# 24 The Transcendence of God and the Value of Human Life

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Throughout this paper I shall keep in view two general areas of reference, two sources of understanding. One is human experience: of the values of human life, and of valuing. The other is Christian theology, or at least certain affirmations made in the intellectual life of faith which pertain to the valuing of human life. Any discourse which attempts to move theology and ethics by necessity must keep these two areas and sources in view. If theological principles and affirmations pertain to human moral values, they do so in two ways. Either they are principles and affirmations which include within the divine purposes those purposes which are moral, that is, which stipulate human moral values, ends, rules, etc., or the religious community infers certain moral values, ends, rules, etc., to be consistent, coherent, harmonious, consonant with affirmations about God. If claims are made for transformation, emendation, penetration, alteration, re-orientation of human experience through religious faith, those claims are in principle subject to virtually empirical investigation. These are two pitfalls in the efforts to relate theology and ethics in general which I wish to avoid. On the one hand are the temptations to deduce too much from theological principles for ethics, a pitfall more characteristic of the religious rhetoric of some continental Protestants than of either Roman Catholic or American Protestant theologians, e.g., the claim that what is morally right is determined by the command of God in the moment. On the other hand are the temptations to separate the ethical discourse from the theological, confining the significance of the theological to soteriology, and finding the resources for the ethical only in what (hopefully) all men can accept in common as the human and the moral.

My procedure will be to discuss three general affirmations in an exploratory way, seeking to make clear the relations between Christian belief in the transcendence of God (and the God who is transcendent) and human experience in each. The first is: Human physical life is not of absolute value, but since it is the indispensable condition for human values and valuing, the burden of proof is always on those who would take it. The second is more complex. Human life has *many values*. Some of these adhere to individuals, others adhere to the relations between persons in interpersonal situations, others adhere to human collectivities, and some adhere to all three. These values are not always in harmony with each other in particular human circumstances. The third is this: Human valuing of others involves several kinds of relations, and several aspects of individual experience; it is no simple single thing either descriptively or normatively.

## I. Human Physical Life is not of Absolute Value

Human physical life is not of absolute value. But it is the indispensable condition for human values and valuing, and for its own sake is to be valued. Thus the burden of proof is always on those who would take it. The delicacy of discerning what value is to be given to human physical life under particular circumstances when it is not valued absolutely presents one of the principal practical moral problems men have to face.

H. Richard Niebuhr, in *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture*, stated the broad outlines of the affirmation of the nonabsolute value of all created things from a theological perspective. He closes his chapter, "The Idea of Radical Monotheism," with the following words. "Radical monotheism dethrones all absolutes short of the principle of being itself. At the same time it reverences

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every relative existent. Its two great mottoes are: 'I am the Lord thy God; thou shalt have no other gods before me' and 'Whatever is, is good.' "[1] The theme is a very familiar one in a great deal of Protestant theology. Kierkegaard wrote about the difficulties of being absolutely related to the absolute, and relatively related to the relative; Paul Tillich's idea of the "protestant principle" functioned to provide men with a point of transcendence from which all finite gods could be assessed with presumed freedom and objectivity.[2] Nothing has been exempted from the edges of this theological sword, including religion (as it is distinguished in Barth, Bonhoeffer, and many followers, from faith). The intention of many Protestant writers in this vein has been primarily religious and theological; they intend to preserve the majesty of God from confusion with lesser majesties, they intended to make the claim that God alone is worthy of absolute trust and reliance, that is, of absolute faith; they intended to drive men to faith in God by preaching the unworthiness of lesser gods. A few writers have moved on to develop some of the ethical inferences that can be drawn from the theological point; the Niebuhr brothers, for example, show in part what it means for the political community to confess that God alone is the Lord. It is not unfair, however, to charge almost all of the Protestant giants who perceived the dangers of idolatry with failing to deal with many of the hard cases in which men must judge what the proper reverence is for various relative existents.

Here we see the serious ethical limitations of affirmations of the transcendence of God if the moral inference drawn from it is vaguely the relativity of all things that are not God. A veritable host of conclusions could be drawn from this vagueness. Some of these can be easily listed. 1) Since only God is absolute, all other things are *equally* relative to him and to each other. No one, however, wishes to take this line. 2) Quite different would be this; since the importance of the doctrine of transcendence is to show the majesty and virtual mystery of God, once we see the relativity of all things in relation to him, we have exhausted the theological resources for determining the values of the relativities of life. We are on our own to explore pragmatically the great varieties of human schemes for the ordering of existents in relation to each other: reason, power, utility and other values, and many other things can be brought together in whatever combination to keep life surviving. 3) God, in his absoluteness, had the good sense to foresee the problem of the relativity of all things, and had the good judgment to designate certain persons and institutions with the authority to order the relativities in relation to each other. So men ought to obey these divinely authorized minds and powers, whether ecclesiastical or political. 4) Since man, according to Scripture and his own estimate of himself, is the "highest" being in the created order, all relative things are to be ordered according to his valuations. These empirically might be wrong; but if we can know what man is essentially we can know how normatively all relative things are to be ordered for man's well-being. Which conclusion one accepts will set something of the course he takes in dealing with the question of when human physical life can be taken.

When we turn from theology to human experience, we see that it is not necessary for a person to believe in the transcendence of God in order to affirm the relativity of institutions, religious, morals, physical life, and what have you.[3] Historical and cultural relativism, whatever their intellectual origins might be, are part of the conventional wisdom. And even long before there were tags to put on these notions, men had learned that circumstances of human experience often required them to alter things they professed to be of absolute value, whether these were physical life processes or institutions. "Kill or be killed," the slogan drummed into some of us during the Second World War, has a natural history predating myths of creation. One's own life is to be valued more than the life of the one who attacks, at least under most conditions — if he attacks first, if he has malicious intent, if he seeks to destroy not only one's own life but those of others, if you are under orders to kill him before he kills you in the game of war, etc. But many other things have been valued above human life; the honored legends and narratives of the things men have been willing to die for, all point to the development of human convictions about things to be valued more than physical life itself — justice, liberty of conscience, exemplary witness to a belief, as well as things valued less highly by most people. It is not hard for most men to believe that physical life is not of

absolute value, though in the time of assassinations, it is hard to accept the fact that others do not believe it.

