Body-Self Dualism and Euthanasia

Patrick Lee

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I. Introduction

By "body-self dualism" I mean the idea that what I am is something different from this living bodily being — the idea that the self, the I, is one thing, or perhaps a series of mental events, and the body is another thing. Body-self dualism is the denial that I am an animal organism.

I hold that this idea is profoundly mistaken. Along with St. Thomas and also the teaching of the Catholic Church, I hold that what I am is a body-soul composite. So I am not just a soul or a series of conscious events that somehow inhabits or possesses a body. Rather, I am a particular type of animal-organism, a rational and free animal-organism, and having an immortal soul, but essentially, nonetheless, a particular type of animal organism.

My contention is that very often the defense of euthanasia is based, sometimes only implicitly, on such body-self dualism. For example, suppose Grandfather has a stroke, his son and daughter call the ambulance, and he is brought to the hospital. As a result of the stroke he loses significant memory and becomes demented. Suppose he no longer recognizes his family and can no longer carry on a conversation; his family comes to visit him. They spontaneously react: "That's just not Grandfather anymore. Grandfather — the lovable, affable person we have known for years — is just not there any more!" An understandable reaction. But some proponents of euthanasia articulate this reaction into an argument. It is wrong to kill persons (they argue), but the person who was living at his family's home exists no longer.

True, it would be wrong to kill Grandfather, but *that* (meaning the human organism now hooked up to various tubes in the hospital) is not Grandfather. So, a week later it is proposed that since this isn't really Grandfather any more we should withdraw nutrition and hydration (though his system is still metabolizing the nutrition). Keeping this organism alive who — or which — is not Grandfather, and is not a person, is futile. Proponents of euthanasia add that the doctors should be allowed to hasten the demise of this organism by more active methods. In short: since this is not a person, it is not murder to kill it.

In this scenario, the living human being that was sitting and talking to people two weeks ago is clearly the same organism that is lying on the hospital bed that these doctors propose to kill. And so, if people say that two weeks ago Grandfather existed but now he does not, that can only be because they are identifying, perhaps only implicitly, Grandfather with something other than a living human organism.[1]

What then *is* Grandfather, that is, what is he when he is alive and conscious before his trip to the hospital? Proponents of euthanasia are usually not so clear about the answer to this question. But if Grandfather is not a human organism, then he must be either a spiritual subject somehow associated with a human organism, or a series of experiences — a non-substantial consciousness sustained or embodied somehow in this organism

during certain stages of its existence. In other words, this popular argument for euthanasia relies on an implicit denial that we are essentially bodily beings. The body and bodily life are treated as interesting tools or instruments — good just insofar as, and for as long as, they enable *us* to have and enjoy various experiences. But the body is not — on this view — part of the person or the self. On this view the self is one thing and the body, the living physical organism, is another thing.

I will return to this particular argument in a moment. But before that, let me set out what I think is the basic reason why suicide and euthanasia are intrinsically morally wrong.

II. Why Suicide and Euthanasia Are Morally Wrong

There are various arguments against suicide and euthanasia. For example, one might argue that such acts violate God's dominion. Here I will argue that the reason why suicide and euthanasia are wrong is that they are choices contrary to the intrinsic good of a human person. Such acts are contrary to the openness to the fulfillment of oneself and of others which is, I suggest, the basic standard for morality.[2]

When one chooses an action, one chooses it for a reason, that is, for the sake of some good one thinks this action will help realize. That good may itself be a way of realizing some further good, and that good a means to another, and so on. But the chain of goods cannot be infinite. So, there must be some ultimate reasons for one's choices, some goods which one recognizes as reasons for choosing which need no further support, which are not mere means to some further goods. These ultimate reasons for choice are intrinsic goods, that is, conditions understood to be good for their own sake, and not just as means to some further end. What these goods are is not determined by choice, since they make choice possible. Hence these goods must be goods that we naturally recognize as good; and they must be activities or conditions to which we are naturally inclined.

Moreover, these goods are conditions that can be realized by our actions. Thus, these fundamental human goods are the actualizations of our basic potentialities, the conditions to which we are naturally oriented and which objectively fulfill us, the various aspects of our fulfillment as human persons. To choose in a way that respects all of these human perfections, both in ourselves and in others, is to respect human persons and to choose morally well. To choose to act against a fundamental human good is to act against some intrinsic good of a human person. To make such a choice is to substitute one's own preference for the objective standard provided by what is objectively fulfilling.

The moral norm, I would argue, is simply that we should choose fully in accord with the truth about what is really perfective or fulfilling for ourselves and other persons. Or, it can also be expressed as follows: the basic moral norm is that we should act in a way that is consistent with love of God, neighbor and self.[3]

Human life itself is a fundamental human good. Thus, we ought to respect this good.[4] But the choice to destroy a human life is contrary to respecting human life. And so, we ought never to choose precisely to destroy a human life, whether of another person or our own. To do so is implicitly (and sometimes explicitly as well) to adopt the attitude that this human life is not objectively good, but is good only if I desire it.

