

The Hippocratic Oath and Christian Tradition

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July 17, 2020

According to the Hippocratic tradition, the primary obligation for physicians is to do no harm. This clearly prohibits active euthanasia; i.e., incidents in which a physician directly brings about the death of a patient. However, ethicists must also wrestle with more indirect or passive acts. Even without active intervention, under what circumstances is it appropriate for physicians to allow their patients to die?

Two competing answers can be found in vitalism and subjectivism. According to the former, the prolongation of life is of ultimate importance such that all attempts to keep a patient alive must be pursued. The latter states that life is only valuable if the individual believes her life has value. Thus, when subjective value is gone, a life may be terminated.

The Christian tradition has built upon the Hippocratic tradition by rejecting both these extreme philosophies. According to Christianity, human life is important and has inherent value. But faith in the resurrection shows that this life is not all there is. Therefore, it does not have ultimate value. Accordingly, while ordinary measures should be taken to prolong life, extraordinary measures are not necessary.

These traditions have combined to form an American consensus in medical ethics which David F. Kelly has summarized in three pillars. First, there is a difference between ordinary treatment and extraordinary treatment. Those which have a reasonable potential for benefit to the patient must be undertaken, but those that do not provide a reasonable benefit do not. Second, there is a distinction between killing and allowing to die. This is consistent with the principle of double effect which acknowledges circumstances in which it is permissible to take action toward a good end even though some bad results may also occur. Third, priority is given

to privacy, autonomy and liberty such that patients may refuse treatment for any reason regardless of the recommendation of their physician.

The three pillars are in many ways consistent with the value Christianity places on human life. Because we are made in the image of God, autonomy should be respected. Similarly, because this life is not all there is, it's preservation should not be elevated above all other values (a principle implicit in the first pillar). However, the third pillar walks a fine line. Liberty is important, but it is not absolute. An overemphasis on autonomy could lead to subjectivism which denies the objective value of human life.