How might belief in the transcendence of God qualify, alter, modify, man's understanding of, and response to, the non-absolute human values, and particularly the value of human physical life? If there are theological grounds for accepting the finite values as non-absolute, and if there are experiential grounds for this, in what ways might the religious belief qualify the human experience? I shall not give all the possible answers to these questions, but only some which I deem to be very important.

First, created life is accepted as a gift; it has an author and a source beyond itself, and we and all the other forms of life are dependent on that author and source. Life is given to us; even if man succeeds in creating new physical life, he remains the recipient of a multitude of gifts which make this possible. Thus one could spell out a number of the characteristics of the relationship between man and God which in turn would qualify man's disposition toward the created values around him: man is a *dependent* creature, dependent upon God and upon his fellows — this he remembers in his relationships and responses; man is the recipient of good things which are not of his creation, including his own physical life — this brings a response of *gratitude* both to God and the persons and institutions which sustain the goodness of his life, etc.

Second, since only God is absolute, man must remember his finitude, not to mention his deformed existence. This, as the Protestant theological interpreters of culture remind us, requires that man always be brought under question by himself and by others, that he never absolutize his powers, his acts, his judgments. The requirement, in traditional religious terms, of humility constantly qualifies his tendencies to absolutize the relative.

Third, man is *accountable* to the author and source of life for his use and cultivation of life, including human physical life. He is responsible (in terms of accountable) to God for the ways in which he cares for, preserves, sustains, cultivates, and, in his limited capacity, creates life around him. His disposition is that of the free servant; not servile but acknowledging that his human vocation is under God.

Fourth, in his participation in the created order, man is *responsive* to the *developments and purposes which are being made possible* for him under the power and gifts of life from God. He responds not only to the immediacies of possibilities, but to the course of developments which the transcendent God is making possible and ultimately governing. This fourth brings us to a critical point, in my judgment, in Protestant theologies which most substantiate the first affirmation of this paper. That is, insofar as the transcendent God is the One beyond the Many (H. R. Niebuhr), or the unspeakable ground of being (Tillich), he is peculiarly devoid of meaningful content, and thus man is left almost no substantial theological resources in the determination of the values and purposes which ought to govern his participation in the created order, including his use of human physical life. The human ingenuity left for man to depend on in the absence of theological resources is not to be denigrated; out of reflections on human life man does develop views of the "values" which are human, and which are to be developed and sustained. But the God who is transcendent is not the totally unknown God, and thus there are more resources than man's reflection on his own existence alone.

Since the *sine qua non* of other relative values and of valuing is the existence of human physical life, it is valued and is to be valued with a high priority. To take it is to render it impossible for the other person to experience any values, and for him to contribute to the life of the community in such valued ways as it might be possible to do. Thus, while human physical life is not an absolute value, it is to be preserved unless there are substantial grounds for regarding other values to be of greater significance in the particular circumstances in which judgments are made. Human physical life is the primary gift of God on which all other gifts to man are dependent; this vacuous platitude suddenly becomes cogent when assassins' bullets remove from the human community the values of a great man's life, not only values to himself but to the human community.

## Human Life Has Many Values

Human life has many values. These values are not always in harmony with each other in particular

circumstances. Indeed, there is no fixed timeless order of priority of the values of human life which *a priori* determines what ought to occur in all particular circumstances. Put theologically, while God's purposes for man might be summed up in some generalized unitary conception, such as "He wills man's good," man's good is a complex and not simple notion. Indeed, the religious consciousness of Christianity and Judaism has always recognized that God's purposes are multiple and not single in human life. Put in the language of human experience, men have always been aware that human life cannot exist without both freedom and order, without both love and justice, without both peace and freedom or peace and justice, and that these sometimes conflict with each other and with the value of particular human physical lives in particular circumstances.

The God who is transcendent is not a totally unknown God. People who have acknowledged him to be the Lord have historically discerned his activity in the course and purposes of events, in the lives and deeds of particular men, in the responses men have made to each other and to him. They have written accounts of human life in which they have interpreted experience in the light of the purposes of God, the values God confers upon life. They have written in propositional form some of the predicates which they have deduced from the activities of God; God is love, God is just, God is merciful, God is wrathful, God is the creator, God is the redeemer, God is the judge, God is righteous, etc. Many of these accounts and purposes are directly moral in their content; they pertain to what God wills that human life should be if it is in accord with his activities and his purposes, his will in the double sense of what he does and what he requires. To be sure, certain purposes of God are more dominant than others: his redemptive purpose triumphs over his wrath, for example, as Jonah was disappointed to find out. But in particular circumstances the significance of his redemptive purposes might well include his wrath, as religious sentimentalists often fail to see. He is loving, but the forms of his loving are at least as complex as the forms of human loving — sometimes he loves through the provision of an order, a pattern of rules for life, sometimes through spontaneity and boundless mercy, sometimes through the preservation of peace, and sometimes through the break-up of oppressive and unjust peace. Religious men, like others, long to leap to a simple unitive understanding of God's will and purpose, for if they can be true believers in such, they can provide simpler statements of what life in the human world is to be. But the impulse violates both Christian beliefs about the God who is transcendent and the complexity of the life created by him in which his purposes are to be fulfilled. God values many things in human life.

