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14 How Should One Die? Nietzsche's Contribution to the Issue of Suicide in Medical Ethics

14.1 Introduction

In the history of ideas, “suicide” refers in general to the voluntary act of self-destruction (Minois 1995). By contrast, the word “suicide” is hardly used alone in contemporary medical ethics, as patients’ requests to end their lives refers to specific ethical and legal issues (Beauchamp 1993). For instance, “physician-assisted suicide” raises the question about the justified conditions under which physicians may be involved in the request of patients to die. The fundamental condition is that the decision-making of the patient be unambiguously autonomous. A further use of the word “suicide” in medical ethics is within the context of “suicide prevention”. It refers to the medical–social right to intervene in order to prevent patients who are mentally ill, or clinically depressed, from not acting autonomously (Beauchamp and Childress 2009). This paper focuses upon the philosophical arguments on assisted suicide, which the German thinker Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900) developed in his early writings. We argue that Nietzsche – who is often perceived as defending the legitimacy of suicide as the expression of individual autonomy (Hecht 2013) – remains, however, cautious and undecided concerning the possibility of identifying for certain whether a patient is indeed acting autonomously when s/he requests to put an end to his/her life. We underline the hermeneutic challenges that health-care professionals face when a patient formulates a suicide request. In this paper, we ask whether it should be desirable that health-care professionals suspend their personal view regarding assisted suicide.

The paper focuses on Nietzsche’s ideas about suicide, which he formulated at the end of the 1870s, mainly in *Human, all too Human* (HTH). In this contribution, we shall take a closer look at §185 of *The Wanderer and His Shadow* and suggest, in contrast to a widespread view, that Nietzsche is not an active and straightforward defender of the cause of suicide.

Our suspicion is that Nietzsche was aiming at something else than at simply endorsing a pro-suicide attitude. When Nietzsche took up the case of suicide, it was mainly to criticize philosophical rejections of suicide, in particular Schopenhauer’s view (Jacquette 2000), the religious prohibition, and the moral condemnation of suicide. The issue of suicide was an opportunity for Nietzsche to distance himself from normative stances. By criticizing the philosophical, moral, and religious condemnation of suicide, Nietzsche did not, however, plead for a legitimization of suicide. The suggestion made here is that Nietzsche’s disagreement with the moral

condemnation of suicide does not necessarily resolve the issue at stake. Indeed, there is no clear affirmation of suicide in Nietzsche's texts. As we shall see later on, many elements in §185 make it difficult to ascertain Nietzsche's view on suicide.

Unlike Paul Loeb's recent work on Nietzsche's conception of suicide in comparison to Camus's existentialist understanding (Loeb 2010), our purpose here is to focus on earlier texts about suicide, i.e., from the period of HTH. We shall leave out the later texts from the *Zarathustra* and the *Genealogy of Morals*, which Loeb has studied. In difference with Paulo Stellino's recent publication on suicide (Stellino 2013), we are not primarily interested in discussing the possible tension between Nietzsche's apology of suicide and his affirmation of life.

Our interest was raised by contemporary debates on suicide in medical ethics, in which Nietzsche appears now and then as a figure of authority to defend the morally legitimate option of assisted suicide (Benzenhöfer 2009; Filiberti et al. 2001). By and large, the legal and ethical debates oppose those who think that suicide is a fundamental right of the patient and those who defend the view that suicide may not be seen as a right, because it is an irrational act committed out of despair, loneliness, life fatigue, and depression (Mayo 1986).

In contrast, the advocates of medically assisted suicide defend (Küng 2014) the conception of human dignity, according to which dying in dignity means dying before ineluctable pain becomes unendurable, and before the loss of intellectual, emotional, or motoric competences is irretrievable. In these delicate issues, Nietzsche is often cited (mainly the *Zarathustra*) as endorsing the choice of physician-assisted suicide (Pabst Battin 2015). For the opponents of physician-assisted suicide, Nietzsche's legitimation of "reasonable death" is a violation of the principle of sanctity of life (Moreno 1995). The literature often refers to §88 of HTH, in which Nietzsche writes that there is no right to stop someone from committing suicide: "Prevention of Suicide. – There is a right according to which we may deprive a man of life, but none that permits us to deprive him of death: this is merely cruelty" (Nietzsche 1988, vol. 2, 87; our translation).

Of course, it is anachronistic to appeal to Nietzsche in order to defend the particular case of "physician-assisted suicide" within the particular setting of current medical ethics. We are too quick to appropriate him as a timely ally, in order to defend this ethical issue.

Apart from this undue appropriation of Nietzsche's views, there are deeper problems attached to the interpretation, according to which the German philosopher defends actively the cause of suicide in §185. We shall mention and briefly develop two problems: (1) the first and most interesting one is that Nietzsche does not clearly indicate his view on suicide in §185. The hermeneutic challenge of this text makes it impossible to work out a clear position for or against suicide. This is not necessarily to be interpreted as a conceptual weakness of Nietzsche's arguments. On the contrary, we tend to think that Nietzsche's undecidedness speaks for his nondogmatism and moral sensitivity. (2) The second is that Nietzsche is mainly aiming at criticizing

dominant moral and religious condemnations of suicide. Indeed, his main argument is that these opinions reject individual autonomy. This second problem is only briefly mentioned here. We shall conclude by a biographical testimony written by Nietzsche's colleague and friend, Franz Overbeck. The Basler Professor for History of Christendom, Overbeck remembers in his *Memoirs on Friedrich Nietzsche* (Overbeck 1906) that Nietzsche was very preoccupied with the ideal of suicide. Overbeck even quotes HTH §185 as an illustration for the philosophical and personal importance of this issue in his friend's life. Let us start with the first problem, the hermeneutic challenge of §185.