To choose to destroy one basic good for the sake of others is to adopt the attitude that human goods, including human lives, are only conditionally good. It is to adopt the

attitude that the goodness of this life, for example, can be outweighed by the good consequences (or avoidance of bad consequences) one would bring about by destroying it. It is to adopt the attitude that, in effect, a price can placed upon this life. But the intrinsic goods of persons, including life itself, which is the very being of the person, are irreplaceably good; each is a good whose loss cannot be made up for by some other condition.[5]

Thus, the choice to kill an innocent human life, whether oneself or another, even for the sake of avoiding terrible suffering, is intrinsically immoral. Euthanasia and suicide are contrary to the intrinsic dignity of human persons.

III. Human Life and Personhood

Now I would like to return to the argument I mentioned above, namely, the argument that the severely demented or permanently unconscious human beings are not persons. The case against suicide and euthanasia is based on the proposition that human life is a basic, intrinsic good, a good that ought at all times to be respected.

However, as I mentioned a while ago, one very important objection to this position is that those who are permanently unconscious or demented are no longer *persons*, and therefore it is morally permissible to kill them. I could quote here from Peter Singer or Michael Tooley as examples of philosophers who have adopted this position. However, this view of the human person is seriously mistaken. A human person is not a spiritual subject who *has* a body; nor is a person just a series of experiences, mere consciousness, or conscious information related to his body as software to the hardware in a computer. Human persons are animal-organisms — free and rational animals, but essentially animals nonetheless. What *I* am, the thing the word "I" refers to (or "he," "him," and so on) is a human, physical organism.

So, the time that this human organism comes to be is the time that I come to be. And— what is important for our topic — I do not cease to be until this physical organism ceases to be.[6] Thus, it makes no sense to say that, yes, the same physical organism that Grandfather was is lying on the hospital bed, but Grandfather has ceased to be. Since Grandfather is essentially a human, physical organism, he cannot cease to be until the physical organism which he is ceases to be.

How do we know that we are essentially human organisms, rather than having or possessing organisms? If one is a Catholic one can know it by faith, since the Church teaches that a human being is a body-soul composite that the human soul is *per se* and essentially the form of the body. But here I am interested in the philosophical case against euthanasia.

In fact it seems that there is in some way an immediate awareness of the truth that we are living bodies. When I take a shower I say that I am washing *myself*. If you strike my face I do not say, "You hit my body," but: "Why did you hit *me*?" If I'm walking past a coffee-table and I accidentally knock it to the floor and it shatters, I do not say, "My body did that," but: "I am so sorry, *I* accidentally broke your vase." But, in addition, there are several powerful arguments to show that we are bodily beings, that is, animal organisms. Allow me to present in brief form one argument that was set out by St. Thomas.

We understand what an entity is by examining the kinds of actions it performs. If a living thing performs bodily actions, then it is a physical organism. Now, those who wish to deny that we are physical organisms think of *themselves,* what each of them refers to as "I", as the subject of self-conscious acts of conceptual thought and willing (what many philosophers, myself included, would say are non-physical acts). But we can show that this "I" is identical with the subject of physical, bodily actions, and so is a living, bodily being (an organism).

Sensation is a bodily action, and it is an action performed by the organism as a whole (and not just its brain). The act of seeing, for example, is an act that an animal performs with his eyeballs and his optic nerve, just as the act of walking is an act that he performs with his legs, and so the agent that performs the act of seeing must be a bodily being, an animal organism. But it is clear in the case of human individuals that it must be the same entity, the same single subject of actions, that performs the act of sensing and that performs the act of understanding.

When I know, for example, that *This is a book,* it is by my understanding, or a self-conscious intellectual act, that I apprehend what is meant by "book," apprehending what it is (at least in a general way). But the subject of that proposition, what I refer to by the word "This," is apprehended by sensation or perception. Clearly, it must be the same thing — the same I — which apprehends the predicate and the subject of a unitary judgment.

So, it is the same substantial entity, the same agent, which understands and which senses or perceives. And so what all agree is referred to by the word "I" (namely, the subject of conscious, intellectual acts) is identical with the physical organism which is the subject of bodily actions such as sensing or perceiving. Hence the entity that I am, and the entity that you are — what you and I refer to by the personal pronouns "you" and "I" — is in each case a human, physical organism (though also with nonphysical capacities).[7] [8]

So, it is wrong to say that the person, he, she, you, or I, ceases to be before this bodily organism cease to be. Since a human person is essentially a physical organism, the human person continues to exist until the organism that he is ceases to exist, that is, until biological death — the soul continues to exist, but that is only a part of me, it is not the whole me.