In my judgment, the most current simplification is that God wills the human, a simplification which has ecumenical auspices. The human, it turns out, is either something men are presumed to know intuitively, or it is something which must be spelled out in more rationally defensible terms, which is to open the door to complexity. It may well be that God wills the human, but the human, like the good, is not a simple notion.[4]

The things which human beings value, quite properly, are at least as many, and at least as inconsistent with each other in particular circumstances as are the purposes of God. What common human experience knows about this was depicted philosophically several decades ago by Nicolai Hartmann.[5] Not only is there a plurality of values which are abrasive to each other, but there is a plurality of virtues; indeed, Hartmann wrote about the antinomy of values and of virtues. In his rigorous atheism and his rigorous assertion of the moral autonomy of men, Hartmann painted one of the most awesome pictures of human responsibility I have encountered. One might, however, learn from his phenomenological accounts of moral life without necessarily agreeing with his metaphysics and his anthropology. Human values are many, and many things which men value can be ethically and theologically justified. They do not fall into a neat pattern of priorities which smooths the abrasiveness of particular situations.[6]

Do the Christian beliefs about the God who is transcendent bear any importance upon the choices men make in the ordering of human values in the conduct of life? Or, is one left with a plurality in the transcendent matched by a plurality in the human sphere? In this brief paper I cannot explicate my answers fully. They would, however, take the following line. Since the transcendent God is not a capricious being, man can discern the fundamental directionality of his pur-

poses for human life. There is an orientation, an intention, which sheds its light upon which intentions and values are proper for man. And, as I indicated in the first part of this paper, man is accountable to God, whose purposes can be in part explicated, in the conduct of his affairs. One also receives his knowledge of God's purposes as a gift of light and direction in the conduct of his actions. But this directionality, which can be translated into a generally applicable ordering of human values, does not resolve the conflicts that are bound to be present in the hard cases of moral judgment. Although God is loving, and wills that men shall be loving, love is not *prima facie* consistent with the preservation of human life under all circumstances. If one chooses to say that love is consistent with man's well-being, one has only moved the problem over from one term to the other, without specifying it more carefully.

Further, the transcendence of God has personal meaning only if one has trust in the God who is transcendent, only if there is a gratitude to him, loyalty to him, a sense of obligation to him. Given this faith, then, the religious believer is obligated to seek to discern (not alone, but in the company of the people of God) what the transcendent God's purposes are for the conduct of life with its plurality of human values. But given a measure of plurality of God's purposes, there is no guarantee of man making a risk-proof moral judgment, either in God's or in men's sights. There is no prior guarantee of hitting the mark morally. Given the finitude of men, and the plurality of values discerned in human experience, there is no guarantee *a priori* of moral rectitude in all circumstances. Given man's sin (not explicated here), there is need both for guidance from the communities' beliefs about God, and for the mercy which he grants to all people. The Christian beliefs about the God who is transcendent give guidance in the ordering of life with its plurality of values.

## III. Human Valuing

Human valuing is complex and not simple. It involves several kinds of relations, and several aspects of individual experience. A rehearsal of the theories of human valuation is no more possible than a rehearsal of theories of value in this brief paper. To keep the topic manageable I shall confine my discussion to two principal aspects of the experience of valuing. One is valuing things and other persons for their utility, not only for one's own purposes, but for purposes of the human community. The other is valuing things and persons for themselves. My interest in this distinction here is to suggest some of the different characteristics of human responses, and of personhood, which are properly involved in each of these two aspects. The first suggests a mode of life which is largely one of problem-solving, of achievement of specific purposes or ends, and tends to slip into a flat, mechanistic view of experience. It reduces the sense of awe and wonder. The second suggests a mode of life which is spiritually profound, but tends to slip into the denigration of rationality, of the necessity for specification of ends and means. Both modes of life are advanced under religious auspices; the first is strong in the proposals of those who affirm the advances of technology and urbanization, and share the optimistic spirit that sometimes pervades successful problem solvers. (My personal conviction is that the thinness of such theologically sponsored views is becoming clear with the compounding of human failures and tragedies.) The second is strong in the proposals of radically personalistic Christians, who, in some of their rhetoric, appear to suggest that the organization of persons to be useful to achieve certain ends (particularly in the church) compromises what men are meant to be for each other. The double tendency is not new, of course; one can gain insight into it from reading the theology of St. Augustine, among others from the past.

It would be folly to try to argue that only a belief in the transcendence of God can justify the more personalistic vision of life, with its responses to other persons of awe, wonder, joy, reverence, and profound respect. Certain aspects of contemporary youth culture manifest this kind of valuing while at the same time rebelling against traditional religious beliefs; the relations between young people are "beautiful" in a meaningful way to them. (My son, for example, wrote recently to a friend, "The real world is beautiful, and you are part of it.") The grounds for the fresh appropriation of the Kantian principle that persons are to be treated as ends in themselves and not as means, are more a revulsion against the institutionaliza-

tion of values of utility which appear to be "dehumanizing" than they are religious beliefs.

I believe it would be equally a folly to argue that no theological support can be given for the instrumental value, the utility value, of persons. If God is intent upon the preservation and cultivation of life, including as it must, men's lives in relation to each other and in relation to the rest of nature, a view of men as functionaries for the achievement of purposes consistent with those larger purposes is proper, and in order. There is an ordering activity in life, with its impositions of duties and obligations, its assignment of tasks and the requirement of their fulfillment, which is part of God's purpose for man.

