

Do We Have to Have DIGNITY When Dying? I wonder ...

‘Dignity in Death’ ... or Death True to Life?

Have you noticed how often the people promoting euthanasia – and lots of others - talk about wanting “dignity” in death, and the general acceptance that a “dignified” death is generally good and desirable? Then there’s the well-known Swiss euthanasia clinic, Dignitas, where, presumably, you can arrange your decease “with dignity”. As usual, I wonder about all this, and think that, like all other readily/universally accepted ideas, it should be examined and questioned. Just *what* does it mean? What, exactly, is a “dignified” death? All deaths – waiting for all of us – are the cessation of physical life. Some deaths – perhaps many – are accompanied by distress and pain. Are “dignified” deaths physical cessations devoid of such things? One often hears about “pain control”; perhaps this is the key. Perhaps “dignity” in death actually means “control”, or death in *controlled* circumstances. The clients of Dignitas (again, presumably), get to *choose* the time of their death; maybe *dignity* in death consists of personal choice. Either way, “dignity in death” seems to be something about personal power (control, choice).

Now one very salient feature of the present age (at least, of our culture in the West) is that it is dedicated to the idea of individuals’ control and power over their lives, that individuals at all times, as much as can be made practically and legally possible, have total control (at least, regarding those things which they *have* to do). This is the key to the concept of *civil liberty*, in that it involves freedom/power which is granted civilly, that is, by the law, and other civic regulations and pronouncements (this is to suggest the current preoccupation with individuals’ *rights*). Of course, such power can be illusory, in the case of people who (unbeknownst to themselves, perhaps) have only acquired limited power of control over *themselves* (as in such things as inability to control the intake of alcohol, etc.; our control over our lives might be limited in ways we do not know of, and have little to do with laws, and Bills of Rights). No doubt some people believe they have a *right* to a dignified death, and it is the duty of civil authorities, and health-care bodies, to ensure it (since my *right* necessitates someone else’s *duty*).

It seems to me, however, that our bid to control everything is both bound for ultimate failure, and is also something of an anxiety brought about by ultimate insecurity; it is fraught with the suggestion, even, of panic. My need for *my* control over *my* life seems to come, ultimately, from the inevitable insecurity of the materialist world view. Since this life is all we have (the logic goes) we will surely be reluctant to lose it, and filled with anxiety – the feeling of loss of control – over its unavoidable, inevitable, end. But such things should not at all be the case with the non-materialist world view. Those for whom this life is but part of the whole must surely look at things differently; most such people see themselves as part of something bigger, brought about by something above and beyond themselves; they will surely not be motivated by the need to have total control over their lives – which, they will probably believe, really belong to their intelligent creator. Since they exist in eternity, the termination of the physical must be less important. (the lovely Catholic prayer petitions Mary to pray for us sinners “now, *and at the hour of our death*”, with no suggestion that we sinners might request any say over when that hour might be; at death, or any other time, there is no possibility that a Christian could be alone; the possible absence of people is another thing entirely).

There have been many, many deaths in history which were undignified in that the ultimately-deceased person did not choose them, or have any control over them. But there were – are – a few others where the person does not choose them, has little control over them, and yet accepts them; that they may be occasions of pain and suffering is usually part of this. I am thinking, particularly, of the deaths of Christian martyrs (both in the remote past, and right now (currently there is a young woman in Pakistan who may suffer death, due to her Christian beliefs, shortly)). I should make clear that a *real* martyr is someone who does not actually choose death, and in no way threatens or risks the lives of others in accepting death, but who nonetheless accepts it as a condition of fidelity to beliefs. The deaths of the early Christian martyrs were undoubtedly exceedingly agonising, in most cases; those of Christian martyrs, today, in parts of Africa and Asia, no less so. They are not deaths over which many of the victims have much choice or control. They are not in the least dignified. Instead, they are, I contend, acts of cessation of this present life in which those suffering them are fully consistent with the manner of their lives, and the way they have lived – the things assented to (who ever was foolish enough to believe that Christian faith does not require suffering); they partake, in a word, of the fullest Truth.

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