It also is important to note, that every human being is an animal with the basic natural capacity to reason and make free choices, even though something may prevent the actualization of that natural capacity. When thinking of "capacities" or potentialities, one often thinks of such capacities as the ability to play a musical instrument, to work mathematical problems, or to speak a language. Such abilities, however, are quite different from the more basic potentialities such as the abilities to move, to grow, to see, to reason, and so on.

These basic potentialities are not acquired by repeated actions (since they are presupposed by such actions) or by extrinsic causes, and so each agent must have its basic potentialities as part of its nature. And so the agent possesses these basic natural capacities and from the moment it comes to be and does not lose them until it ceases to be, even if some defect may prevent it from actualizing them.

This is true of unborn human beings and of infants, but it also is true of a human being with severe dementia, or in coma, or in a so-called persistent vegetative state. They possess the basic capacity to reason and make free choices, but a defect in their brains— whether temporary or permanent — prevents the actualization of that capacity. Finally, this is true of severely retarded children and anencephalic infants.[9] Thus, unborn human beings, infants, comatose human beings, human beings with severe dementia, and other disabled human beings, are all human persons.

IV. The Human Individual Remains a Person During His Whole Duration

A second way of trying to justify killing severely debilitated human beings is as follows. One might grant that an unconscious or severely demented human being *is* the same individual who was intrinsically valuable a few weeks ago, but one might argue that this individual is no longer intrinsically valuable.

Ronald Dworkin advances this position when, while speaking of an advanced Alzheimer's victim, he says the following:

> ". . . he is no longer capable of the acts or attachments that can give [life] value. Value cannot be poured into a life from the outside; it must be generated by the person whose life it is, and this is no longer possible for him.[10]

In other words, Dworkin does not say that you or I cease to be when we become severely demented or pass into a so-called PVS. Rather, he says that even though you or I continue to exist, continue to live, we have ceased to be intrinsically valuable as subjects of rights. But could this position be right? What this position is saying is that you and I are not intrinsically valuable in virtue of what we are, but that we require additional attributes in order to be intrinsically valuable as a subject of rights or as being worthy of full moral respect. But there are several profound problems with this position. Here I will present only one. One very serious problem with this view is that it is basing a *radical* difference in morals on a mere difference in degree in being. That is, there is a radical difference between the way we treat entities that are subjects of rights versus the way we treat entities that are not. Beings that do not have rights we think it is okay to kill for the sake of food, to experiment on for the benefit of others, in short to *use*.

By contrast, beings that are subjects of rights we think demand a certain level of respect: it is not okay to use them for food, it is not right to enslave them, it is not right to experiment on them for the benefit of others, and so on. So, there is a radical difference in the way we treat beings that have rights and the way we treat beings that do not have rights. There is, to put it another way, a radical moral difference between beings with basic rights and beings that lack rights. So, we would expect, or to put it more strongly, justice requires, that such a radical difference in the way we treat different groups of beings should be based on some radical difference in those beings themselves.

To put this point still another way: if the ontological difference between A and B is a mere difference in degree, than it seems unjust to treat A in a radically and fundamentally different manner than one treats B. It would violate the basic canon of justice, that similars should be treated similarly. But the difference between a human being who has an immediately exercisable capacity for consciousness and a human being who does not,

because perhaps this human being is in a mentally impaired condition — the difference between those two classes of human beings is not a radical difference, it is not a difference in kind. Rather, it is a difference only in degree. In fact, the capacity for self-consciousness is a capacity that exists in degrees of more or less along a continuum, ranging from intense self-consciousness, to the hazy, to the inebriated, down to the irreversible, deep comatose state. The difference between the intensely self-conscious and the comatose is not a difference in kind but a mere quantitative difference, or a difference in degree. But to base a radical moral difference on a mere quantitative ontological difference is unjust.

Now, someone might object that sometimes you just have to draw an arbitrary line; if you are dealing with a true continuum and you have to draw a line somewhere, then you have no choice, your line will have to be arbitrary. But this is not one of those situations. In this situation there *is* a clear radical difference between different types of being, and that radical difference is being ignored by those who propose that some human beings are not persons. The radical difference I am referring to is the difference between a rational being — in the sense of a being with the basic natural capacity for reason and free choice—on the one hand, vs. a being that is not a rational being. The difference between a living human being, no matter what level of consciousness or unconsciousness, on the one hand, and a corpse, is a radical difference in being. But proponents of euthanasia are ignoring that radical difference and urging us to base a radical difference in treatment on a mere ontological difference in degree.