The general phenomenon of valuing, then, has many aspects, and cannot be reduced to a simple notion, nor be grounded in a simple set of ultimate requirements. In "using" another person one is valuing him for his function in the social economy of life; one values his wife, even, in part for her utility — in providing for the mundane needs of the family (doing laundry, cooking meals, shopping, cleaning the house, etc.) and in fulfilling needs for affection and even sexual gratification. But relations other than utility between persons also include valuing; not all valuing of persons is reducible to utility. To respect another is to acknowledge his value, as is to reverence another, appreciate another, care for another, preserve the life of another, sustain another, love another, honor another. The valuing carried by these notions suggests in each instance an aspect of the value of the other for his own sake, an intrinsic value to the other. These notions suggest aspects of the experience of valuing, and the relationship with the other, which acknowledge the mystery, the autonomy, the value of the existence, of the other. They also suggest that the self, in such valuing, is not simply calculating in a rational way how the other fulfills one's own desires, interests, and needs, or even the interests and needs of the society. Rather they involve the affections, the emotive life of the person.

*Belief* in the transcendence of God is not a necessary personal condition for proper maintenance of either the utility or the intrinsic values of persons. To claim that it is a necessary condition would be to take on the obligation to prove that those who believe in the transcendence of God are better "valuers" than are those who do not believe. Christian belief in the God who is transcendent, however, does, can, should, and ought to inform and direct the valuing experiences of Christians, and the relations they have with each other and with nature.

To spell this out, I would develop two themes. One is the effect of this belief on the dispositions of the persons who believe it. To accept life as a gift, to acknowledge dependence on God for life, to acknowledge one's finitude and disobedience in humility, would all (if there is some wholeness to the person) predispose one to have respect, reverence, honor, appreciation, and love for others, and for the world. In the life of praise and adoration, of confession and repentance, which are part of the expression of this belief, of the response to the transcendence of God, the affections are nourished, and the dispositions directed toward the response of respect, honor, appreciation, etc. The calculative rationality of valuations for utility is tempered and impregnated by the sensibilities, dispositions, and affections nourished in religious faith.

The second theme is the effect that the beliefs about the God who is transcendent would have in conditioning the ends and purposes for which the experience of utilization of others would be directed. Since these ends and purposes can be specified in consistency with the purposes of God who is known in Christian faith, and since ends and purposes which are inconsistent with such knowledge of God would be illicit, the utilization of other persons and of nature would be informed by the affirmations made about the God who is transcendent.

The legitimate claims of Christian thought with reference to God's transcendence and the values of human life could be summarized in the following terms. All created things, including human physical life, are of non-absolute value. Yet as gifts of God they are to be nourished, cared for, protected, developed, etc. The transcendent God is a known God, and the knowledge of his purposes gives direction to the ordering of life's values, but not with such clarity that man is exempted from the responsibility to judge and act in his finite condition. The relation of the believers to God in trust, gratitude, obedience, etc., places upon them the willingness and the obligation to make their orderings of values cohere with God's

a drain on my family and limited resources?" As Dr. Robert Bernhoft, a surgeon and president of Washington Physicians Against Initiative 119, put it: "These people [the elderly of limited means] are already under tremendous pressure to get out of the way." The next step is not a huge leap.

Dr. Peter McGough, an opponent of Initiative 119, states after the vote: "Saying No to assisted death is not enough. Now we have a responsibility to deal with the problems that brought out this concern." The five cultural trends described above indicate (even if they do not exhaust) the problems McGough was referring to. Failure to deal with them would invite a replay of Initiative 119 both in Washington and in other places.



# 90 Rational Suicide and Reasons for Living

Stanley Hauerwas

## 1. Suicide and the Ethics of Autonomy

There is a peculiar ambiguity concerning the morality of suicide in our society. Our commitment to the autonomy of the individual at least implies that suicide may not only be rational, but a "right."[1] Yet many continue to believe that anyone attempting suicide must be sick and therefore prevented from killing themselves. This ambiguity makes us hesitant even to analyze the morality of suicide because we fear we may discover that our society lacks any coherent moral policy or basis for preventing suicide.

Therefore the very idea of "rational suicide" is a bit threatening. We must all feel a slight twinge of concern about the book soon to be published by the British Voluntary Euthanasia Society that describes the various painless and foolproof methods of suicide. But it is by no means clear why we feel uncomfortable about having this kind of book widely distributed. As Nicholas Reed, the general secretary of the Society, suggests: suicide is "more and more seen as an acceptable way for a life to end, vastly preferable to some long, slow, painful death. We're simply helping in the fight for another human right — the right to die."[2]

We think there must be something wrong with this, but we are not sure what. I suspect our unease about these matters is part of the reason we wish to deny the existence of rational or autonomous suicide. If all potential suicides can be declared ill

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by definition then we can prevent them ironically because the agent lacks autonomy. Therefore we intervene to prevent suicides in the name of autonomy which, if we were consistent, should require us to consider suicide a permissible moral act.

Once I was a participant in a seminar in medical ethics at one of our most prestigious medical schools. I was there to speak about suicide, but the week before the seminar had considered abortion. At that time I was told by these beginning medical students they decided it was their responsibility to perform an abortion if a woman requested it because a woman has the right to determine what she should do with her body — an ethical conclusion that they felt clearly justified on grounds of protecting the autonomy of the patient. Moreover this position, they argued, was appropriate if the professional dominance and paternalism of the medical profession was to be broken.

However, I asked them what they would do if they were attending in the Emergency Room and someone was brought in with slashed wrists with a suicide note pinned to their shirt front. First of all would they take the time to read the note to discover the state of the patient? Secondly would they say this is clearly not a medical matter and refuse to accept the patient? Or would they immediately begin to save the person's life? With the same unanimity concerning their responsibility to perform abortion they felt they must immediately begin trying to save the person's life.

The reason they gave to justify their intervention was that anyone taking their life must surely be sick. But it was not clear what kind of "sickness" was under consideration unless we define life itself as some kind of syndrome. Failing to make the case that all suicides must be sick they then suggested they must act to save such a person's life because it was their responsibility as doctors. But again I pressed them on what right they had to impose their role-related responsibilities on those who did not seek their services and, in fact, had clearly tried to avoid coming in contact with them. They then appealed to experience, citing cases when people have recovered from suicide attempts only to be thankful they had been helped. But again such appeals are not convincing since we can also point to the many who are not happy about being saved and soon make another attempt.

