

BOOK REVIEW

Craig Paterson, *Assisted Suicide and Euthanasia: A Natural Law Ethics Approach*, Aldershot, England - Burlington VT, Ashgate 2008, pp. 217

Controversy pervades contemporary debate over the moral and legal status of assisted suicide and euthanasia: these are two of the much-discussed and troubled topics in the present European context. With this sentiment, Craig Paterson begins his reflection in *Assisted Suicide and Euthanasia: A Natural Law Ethics Approach*. In the *Preface*, the author claims, “It is always and everywhere morally wrong to intentionally kill an innocent person as a means to an end,” (p. IX) and he defends the importance of this principle throughout his arguments. He rejects the moral or legal right to intentionally procure the death of any patient—even with express consent—in order to end pain and suffering.

In order to support this thesis, Paterson suggests and proposes the natural law approach to moral reasoning by developing rational argumentations about the respect of person and human life. He states, “The rationale for adopting a natural law approach to moral discourse stood in need of stronger justification” (*Introduction*, p. 1). At the same time, he notices that the natural law approach has been always justified and supported by religious foundations and traded on revealed theological doctrine and he is aware that this approach may not be familiar to the reader, or familiar only in a religious guise.

Paterson asserts that, starting from the human natural ability to reason, “a secular natural law approach can credibly claim to be a genuine source of ethical knowledge that is open and accessible to all” (*Introduction*, p. 3) and he specifies that his approach “will not depend upon any prior acceptance of the truth of God’s existence or upon anything obtained from special privileged sources of information” (*ibid.*). For this reason, he starts his reflection with some distinctions that can help the reader to understand his rational argumentation.

The author presents some distinctions between moral law and law of nature, secular and religious accounts, objectivism and subjectivism, naturalism and non-naturalism, etc. This brief “dictionary” aims to make the book’s language clearer, especially in the definitions of suicide, *assisted suicide* and euthanasia.

Paterson analyzes some common definitions of *suicide* and comes to a definition that he considers complete and exhaustive: “Suicide is an action (or omission) informed by the intended objective, whether as an end in itself or as a means to some further end, that one’s bodily life be terminated” (*Introduction*, p. 9).

In the same way, he analyzes the meanings of *assisted suicide*, starting from the acceptance of the “role played by a third party in the suicide of another person” (*ibid.*). Paterson takes the example of a physician who gives a patient a lethal dose of a drug in order to end his/her life. But we can wonder: if the physician himself gives the drug, can we consider the physician’s act a case of assisted suicide or euthanasia? In considering this connection, the author makes a distinction between questions concerning the intended end of an action and questions concerning the intended choice of means. In *assisted suicide*, the physician is only the “provider of a means.” We can discuss this topic for a long time. According to Paterson’s definition, every form of euthanasia might also be considered a form of *assisted suicide*. The term “assisted suicide” might therefore be misleading and create misunderstandings. At the end of his reflection, the author gives us this

definition of *assisted suicide*: “a third party action informed by the intended objective (at the very least), to furnish a potential suicide with the lethal means necessary to end his or her bodily life” (*Introduction*, p. 11).

Finally, the author relates the term *euthanasia* to its Greek etymology by describing it as “a gentle and easy death.” He observes that it is only in the latter decades of the nineteenth century that we find the term used in the modern meaning of “the action of inducing a gentle and easy death.” The author criticizes this definition and comes to the conclusion that euthanasia is a form of homicide.

In chapter 2, Paterson analyzes the major ideas that support the moral and political acceptability of some forms of suicide, assisted suicide and euthanasia (for example, quality-of-life, self-determination, and personal autonomy arguments).

In chapter 3, he explicates his revised natural law approach, including his point of view about the goods of persons. Among the primary goods of persons, Paterson lists human life and health, knowledge, truth and contemplation, practical rationality, family and friendship, work, and play and beauty (in the meaning of aesthetic experience, a sense of beauty). According to the author these goods constitute the “primary ingredients of a fulfilling life” (p. 50). The non-primary or secondary goods are, instead, the goods that do not give us ultimate reasons for action and these goods can be instrumental, material or non-material and their value derives from their relationship to primary goods. The secondary goods are: power, pleasure and pain, and personal autonomy. The chapter ends with some key requirements of practical rationality, a primary good that helps us to pursue goods and avoid evils. Practical rationality is also an instrument that makes us able to choose and to discuss our ideas.

Chapter 4 is a philosophical reflection about the good of human life. The author discusses action-types, normative demands, and some basic aspects of the meaning of respect for human life, starting from the proposition that, from a moral point of view, it is always wrong to intentionally kill an innocent person.

The central and most complex chapter is the fifth, in which Paterson focuses his reflection on the three terms previously analyzed: suicide, assisted suicide, and voluntary euthanasia. At the beginning of the chapter, he analyzes types of homicide. He then focuses his attention and his criticism on the widespread notion that a person can be “better off dead.” The author proceeds with a defence of the important distinction between killing and letting die, and reflects on the notion of autonomy. He argues that it is wrong to appeal to personal autonomy in order to justify an individual or cooperative decision to terminate the very being of a person.

In chapter 6, Paterson advocates a very important thesis: all individual human beings are human persons. He deals with the distinction between non-voluntary and involuntary euthanasia drawing on clinical cases. The author also discusses the issue of artificial hydration and nutrition for patients in the persistent vegetative state (PVS). He believes that “withdrawing or withholding nutrition and fluids from PVS patients will invariably end their lives in a relatively short period of time” (p. 143). Accordingly, he argues that, since the provision of nutrition and fluids via tubes assists the ordinary processes of eating and drinking, this intervention cannot be considered “treatment,” but ordinary, everyday care.

The last chapter (chapter 7) is devoted to the examination of state intervention in the matter of suicide, assisted suicide, and euthanasia. Paterson proceeds with a critical assessment of the arguments of H.T. Engelhardt, J. Rawls, and R. Dworkin, and states that it is not the business of the state to enforce upon its citizens substantive conceptions of what constitutes the good. In the

concluding part of the chapter, the author again asserts that “the protection of innocent life from all intentional or reckless killing is foundational to the idea of the common good” (p. 173) and argues that “respect for life is undermined by the state-sanctioned policies of assisted suicide or euthanasia” (*ibid.*)

In conclusion, the aim and the hope of Paterson is to offer a contribution to the contemporary debate by using a new and particular point of view: a revised, secular, natural law perspective. A verdict about the author’s approach and judgments about the effectiveness of his arguments are ultimately left to the reader.

There can be no doubt, however, that the author offers a lucid, rational, complex, and interesting reflection about one of the most delicate topics in the public discussion in contemporary Western society, and that he confronts us with one of the most thorny issues of human existence.

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