In short, between any human being on the one hand, and a corpse or an aggregate of tissues and organs, on the other hand, there *is* a radical difference. But the difference between a healthy, self-conscious human being and an incapacitated, even severely incapacitated, human being is only a difference in degree. It is unjust, then, to pick out such an accidental attribute as self-consciousness or the immediately exercisable capacity for self-consciousness, and make that the criterion for whether someone should be treated as a subject of rights or not. Thus, a human being is valuable as a subject of rights in virtue of what he or she is (a person, a subject with the basic nature capacity for conceptual thought and free choice even if he or she cannot right now actualize that basic capacity). And so a human being remains a subject of rights, someone who has a right not to be intentionally killed, for as long as he or she exists.[11]

V. Human Life Is an Intrinsic Good

Still, someone might object as follows. "Let us grant" some could say, "that the human being himself, that is, the substance (to use Aristotelian language) is intrinsically valuable, and let us grant that the substantial human being remains intrinsically deserving of full moral respect for as long as he exists. But — to continue the objection — perhaps for some people their continuing to live is not an intrinsic good."

In other words, the objection is, that although the human being is intrinsically good, deserving of respect, human *life* is not one of the basic human goods, it is not a condition that is always intrinsically good and worthy of pursuit. Biological life (it might be argued) is good only if connected with other conditions and experiences such as consciousness. So, when biological life ceases to bring about, or to be accompanied by, these other conditions, then it ceases to be valuable.

To reply, the basic reasons for action (as I briefly argued before) are the various forms of personal perfection or fulfillment, that is, what makes a condition or activity intrinsically valuable, worth pursuing for its own sake, is that it is *fulfilling*. But it makes no sense to hold that the fulfillment of an entity is intrinsically valuable and yet, the entity itself is not. The entity itself cannot be viewed as a mere instrumental good, or as a mere condition for the fulfillment or perfection of that entity. Thus, my genuine good includes my *being* as well as my *full*-being.

Moreover, while it is true that an intrinsic *part* of myself can be viewed as in some way instrumentally valuable — my bodily parts are called "organs," which is from the Greek word for instrument — it is impossible actually to view my whole self as merely instrumental to another good or as only conditionally good. One must value, at least implicitly, one's own being or preservation as in itself good. So, to view one's whole biological life as merely instrumentally or merely conditionally valuable is indeed, though perhaps only implicitly, to identify oneself with something other than that living bodily entity. Thus, to deny that one's biological life is intrinsically good is, perhaps implicitly, to adopt a body-self dualism. Suicide and euthanasia necessarily involve a denigration of the very thing which you and I are, our bodily selves. The choice of suicide or euthanasia unavoidably involves a denial of the intrinsic dignity of the human person.

Still, it might be objected that my individual biological life is intrinsically good *while I have a capacity for consciousness*, but that it ceases to be good if I lose that capacity. Indeed, it might be objected that in some cases it is actually an evil. Suppose my continuing to live involves such suffering that I judge that this kind of life is not good. According to Gary Seay, for example, killing someone who is suffering, immediately produces a good because: " ... it is not difficult to imagine the case of a dying patient whose entire conscious experience is wholly consumed by physical suffering so excruciating that his life has *nothing at all good about it* (emphasis in original) (such cases are, in fact, all too common).[12]

So, the thought here is that the life is bad when it brings about bad experience. And here I think we arrive at what is at the basis of many people's acceptance of euthanasia. In this objection life is being viewed as in itself neutral, and good or bad according to whether it brings about good experience or bad experience. In other words, *the reality* of one's life is secondary to the quality, the pleasantness or unpleasantness of one's *experience.* But this is a serious error. What is valuable cannot be mere experience, but must be the reality of which one may, or may not, have an experience.[13] To make experience the criterion for the value or goodness of a thing is to put things backwards. Rather, we should judge the quality of our experience on the basis of the goodness or badness of that of which it is an experience.

Thus, for example, I may take pleasure in the downfall of my enemy, but such pleasure is not a good. Or consider the pleasure that a sadist takes in inflicting pain on his victim. We should not say, "Well, what he did was bad, but at least he obtained pleasure from it." No, the pleasure of the sadist is not itself a good. So, the goodness or badness of pleasure, the goodness or badness of experience, derives from the reality the pleasure is attached to, or the reality the experience is of. The character of my pleasure or experience derives from the character of its object, not vice versa.

Moreover, although suffering is not in itself good, focusing only on experience rather than the realities involved in a situation can make us blind to the real value that our living with suffering can have. Although I am not in this paper addressing the theological issues, it is worth noting that Christians believe that suffering is not meaningless, that, indeed, all of us are called to join our suffering to the sufferings of Christ. This does not mean, according to Christian belief, that we should always actively seek suffering, or that we should not try to remove it or avoid it when possible.

But it does mean that one may view suffering as not the ultimate evil and one may have a developed view as to why *living with* suffering is not in itself evil. One of the worst effects of the euthanasia mentality is to suggest, and subtly to convince many people, that what is valuable is only the quality of one's experience and therefore if one's experience is negative one's existence itself is negative. On the contrary, a person's being and real fulfillment are genuine goods, and are not just mere means to pleasant experience.