Our discussion began to be more and more frustrating for all involved, so a compromise was suggested. These future physicians felt the only solution was that when a suicide came to the Emergency Room the first time, the doctor's responsibility must always be to save their life. However if they came in a second time they could be allowed to die. That kind of solution, however, is not only morally unsatisfactory, but pragmatically difficult to institutionalize. What happens if each time the person is brought to the hospital they get a different physician?

I have told this story because I think it nicely illustrates the kind of difficulties we feel when we try to get a moral handle on suicide. We feel that Beauchamp and Childress are right that if a suicide is genuinely autonomous and there are no powerful utilitarian reasons or "reasons of human worth and dignity standing in the way, then we ought to allow the person to commit suicide, because we would otherwise be violating the person's autonomy."[3]

However, I want to suggest that this way of putting the matter, while completely consistent with an ethics of autonomy, is also deeply misleading. It is misleading not only because it reveals the insufficiency of autonomy either as a basis or ideal for the moral life[4] but also it simply fails to provide an appropriate account of why any of us decides or should decide to stay alive. Indeed it is odd even to think of our willingness to live as a decision. For example Beauchamp and Childress do not explain how anyone could take account of *all* relevant variables and future possibilities in considering suicide. Indeed that seems an odd condition for if we required it of even our most important decisions it would stop us from acting at all.

Yet by challenging this account I want clearly to distinguish my position from those who are intent to deny the possibility of rational suicide. I think that suicide can be and often is a rational decision of an "autonomous" agent, but I do not therefore think it is justified. It is extremely interesting, for example, that Augustine did not claim that suicide was irrational in criticizing the Stoic acceptance and even recommendation of suicide. Rather he pointed out that their acceptance of suicide belied their own understanding of the relation between evil and happiness and how a wise

man thus should deal with adversity. Though the quote is long I think it worth providing the full text. Augustine says,

> There is a mighty force in the evils which compel a man, and, according to those philosophers, even a wise man, to rob himself of his existence as a man; although they say, and say with truth, that the first and greatest utterance of nature, as we may call it, is that a man should be reconciled to himself and for that reason should naturally shun death — that he should be his own friend, in that he should emphatically desire to continue as a living being and to remain alive in this combination of body and soul, and that this should be his aim. There is a mighty force in those evils which overpower this natural feeling which makes us employ all our strength in our endeavor to avoid death — which defeat this feeling so utterly that what was shunned is now wished and longed for, and, if it cannot come to him from some other source, is inflicted on a man by himself. There is a mighty force in those evils which make Fortitude a murderer — if indeed she is still to be called fortitude when she is so utterly vanquished by those evils that she not only cannot by her endurance keep guard over the man she has undertaken to govern and protect, but is herself compelled to go so far as to kill him. The wise man ought, indeed, to endure even death with a steadfastness, but a death that comes to him from outside himself. Whereas if he is compelled, as those philosophers say, to inflict it on himself, they must surely admit that these are not only evils, but intolerable evils, when they compel him to commit this crime.
>
> It follows from this that the life weighed down by such great and grievous ills, or at the mercy of such chances, would never be called happy, if the men who so term it, and who, when overcome by the growing weights of ills, surrender to adversity encompassing their own death — if these people would bring themselves to surrender to the truth, when overcome by sound reasoning, in their quest for the happy life, and would give up supposing that the ultimate, Supreme God is something to be enjoyed by them in this condition of mortality.[5]

The question is not, therefore, the question of whether suicide is "rational." Augustine knew well that the Stoics could provide outstanding examples of cool, unemotional, and rational suicide. He rather asks what kind of blessedness we should expect out of life. For Augustine the Stoic approval of suicide is an indication of the insufficient account they provided about what human existence should be about — namely they failed to see that the only happiness worth desiring is that which came from friendship with the true God. "Yet," he says, "these philosophers refuse to believe in this blessedness because they do not see it; and so they attempt to fabricate for themselves an utterly delusive happiness by means of a virtue whose falsity is in proportion to its arrogance."[6] So the issue is understood within a conception of life we think good and worthy.

## 2. The Grammar of Suicide

Before developing this line of reasoning, however, it should be pointed out that the discussion to this point has been trading on the assumption that we know what suicide is. Yet that is simply not the case. For as Beauchamp and Childress suggest, definitions of suicide such as "intentionally caused self-destruction not forced by the action of another person" are not nearly as unambiguous as they may at first seem. For example they point out when persons suffering from a terminal illness or mortal injury allow their death to occur we find ourselves reluctant to call that act "suicide," but if persons with a terminal illness take their life by active means we do refer to that act as one of suicide. Yet to only describe those acts that involved a direct action as suicide is misleading since we are not sure how we should describe cases where "a patient with a terminal condition might easily avoid dying for a long time but might choose to end his life immediately by not taking cheap and painless medication."[7]

Beauchamp and Childress suggest the reason we have difficulty deciding the meaning of suicide is that the term has an emotive meaning of disapproval that we prefer not to apply to certain kinds of ambiguous cases. The very logic of the term therefore tends to prejudice any pending moral analysis of the rightness or wrongness of suicide. As a means to try to deal with this problem they propose an "uncorrupted" definition of suicide as

what occurs "if and only if one intentionally terminates one's own life — no matter what the conditions or precise nature of the intention or the causal route to death."[8]

