ST. VINCENT'S BIOETHICS CENTRE

THE CHALLENGES OF MODERN TECHNOLOGY IN MEDICAL PRACTICE

A COURSE ON CATHOLIC MEDICAL ETHICS

Notes on the course

NEWMAN COLLEGE

ETHICS AND CLINICAL PRACTICE

A Course on Catholic Medical Ethics

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DEATH and LIFE

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We are all extremely familiar with life, but that does not mean that we understand it, or can say what it involves, or can discern its presence in borderline cases.

Similarly, we are reasonably familiar with death, and can define it negatively as the cessation of life. But, again, just what does this mean?

Some basic clarifications come from distinguishing life, a life, and a living thing.

Life is a level of existence or a way of existing. It involves powers and characteristics that can be described and interrelated.

A life is a particular instance of life. It has a beginning and an end, even though life goes on in other living things or existed elsewhere before this particular life came into existence.

A living thing is something that has life, but it can possess properties other than life as well, such as shape or mass. It is an individual, and has a considerable amount of autonomy. It can die and it once commenced to live.

There are other things, other individuals, which are not alive. They have a different level of existence. Examples would be an individual atom or molecule, provided that it is not simply a part of something else and not just a collection of other autonomous individual things.

Life involves nutrition, respiration, elimination, growth, healing, adaptation, reproduction. These can be described in chemical terms, but make sense (even without that description) as directed to and by a single individual organization.

Without this notion of unity of organization the chemical account does not explain the occurrence of these sorts of activity in such regularity and proximity to each other. Indeed, a living thing possesses an enormous range of parts and of functions, all of which make sense as serving the continued unity of organization of this particular individual living thing.

Biologists are discovering the importance of such central organization. For instance, in Molecular Biology of the Cell by Bruce Alberts and others (New York: Garland, 1983), we read (my emphasis):

> New techniques of analysis at the molecular level are revealing an astonishing elegance and economy in the living cell and a gratifying unity in the principles by which cells function (v).

> The interconnecting pathways between ATP and DNA, marvellous as they are, do not give us the living cell. Even the simplest cells are far more complex objects than generally perceived and vastly more ingenious than any computerized intelligent machine yet designed. That this is so is strongly hinted at by simple observation. We do not have to see through the outer surfaces of cells to appreciate that the biological organization that permits them to act in such rational ways must indeed be incredibly subtle and versatile (xxxiii-iv).
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> The puzzle is that living organisms are very highly ordered, at every level. Order is strikingly apparent in large structures such as a butterfly wing or an octopus eye, in subcellular structures such as mitochondrion or a cilium, and in the shape and arrangement of molecules from which these structures are built. The large number of atoms in each molecule of protein or nucleic acid have been captured, ultimately, from their highly disorganized state in the environment and locked together into a precise structure. Every time large molecules are made from smaller ones, as when a living cell grows, order is created out of chaos (62).
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> The capacity of cells to maintain a high degree of order in a chaotic universe stems from the genetic information that is expressed, maintained, replicated, and occasionally improved by four basic genetic processes - protein synthesis, DNA repair, DNA replication, and genetic recombination. These processes, which produce and maintain the proteins and the nucleic acids of a cell, are one-dimensional ... Perhaps that is why we understand genetic mechanisms in far greater detail than most other cellular events (199).

A thing of this sort has individuality and a set of powers.

An individual thing can take over another individual (e.g., by eating it), and can give rise to another individual by generation while itself remaining the same individual. Such generation can be by sexual or asexual reproduction, the latter occurring in the division of amoebas and in the vegetative propagation of a plant by taking a cutting or dividing bulbs.

And it can lose some powers temporarily, or even permanently, without ceasing to be itself.

But it dies, when it can no longer organize centrally, that is, when the central organization as a whole breaks down.

If some of the powers were such as could be operated without essential dependence on particular organs, then the organization may survive even though its organs have disintegrated. Such survival would not be a denial of the fact of death, since what was the body would now be without its previous organization.

Many passages from Defining Death, by the President's Commission for the Study of Ethical Problems in Medicine and Biomedical and

Behavioral Research (Washington, 1981) fit in well with this view:

> On this view, death is that moment at which the body's physiological system ceases to constitute an integrated whole (33).
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> Nor is there one single characteristic (e.g., breathing, yawning, etc.) the loss of which signifies death. Rather, what is missing in the dead is a cluster of attributes, all of which form part of an organism's responsiveness to its internal and external environment (36).
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> The death of a human being - not the "death" of cells, tissues or organs - is the matter at issue. The cessation of vital bodily systems provides the basis for broad standards by which death can be judged to have occurred. But such functional cessation is not of interest in and for itself, but for what it reveals about the status of the person. What was formerly a person is now a dead body and can be socially and legally treated as such. Although absence of breathing and heartbeat may often have been spoken of as "defining" death, review of history and of current medical and popular understanding makes clear that these were merely evidence for the disintegration of the organism as a whole (58).
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> Death is an absolute phenomenon, so that terms such as "brain dead" or "virtually dead" are misleading (12).

DETERMINING DEATH

SOME MORAL QUESTIONS

1. What can people expect to get out of life?
2. What can people hope to achieve in life?
3. What is wrong with terminating someone's life?
4. What is wrong with terminating one's own life?
5. What obligation is there to positively sustain life?
6. Can the mere fact of whether a man is alive or not be relevant to the morality of my treatment of him?
7. If life is a value, can I take the risk of killing another person?
8. If life is a value, can I risk losing my own life?
9. May I sacrifice my life for some other good?
10. To what extent is the value of life dependent on the powers currently possessed?
11. What other values are there besides life? How do they rank?
12. Can we avoid sacrificing some of these for the sake of others?
13. Are there significant differences in the way that this is done?
14. What difference does God make in moral issues?
15. Can morality be reasonable?
16. Who is harmed by an immoral action - the victim, God, the world, the agent?
17. What can Christianity do about morality?

The parables of the Prodigal Son, the Good Samaritan, the Talents, The Sower, the Mustard Seed.

The Sermon on the Mount.

The Crucifixion.

The two main Commandments.