In sum, so far I have examined three way of trying to justify euthanasia and found each of them to be unsound. First, it is argued that though the human organism is there, Grandfather is not there; second, that Grandfather *is* there, but he no longer is intrinsically valuable or deserves full moral respect; and third, although Grandfather is there, and is still intrinsically valuable, life is not a good to him. Each of these, I have given reasons to show are profoundly unsound.

So, (1) severely mentally impaired human beings are persons; (2) a human being is deserving of full moral respect for the entire time that he exists until he dies; (3) life is an intrinsic good for persons, not a merely instrumental good. These are the main points needed to show that euthanasia is objectively morally wrong.

VI. Intentional Killing Vs. Causing Death as a Side Effect

This does not mean, however, that we must always take all measures possible to preserve someone's life, our own included. While it is always morally wrong intentionally to kill a human person, it is sometimes morally right to choose not to use certain means to preserve someone's life, because of the burden of those means.

For example, someone with cancer may choose not to take a course of chemo-therapy if doing so offers little or no chance of bringing complete recovery, it is quite expensive, and it would block spending time with one's family. Such a choice is not disrespectful of the basic good of life. Rather, it is a choice not to use certain means of extending life on the grounds that these means involve a diminishing of one or more other basic goods, or on the grounds that adopting these means is incompatible with pursuing other goods (one's other responsibilities).

Such diminishing of basic goods as a side effect of what one does is not the same as choosing against a basic good, and it does not necessarily involve a lack of appreciation or commitment to those goods that are diminished (or destroyed) as a side effect. Indeed, some diminishing or destruction of basic goods as a side effect is strictly unavoidable. Every choice we make is a choice to pursue and enhance some goods and not others. Thus every choice we make involves a diminishing or at least a non-enhancing of some basic goods as a side effect of what we directly (intentionally) do.

On the other hand, a choice to kill a human life *is* incompatible with a love for that life: such a choice involves — as proponents of euthanasia themselves often openly testify — the judgment or attitude that some lives are not worth living, that some lives are mere means to some other condition, a denial of the intrinsic dignity of the person killed.
If one chooses to kill in order to end suffering, one sees (at least initially) that continuing to live does instantiate a human good, but that escaping pain also would instantiate a good.[14] To act *against* the first reason (as opposed simply to not acting on it), one must judge that the second reason (escaping pain) is preferable to it.

But one can make such a judgment only on the supposition that the good offered by the second alternative (escape from pain) is of a higher order than the good offered by the first alternative (human life). But it could be of a higher order only if human life were not a basic and intrinsic good. Thus, the choice to kill as a means toward escaping pain involves, at least implicitly, the attitude that human life is not a basic and intrinsic good.

It has sometimes been objected that there is no morally significant difference between actively killing a dying person and letting him die.[15] Therefore, (the argument continues) since everyone admits that it is sometimes morally right to let someone die (that is, choose not to use a life-saving treatment), then it also is morally right in some cases to choose to kill a dying person.

However, this argument is unsound. If killing were the same as withholding or withdrawing lifesaving treatment, then *everything* we did, other than life-saving attempts, would be a case of killing. For in every choice we make to pursue some good other than the saving of someone's life we are doing something which has the side effect of not-saving-someone's life. If this objection were correct, then, as John Finnis points out, the choice to take one's children for a walk, thus passing up the opportunity to take a plane to Calcutta to save street children, would be as murderous as deliberately blanketing those same children with machine gun bullets.[16]

We cannot actively pursue every aspect of every person's fulfillment all of the time, but we are morally required at least not to choose to act precisely *against* (that is, to destroy, damage, or impede) one instance of a basic good for the sake of others. The basic moral requirement is of a respect and appreciation for all the basic goods, both in ourselves and in others. Such respect and appreciation is incompatible with a choice to destroy one instance of a basic, intrinsic good for the sake of others.

It is important to see that the difference between intentionally killing and causing death as a side effect is not primarily a difference in physical behavior. The same physical behavior — for example, injecting a patient with morphine — might in one case be carrying out a choice to relieve pain with the side effect of hastening death, and in another case carry out a choice to kill in order to relieve pain. Although the external results are the same, there is a tremendous moral difference between the two choices.

Moreover, not-doing something — an omission — can in some cases be a way of intentionally killing someone. Clearly, if someone withholds needed insulin from his wife in order to end her life, he intends her death just as much as if he had deliberately dropped arsenic in her orange juice. Similarly, if a relatively non-burdensome life-saving treatment is withheld or withdrawn, then the reason must be that one wants the death — in this case the omission is the means chosen for the sake of the death.[17] (This brings out what the problem was in the way Mrs. Terri Schiavo was treated: the administration of

nutrition and hydration in her case was surely not burdensome. Withdrawing it was therefore withdrawing ordinary means, not extraordinary ones.)