As sympathetic as one must feel with their attempt to provide a clear and non-prejudicial account of suicide, however, the very idea of an "uncorrupted" definition of suicide distorts the very grammar of such notions. Beauchamp and Childress are quite right to point out that the notion itself cannot settle how and why suicide applies to certain kinds of behavior and not others. But what must be admitted, as Joseph Margolis has recently argued, is the culturally variable character of suicide. There are many competing views about the meaning and nature of suicide, "some religious, some not, some not even significantly so characterized. . . . There is no simple formula for designating, except trivially, an act of taking, or yielding, or making likely the end of, one's life that will count, universally as suicide. No, some selection of acts of this minimal sort will, in accord with an interpreting tradition, construe what was done as or as not suicide; and, so judging, the tradition will provide as well for the approval or condemnation of what was done. In short, suicide, like murder itself, is an act that can be specified only in a systematic way without a given tradition; and that specification itself depends on classifying the intention of the agent. We can say, therefore, that there is no minimal act of commission or omission that counts as suicide, except relative to some tradition; and, within particular traditions, the justifiability of particular suicides may yet be debatable."[9]

So the very way one understands "suicide" already involves moral judgments and requires argument. So I shall contend that if we rightly understand what life is about, suicide should be understood negatively and should not therefore be recommended as an alternative for anyone. This is not to deny that from certain perspectives suicide can be considered rational — as an institution, that is a way of characterizing a whole range of behavior, as well as an individual act. That it can be so understood, however, reveals how little the issue turns on the question of "rationality." We must rather ask whether the tradition through which we understand the meaning and nature of suicide is true.

## 3. Why Suicide Is Prohibited

I have argued elsewhere that suicide as an institution must be considered morally doubtful. That conclusion is based on the religious understanding that we should learn to regard our lives as gifts bestowed on us by a gracious Creator.[10] That such an appeal is explicitly religious is undeniable, but I would resist any suggestion that the religious nature of this appeal disqualifies it from public argument. Rather it is a reminder of Margolis' contention that any account of suicide necessarily draws on some tradition. Therefore my appeal to this kind of religious presupposition is but an explicit avowal of what any account of suicide must involve — though I certainly would not contend that the only basis for disapproving suicide is religious.

It is important, however, that the significance of the shift to the language of gift be properly appreciated. For it is a challenge to our normal presumptions about the way the prohibition of suicide is grounded in our "natural desire to live." Indeed it is not even clear to me that we have a "natural desire to live," or even if we do what its moral significance entails. The very phrase "natural desire to live," is fraught with ambiguity, but even worse it seems to suggest that when a person finds they no longer have such a desire there is no longer any reason for living.

In contrast the language of gift does not presuppose we have a "natural desires to live," but rather that our living is an obligation. It is an obligation that we at once owe our Creator and one another. For our creaturely status is but a reminder that our existence is not secured by our own power, but rather requires the constant care and trust in others. Our willingness to live in the face of suffering, pain, and sheer boredom of life is morally a service to one another as it is a sign that life can be endured as well as a source for joy and exuberance. Our obligation to sustain our lives even when they are threatened with or require living with a horrible disease is our way of being faithful to the trust that has sustained us in health and now in illness.[11] We take on a responsibility as sick people. That responsibility is simply to keep on living as it is our way of gesturing to those who care for us that we can be trusted and trust them even in our illness.

There is nothing about this position which entails that we must do everything we can do to keep ourselves alive under all conditions. Christians certainly do not believe that life is inherently sacred and therefore it must be sustained until the bitter end. Indeed the existence of the martyrs is a clear sign that Christians think the value of life can be overridden.[12] Indeed I think there is much to be said for distinguishing between preserving life and only prolonging death, but such a distinction does not turn on technical judgments about when we have in fact started dying, though it may involve such a judgment.[13] Rather the distinction is dependent on the inherited wisdom of a community that has some idea of what a "good death" entails.[14]

Such a death is one that allows us to remember the dead in a morally healthy way — that is, the manner of death does not prevent the living from remembering the manner and good of their life. To be sure we can train ourselves to remember a suicide as if the suicide said nothing about their life, but I think we would be unwise to do so. For to face the reality of a death by suicide is a reminder how often our community fails to offer the trust necessary to sustain our lives in health and illness. Suicide is not first a judgment about the agent, but a reminder that we have failed to embody as a community the commitment not to abandon one another. We fear being a burden for others, but even more to ourselves. Yet it is only by recognizing that in fact we are inescapably a burden that we face the reality and opportunity of living truthfully.

It is just such a commitment that medicine involves and why the physician's commitment to caring for the sick seems so distorted by an ethics of autonomy. Medicine is but a gesture, but an extremely significant gesture of a society, that while we all suffer from a condition that cannot be cured, nonetheless neither will we be abandoned. The task of medicine is to care even when it cannot cure.[15] The refusal to let an attempted suicide die is only our feeble, but real, attempt to remain a community of trust and care through the agency of medicine. Our prohibition and subsequent care of a suicide draws on our profoundest assumptions that each individual's life has a purpose beyond simply being "autonomous."

## 4. Reasons for Living and "Rational Suicide": An Example

However, the kind of religious appeals I have made as well as this kind of talk about "purpose" can easily be misleading. For it sounds as though suicide is religiously prohibited because people who believe in God really know what life is about. But that is not the case — at least in the usual sense a phrase such as "what life is about" is understood. Indeed the very reason that living is an obligation is that we are to go on living even though we are far from figuring out what life is about. Our reason for living is not that we are sure about the ultimate meaning of life, but rather that our lives have been touched by another and through that touch we believe we encounter the very being that graciously sustains our existence.

Indeed one of the problems with discussions of "rational suicide" is they seem to be determined by the assumption that the decision to live or to die turns on whether life, and more importantly, one's particular life, has meaning or purpose. Thus, Margolis, for example, suggests that a relatively neutral understanding of the issue raised by suicide is whether the deliberate taking of one's life in order simply to end it, not instrumentally for any ulterior purpose, can ever be rational or rationally justified. He suggests a rational suicide is when a person "aims overridingly at ending his own life and who, in a relevant sense, performs the act. The manner in which he suicides may be said to be by commission or omission, actively or passively, directly or indirectly, consciously or unconsciously, justifiably or reprehensibly — in accord with the classificatory distinctions of particular traditions."[16] According to Margolis such suicide is more likely to be justified if the person "decided that life was utterly meaningless" or "sincerely believed life to have no point at all."[17]

My difficulty with such a suggestion is that I have no idea what it would mean to know that life and in particular my life, was "utterly meaningless" or had "no point at all." In order to illustrate my difficulty about these matters let me call your attention to one of the better books about suicide — John Barth's *The Floating Opera.*[18] Barth's book consists of Todd Andrews' account of how one day in 1937 he decided to commit suicide. There was no particular reason that Andrews decided to

commit suicide and that, we discover, is exactly the reason he decided to do so — namely, there is no reason for living or dying.

The protagonist has written the book to explain why he changed his mind and in the process we discover quite a bit about him. Most people would describe him as a cynic, but there is more to him than that. Andrews makes his living by practicing law in a small backwater town in the Chesapeake tidewater country. He became a lawyer because that is what his father wanted, but he is later stunned by his father's suicide. What bothered him was not that his father killed himself, but that he did so because he could not pay his debts due to the Depression.

Andrews has chosen to live free from any long-term commitments since the day in WWI when he killed a German sergeant with whom he had shared a foxhole through a terrible night of shelling. His lack of commitment extends even to his arrangement for living — he lives in a hotel room where he registers on a day to day basis. He has, however, been involved in a long-term affair with Jane Mack, his best friend's wife. Harrison Mack not only approved but actually arranged this as a further extension of their friendship. However by mutual agreement they have recently decided to end this form of their relation.[19] This is partly the result of the recent birth of Jeannie, who, even though her paternity remains unclear, has given the Macks a new sense of themselves as a couple.

Andrews also suffers from two diseases — subacute bacteriological endocarditis and chronic infection of the prostate. He was told thirty-five years ago that the former could kill him any time. The latter disease only caused him to cease living a wastrel's existence he had assumed during law school and begin what he claims is almost a saintly life. And indeed his life is in many ways exemplary, for he is a man who lives his life in accordance with those convictions he thinks most nearly true.

Even though he is not a professional philosopher, Andrews is a person with a definite philosophical bent. For years he had been working on notes, suitably filed in three peach baskets, for the writing of a Humean type *Inquiry* on the nature of causation. For if Hume was right that causes can only be inferred, then his task is to shorten as much as possible the leap between what we see and what we cannot see. That is, to get at the true reasons for our actions.[20]

This becomes particularly relevant if we are to understand Andrews' decision to commit suicide. He fully admits that there are abundant psychological reasons, for those inclined for such explanations, to explain his suicide — a motherless boyhood, his murder of the German sergeant, his father's hanging himself, his isolated adulthood, his ailing heart, his growing sexual impotency, injured vanity, frustrated ambition, boredom — the kinds of things psychoanalysts identify as "real" causes.[21] But for him the only reasons that interest him in dying are philosophical. These he states in five propositions which constitute his completed *Inquiry*. They simply are:

I. Nothing has intrinsic value. Things assume value only in terms of certain ends.
II. The reasons for which people attribute value to things are always ultimately arbitrary. That is, the ends in terms of which things assume value are themselves ultimately irrational.
III. There is, therefore, no ultimate "reason" for valuing anything.
IV. Living is action in some form. There is no reason for action in any form.
V. There is, then, no "reason" for living.[22]

And so Todd Andrews decided to kill himself one day in 1937.

However before doing so he decided to go see *The Original and Unparalleled Floating Opera*, a local minstrel show on a rundown showboat. The absurdity of the show matches perfectly Andrews' view of the absurdity of life. During the performance, Andrews goes to the ship's galley, turns on the gas only to be interrupted and saved by a workman who angrily calls him a damn fool — not because he tried to take his life, but because he could have blown up the ship.

More importantly, however, just as he is recovering, the Macks, who had also been attending the opera, rush into the galley with Jeannie who had suddenly taken sick and fainted. Though appealed to for help, Andrews suggests he is no good at such things and advises the Macks to rush to the hospital. However, the local doctor arrives and advises an alcohol rub reassuring everyone nothing is seriously wrong. In the emergency, however,

and the concern Andrews felt about Jeannie, he discovers he no longer wants to commit suicide even though he could still easily jump into the Choptank river. For as he tells us, "something was different. Some qualitative change had occurred, instantly, down in the dining room. The fact is I had no reason to be concerned over little Jeannie, and yet my concern for that child was so intense, and had been so immediately forthcoming, that (I understood now) the first desperate sound of Jane's voice had snapped me out of a paralysis which there was no reason to terminate. No reason at all. Moreover, had I not, in abjuring my responsibility for Jeannie, for the first time in my life assumed it — for her, for her parents, and for myself? I was confused, and I refused to die that way. Things needed explaining; abstractions needed to be straightened out. To die now was simply out of the question, though I hated to spoil such a perfect day."[23]

Andrews suspects most philosophizing to be rationalization, but nonetheless his experience requires him to return to the propositions of his *Inquiry* to make a small revision of the fifth: V. There is then, no "reason" for living (or for suicide).[24] For now he tells us that he realized that even if values are only relative there are still relative values. "To realize that nothing has absolute value is surely overwhelming, but if one goes no further from that proposition than to become a saint, a cynic, or a suicide on principle, one hasn't gone far enough. If nothing makes any final difference, that fact makes no final difference either, and there is no more reason to commit suicide, say than not to, in the last analysis. Hamlet's question is, absolutely, meaningless. A narrow escape."[25]

The Christian prohibition of suicide is clearly based in our assumption that our lives are not ours to do with as we please. But that prohibition is but a reminder of the kind of commitments that make suicide which appears from certain perspectives and at particular times in our lives so rational, so wrong. It reminds us how important our commitment to be the kind of people who can care about a sick little girl and in the process learn to care for ourselves. That kind of lesson may not give life meaning, but it is certainly sufficient to help us muddle through with enough joy to sustain the important business of living.