Of course, really causing death as a side effect is not always morally right either. How does one decide when it is? Frances Kamm has argued that everyone already admits that we may let someone die, *if doing so would be for the patient's overall benefit.* In other words, we sometimes make the judgment (according to Kamm) that, "in this particular case, the greater good for the patient is relief of pain, and the lesser evil is loss of life ..."[18] But if that is so, she argues, it should also be morally right to kill the patient in order to bring about this greater good.

I believe Kamm is right that *if* that were the basis for not adopting those means, then it would be inconsistent to say that letting die can be permissible but not the killing. However, contrary to what Kamm assumes, people often make such judgments (that they should withhold lifesaving treatment) on the basis of something other than the denial of the patient's intrinsic dignity (which is what the judgment that a patient would be better off dead amounts to).

Think of a concrete case. The patient who foregoes chemo-therapy does not usually say to himself, "The total consequences of living two months without chemo-therapy will be objectively better, overall, than all of the consequences of living six months with chemo-therapy." No, there usually is no futile attempt to calculate what all of the consequences will be in the two different scenarios and measure them against one another. Rather, people usually make such a judgment on the basis of the belief that their responsibilities to family and others could best be carried out in one way rather than the other.

The criterion for whether one should do something that causes bad side effects is not whether doing so will produce the greatest net good, since that is a judgment that cannot be objectively assessed, but whether doing so is just and consistent with all of one's responsibilities.[19]

VII. Human Life and Dignity

Perhaps the most popular argument in behalf of euthanasia or suicide is that there are various conditions that make continuing to live a severe *in*dignity, and therefore in choosing to kill one is not choosing to destroy what retains intrinsic value. "Granted," the argument could be made, "one ought not to kill any person whose life retains dignity or intrinsic worth. Still, to live as a vegetable, or as severely demented, or as completely dependent on others and burdensome to them — to continue to have biological life but without *meaningful life* — is a fate worse than death. To kill oneself in such a situation is not to choose to destroy something that preserves intrinsic value or dignity since one's dignity has already been lost." Indeed in certain cases, it is argued, life is the evil and death the good. Ronald Dworkin claims: "Just as Justice Rehnquist was wrong to assume that there is no harm in a patient's living on as a vegetable, so it would be wrong to assume that there is no harm in living on demented."[20]

A variant of this argument — usually not clearly stated — is that there are two types of death: death *with* dignity and death *without* dignity. The proponent of this argument may or may not grant that death itself is bad, but the argument is that death without dignity is *much worse* than death with dignity, and it is morally upright to pursue the latter and

avoid the former. However, let me reply — briefly — to this objection. We must distinguish between two types of dignity, and, in turn, distinguish between dignity, in either of these senses, and the sense or feeling of dignity that a person may or may not have.[21]

Dignity is not a distinct property, a quality one might know by intuition. Though there are different types of dignity, in each case the word refers to a property or properties — different ones in different circumstances — that cause one to *excel*, and thus elicit or merit respect from others. First, there is the dignity of a person or personal dignity. The dignity of a person, is that whereby a person excels other beings, especially other animals, and merits respect or consideration from other persons. And I would argue that what distinguishes us from other animals, what makes us persons rather than things, is our capacity to shape our own lives, our capacity for rationality and free choice.

And, as I noted before, the capacities to reason and make free choices are basic, natural capacities, possessed by every human being, even those who cannot immediately exercise these capacities. Dignity in this sense derives from the kind of substantial entity one is, a human being — and this is dignity in the most important sense. Because it is based on the kind of being one is, one cannot lose this dignity as long as one exists.

Second, there is a type of dignity which varies in degrees, which is the *manifestation* or *actualization* of those capacities that distinguish us from other animals. Thus, slipping on a banana peel (being reduced for a moment to a passive object), losing one's independence and privacy (especially as regards our baser functions), are events that detract from our dignity in this sense. However, note that while this dignity seems to be harmed by various situations, it never seems to be completely removed. Moreover, this dignity, which varies in degrees, is distinct from the more basic dignity that derives from the kind of substantial entity one is.

In addition to these two different types of real dignity, it is important also to distinguish one's sense of dignity. Something may harm one's *sense of* dignity without removing one's real dignity. Everyone who becomes dependent on others *feels* a certain loss of dignity. Yet their dignity, in either of the senses of real dignity, may not have been harmed at all. Often one's sense of dignity can be at variance with one's real dignity. Those who are sick and who bear their suffering in a courageous or holy manner, often inspire others even though they themselves may feel a loss of dignity.

So, to reply to the argument based on the concept of dignity: in truth, every human being has a basic real dignity based simply on being a person, that whereby he excels other animals and has in him what makes him deserving of respect and consideration from all other persons. It is precisely this truth that is at stake in the debate about suicide and euthanasia.