## Notes

1. For example, T. Beauchamp and J. Childress (*Principles of Biomedical Ethics* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1979], p. 90) suggest, "If the principle of autonomy is strongly relied upon for the justification of suicide, then it would seem that there is a right to commit suicide, so long as a person acts autonomously and does not seriously affect the interests of others."

2. "British 'Right to Die' Group Plans to Publish Manual on Suicide," *New York Times.*

3. T. Beauchamp and J. Childress, *Principles of Biomedical Ethics,* 93.

4. See F. Bergman, *On Being Free* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1977); and G. Dworkin, "Moral Autonomy," in *Morals, Science, and Sociality,* ed. H. Engelhardt and D. Callahan (Hastings-on-Hudson, N.Y.: Hastings Center Publications, 1978).

5. Augustine, *The City of God,* trans. Henry Bettenson (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977), pp. 856-57.

6. Ibid., p. 857. Earlier Augustine had argued, "There were famous heroes who, though by the laws of war they could do violence to a conquered enemy, refused to do violence to themselves when conquered; though they had not the slightest fear of death, they chose to endure the enemy's domination rather than put themselves to death. They were fighting for their earthly country; the gods they worshipped were false; but their worship was genuine and they faithfully kept their oaths. Christians worship the true God and they yearn for a heavenly country; will they not have more reason to refrain from the crime of suicide, if God's providence subjects them for a time to their enemies for their probation or reformation. Their God does not abandon them in that humiliation, for he came from on high so humbly for their sake," pp. 35-36.

7. Beauchamp and Childress, *Principles of Biomedical Ethics,* p. 86.

8. Ibid., p. 87. Elsewhere Beauchamp provides a fuller account arguing suicide occurs when "a person intentionally brings about his or her own death in circumstances where others do not coerce him or her to the action, except in those cases where death is caused by conditions not specifically arranged by the agent for the purpose of bringing about his or her own death," T. Beauchamp, "Suicide," in *Matters of Life and Death,* ed. T. Regan (New York: Random House, 1980), p 77.

9. J. Margolis, *Negativities: The Limits of Life* (Columbus: Merriall, 1975), pp. 25-26.

10. S. Hauerwas, *Truthfulness and Tragedy* (Notre

Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1977), pp. 101-15.

11. See S. Hauerwas, "Reflections on Suffering, Death, and Medicine," *Ethics in Science and Medicine* 6 (1979): 229-37.

12. See S. Hauerwas, *Community of Character* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1980).

13. S. Hauerwas, *Vision and Virtue* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1974), pp. 166-86.

14. S. Hauerwas, "Religious Conceptions of Brain Death," in *Brain Death: Interrelated Medical and Social Issues*, ed. J. Korein (New York: New York Academy of Sciences, 1978), pp. 329-36.

15. S. Hauerwas, "Care," in *Encyclopedia of Bioethics*, ed. W. Reich (New York: Free Press, 1978), 1: 145-50.

16. Margolis, *Negativities*, p. 29.

17. Ibid., p. 24.

18. J. Barth, *The Floating Opera* (New York: Avon, 1956). For a similar approach from which I have learned much see H. Nielsen, "Margolis on Rational Suicide: An Argument for Case Studies in Ethics," *Ethics* 89, no. 4 (1979): 394-400. The fact that we must resort to example when considering such matters is an important indication how easily abstract discussions of the rightness or wrongness of suicide, for which there is no substitute and must certainly be done, can as easily mislead as they can help us clarify why the suicide is rightly understood in a negative manner. Seldom are any of us sure why it is we act and do not act as we do. We may say we would rather die than live with such and such disease, but how can we be so sure that is the reason? Beauchamp and Childress' suggestion that ideally a person contemplating suicide would consider all the variables is as much a formula for self-deception as one for self-knowledge. I suspect that is why Barth's book is so helpful — namely it is only by telling a story that we come to understand how the prohibition against suicide is meant to shape the self.

19. Andrews admits that this turn of affairs made him reconsider briefly his decision to commit suicide since the Macks might interpret his suicide as caused by their decision. But he says that this lasted only a moment since it occurred to him "What difference did it make to me how they interpreted my death? Nothing, absolutely, makes any difference. Nothing is ultimately important. And that, at least partly by my own choosing, that last act would be robbed of its real significance, would be interpreted in every way but the way I intended. This fact once realized, it seemed likely to me that here was a new significance, if possible even more genuine," Barth, *The Floating Opera*, p. 224.

20. The full title is actually *An Inquiry into the Circumstances Surrounding the Self-Destruction of Thomas F. Andrews, of Cambridge, Maryland, on Ground-Hog Day, 1930 (More Especially into the Causes Therefor)*. Andrews tells us his aim is simply to learn why his father hanged himself. Andrews admits the real problem was one of "imperfect communication" between him and his father as he could find no adequate reason for his father's act. His *Inquiry*, however, became primarily a study of himself since he realized to understand imperfect communication requires perfect knowledge of each party. Andrews suggests at the end of the book if we have not understood his change of mind he is again cursed with imperfect communication — but the suggestion seems to be we have a better chance at communication than he had with his father as now at least we have Todd Andrews' story.

21. Barth, *The Floating Opera*, p. 224.

22. Ibid., pp. 238-43.

23. Ibid., p. 266.

24. Ibid., p. 270.

25. Ibid.