There are conditions that harm our dignity in the second sense discussed above (the manifestation of our more basic dignity) — conditions such as being dependent on others, loss of privacy, preoccupation with pain. These conditions are certainly bad. None of us desires to be in these conditions, and we should work to remove or alleviate such conditions in sick and elderly people as much as possible.

But that does not mean that it would be right to kill someone (or oneself) in order to prevent those indignities. For, death itself is bad, the destruction of an intrinsic good. So,

to choose death in order to avoid indignities (in the sense of loss of independence, which is the *manifestation* of an underlying dignity) is to act against what has basic, intrinsic dignity for the sake of an ulterior end. But the end does not justify the means. The very act of killing a person with the supposed justification that the one killed has lost his dignity, or is about to lose his dignity, denies the *intrinsic personal* dignity of the one killed.[22]

No one wants to die without dignity. But we do not really want to die now *with* dignity either.[23] Death itself is never a dignity — it is, in a way, the supreme indignity. We may bear suffering and death well, and whether we do so depends, in part, on whether we continue to treat ourselves as well as others as persons with intrinsic dignity, that is, persons who have dignity simply because they are persons.

Thus, the argument that death without dignity is much worse than death with dignity and therefore it is permissible seek the latter in order to avoid the former, confuses real basic dignity with either the manifestation of dignity or the sense of dignity.

Professor of Philosophy
Franciscan University of Steubenville

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[1] The debate about euthanasia in many ways mirrors the debate about abortion.

[2] Some sources for this position: Robert P. George, *In Defense of Natural Law* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999); Germain Grisez, Joseph Boyle, and John Finnis, "Practical Principles, Moral Truth and Ultimate Ends," *American Journal of Jurisprudence* 33 (1988), 99-151; John Finnis, Joseph M. Boyle, Jr., Germain Grisez, *Nuclear Deterrence, Morality and Realism* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), Chapter 9-11. John Finnis, *Fundamentals of Ethics* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 1983); John Finnis, *Aquinas, Moral, Political, and Legal Theory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998); William E. May, *An Introduction to Moral Theology* (Huntington, Ind.: Our Sunday Visitor, 1994); T. D. J. Chappell, *Understanding Human Goods, A Theory of Ethics* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998).

[3] To love someone is simply to will to them their genuine good. Thus, respecting the fundamental intrinsic goods of person *is* loving them, and cooperating with God's plan of creation. Cf. St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae,* Part I-II, Questions 26-28.

[4] Cf. Pope John Paul II, *The Splendor of Truth*, especially #48-50, 79.

[5] For arguments against the utilitarian or consequentialist attempt to justify direct killing, see John Finnis, Joseph M. Boyle, Jr., Germain Grisez, *Nuclear Deterrence, Morality and Realism*, Chapter 9, and Patrick Lee, *Abortion and Unborn Human Life* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1996), Chapter 5. Of course, the position that one may choose to destroy on instance of a fundamental good for the sake of avoiding bad consequences—a position proposed by utilitarianism, consequentialism, and proportionalism—was explicitly rejected as contrary to Catholic teaching by Pope John Paul II in *The Splendor of Truth.* See #81 where Pope John Paul makes it clear he is re-iterating the teaching that certain acts are intrinsically immoral as the traditional and unchangeable interpretation of Sacred Scripture (for example, Rom 3:8 and 1 Cor. 6:9-10).

[6] Cf. Patrick Lee, *Abortion and Unborn Human Life,* Chapter 1.

[7] So, how should we use the word "person"? Are human embryos persons or not?

People may stipulate different meanings for the word "person," but we think it is clear that what we normally mean by the word "person" is that substantial entity that is referred to by personal pronouns—"I", "you," "she," etc. It follows, we submit, that a person is a distinct subject with the natural capacity to reason and make free choices. That subject, in the case of human beings, is identical with the human organism, and therefore that subject comes to be when the human organism comes to be, even though it will take him or her at least several months to actualize the natural capacities to reason and make free choices, natural capacities which are already present (albeit in radical, i.e., root, form) from the beginning. So it makes no sense to say that the human organism came to be at one point but the person—you or I—

came to be at some later point, To have destroyed the human organism that you are or I am even at an early stage of our lives would have been to have killed you or me.

[8] Nor does the argument that psychological continuity with a being is necessary for personal identity hold up. It is sometimes argued that for A at one time to be the same person as B at a later time, there must be some psychological continuity linking B back to A, and since there is no psychological continuity linking us back to earlier human embryos, those human embryos are not identical with later persons and are not now persons. However, there are several problems with the psychological continuity view of personal identity. To be brief, allow me summarize one serious problem. The argument implies that you and I are not enduring entities at all, that is, that we are not entities that persist throughout time, but rather, that each of us is a series of mental event psychologically connected—for if I am a substantial entity that endures through time, it is clear that I may do so even in those situations, such as catastrophic events causing complete amnesia, where psychological continuity is lacking. But the decisive problem for that view—that is, the view that I am a series of events, sometimes called perdurantism or four-dimensionalism—is that it is implies that literally I do not change. On the perdurantist position an object, such as a human being, is not wholly present at any given time. Rather, just as an object has spatial parts, so that at small portions of space only part of it is present, so each object has temporal parts. An object, for example an apple, has a part that is present at one time, say on Monday, and another part of the apple that is present at another time, say, on Tuesday (it does not matter how small or large the parts selected). The apple is composed of different temporal parts or stages. Thus, the apple is green at one temporal stage (say, Monday) and red at another temporal stage (say, Tuesday). But on this view it follows that in the strict sense there is no change: just as a flagpole that is green at one spatial part and red at another part does not involve any change, so an apple that is green at one temporal part and red at another part involves no change.[8] For real change to occur, the same subject must first be characterized in one way and then in another way. However, that change does occur, both in external things and in ourselves is, I take it, obvious. The *changing* of the apple from green to red, and a myriad other changes, are evident to our senses, and prompt us to ask why and to formulate hypotheses or theories to provide explanation for such changes. And we obviously undergo and bring about changes in ourselves—the reader right now is experiencing some type of change, whether pleasant or unpleasant, enlightening or disappointing. Thus, the psychological continuity view leads to the perdurance theory (that is, the denial of enduring things or substances) but the perdurance theory leads to the literal denial of change. And so the psychological continuity view should be rejected. Therefore the psychological continuity view cannot reasonably be used as a premise to deny that human embryos are persons.

[9] On this point also see John Finnis, "The Philosophical Case Against Euthanasia," in *Euthanasia Examined,* ed. John Keown, 68-70.

[10] Ronald Dworkin, *Life's Dominion, An Argument About Abortion, Euthanasia, and Individual Freedom* (New York: Vintage Books, 1992), 230.

[11] See further arguments for this point above, Chapter 4.

[12] Gary Seay, "Do Physicians Have an Inviolable Duty Not to Kill?" *The Journal of Medicine and Philosophy* 26 (2001), 78.

[13] On this point our culture is, indeed—and not just on the euthanasia issue—profoundly confused. Much of our culture is hedonistic.

[14] Thus, Frances Kamm is correct when she argues that it is not incoherent to view such killing as bringing about a good, namely, the cessation of pain. (Cf. Frances Kamm, "A Right to Choose Death?" *Boston Review*, 1998, reproduced on the internet at: http://bostonreview.mit.edu/BR22.3/Kamm.html). However, it *is* unreasonable and immoral to choose the destruction of a basic good as a *means* toward realizing that good.

[15] For example, James Rachels, "Active and Passive Euthanasia," reprinted in several places, for example: *Social Ethics*, *Morality and Social Policy, 5th ed.,* ed. Thomas A. Mappes and Jane S. Zembaty (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1997), 61-66.

[16] John Finnis, "Understanding the Case Against Euthanasia," in *Euthanasia Examined, Ethical, Legal and Clinical Perspectives*, ed. John Keown (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 64-65.

[17] Unfortunately, this kind of thing seems to done frequently to Downs Syndrome babies.

[18] Ibid, p. 2.

[19] Cf. John Finnis, "The Philosophical Case Against Euthanasia," in *Euthanasia Examined,* ed. John Keown, 23-34. Note also that the examples Kamm gives of cases where all of us seem to condone doing evil to achieve a good are *not* cases of choosing to destroy, damage, or impede a basic human good. When one amputates a limb for the sake of the individual life, the limb is not a basic human good. The parts of one's body are good just to the extent to which they, as parts, contribute to the good of the whole. If through some pathology they cease to be able to contribute to the survival or flourishing of the whole, then they are not good but instead are harmful. This, of course, is the traditional principle of totality. It says, not

that one may do a small evil for the sake of avoiding a greater, but that the goodness of the part consists in it contribution to the whole. But a whole person is not a part.

[20] Ronald Dworkin, *Life's Dominion*, 232.

[21] See Germain Grisez and Joseph Boyle, *Life and Death with Liberty and Justice,* loc. cit., 179-182.

[22] It is worth remembering here also that there is a distinction between death, and the process of dying. The process of dying may in many ways assault our dignity, in the sense of its manifestation, but it is not a loss of one's basic dignity as a person and it need not involve a loss of dignity in action. It must be conceded that death itself, since it is one's ceasing to be or destruction, is a loss of dignity. But that of argues *against* hastening death, not for it.

[23] Germain Grisez and Joseph M. Boyle, Jr., *Life and Death with Liberty and Justice, a Contribution to the Euthanasia Debate* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1979), 179.