14.2 The hermeneutic challenge of HTH §185

HTH §185 reads as follows:

Of Reasonable Death. – Which is more reasonable, to stop the machine when it has done the job demanded of it, or to let it run until it stops on its own – in other words, until it is deteriorated? Is not the latter a waste of the maintenance costs, a misuse of the strength and care of the operators? Are we not here throwing away something which would be necessary elsewhere? Are we not propagating a kind of contempt of the machines, in the sense that many of them are so uselessly maintained and operated? – I am speaking of involuntary (natural) and voluntary (reasonable) death. Natural death is independent of all reason and is really an *unreasonable* death, in which the pitiable substance of the shell determines how long the kernel should exist or not; in which, accordingly, the deteriorating, ailing and dull jailer is lord and indicates the moment at which his noble prisoner shall die. Natural death is the suicide of nature – in other words, the annihilation of the rational being through the irrational being that is attached thereto. Only a religious perspective can make the reverse appear; for then, as is equitable, the higher reason (God) issues its orders, which the lower reason has to obey. Outside religious thought pattern natural death is not worth glorifying. – The wise dispensation and disposal of death belongs to that now quite incomprehensible and immoral-sounding morality of the future, whose dawn must be an indescribable bliss to behold. (Nietzsche 1988, vol. 2, 632–3)

One tends to read Nietzsche's early texts prospectively. Sometimes, it is useful. Often it biases one's understanding. A good illustration for our odd reading is the issue of suicide. Many commentators read §185 with the chapter of the *Zarathustra* "Of Voluntary Death" (Nietzsche 1969, 97–9) in their mind. For instance, Andreas Urs Sommer starts his commentary of §185 by writing that in many regards, *The Wanderer and His Shadow* anticipates the motto of the *Zarathustra*, "die at the right time" (Sommer 2010, 171). Sommer is certainly right in establishing some connections between, on the one hand, the idea of the free spirits, namely, shaping one's life according to one's own rules, and the wise Zarathustra on the other. After all, §185 might be also a plea for considering death as it is, without fear, without the metaphysics of tragedy, without religious consolation, and without moral condemnation. So, if death is part of life, i.e., if death constitutes the normal, banal, trivial, *natural* fate of human

existence, then one should consider it rationally and take reasonable decisions about one's life, when it seems to be fading away. But the arguments get more complicated in §185. Could Nietzsche be arguing 1) that death is a natural event, *and* – as Nietzsche does in §185 – 2) that we should *not* die in a natural way? What does “natural” mean in 1) and 2)? We suspect the question we should ask concerning §185 is not what position is Nietzsche endorsing, but what suicide actually means.

To start with, the word “suicide” appears only once in §185, and in a very particular phrase: “Suicide of nature” (*Selbstmord der Natur*). In the common use of the word (putting an end to one's own life), it is noteworthy that “suicide” is neither in the title, nor in the aphorism, nor in the preliminary version of the published text (*Vorstufe*): “There is no right by which we can prevent a human being from taking his/her life. To put the criminal in this position of ‘ought-to-live’ is cruelty” (Nietzsche 1969, vol. 4/4, 182; our translation). Nietzsche could have well used it here, since he uses the word “suicide” (*Selbstmord*) in HTH I §88.

Second, Nietzsche begins §185 by asking a series of questions, four long questions in total. The questions do not actually deal with the issue of suicide *sensu stricto*. Instead, Nietzsche is asking whether it is more reasonable to repair an already old machine and to run it until it stops, or to stop it (*stillstellen*) before it starts breaking down. One could argue here that Nietzsche speaks about suicide *per analogiam*. Fair enough, Nietzsche discusses the question of stopping at the right time, on due course, out of respect, and so on. Nietzsche also explicitly confirms his analogy by writing: “I am speaking of involuntary (natural) and voluntary (reasonable) death”. To our understanding, the analogy does not really clarify the issue of death/suicide, and we think that Nietzsche was aware of the obscurity of the analogy too. He would not have otherwise reminded his readers of the topic in question: “I am speaking” (*ich spreche*). The analogy is indeed very puzzling. What “machine” should one stop when it is time to do so: one's body, one's soul or oneself, or something else? Nietzsche uses the word “machine” in different contexts, sometimes to explain something about humans. Consider, for instance, this posthumous text from 1876–1877: “Mankind, a disorderly functioning machine with formidable strength” (*Menschheit, eine unordentlich fungierende Maschine mit ungeheuren Kräften*) (Nietzsche 1988, vol. 8, 369; our translation). In other texts, similar to that depicted here, “machine” seems to refer to the mechanistic Cartesian concept of body (1985, 99-108). He could also allude to La Mettrie's materialism (La Mettrie 1996).

The unsettling character of the analogy lies also in the unexpected language Nietzsche uses: “waste” (*Vergeudung*), “maintenance costs” (*Unterhaltungskosten*), “operators” (*Bedienende*), and “throwing away” (*wegwerfen*). All these words and kinds of arguments are typical for the modern, industrialized, capitalist 19th-century Europe (Thomas 1983). The negative questions that Nietzsche is raising are directly connected with the impact of the economy of production and consumption on culture, morality, and religion. Consider, for instance, this question: “Are we not propagating

a kind of contempt of the machines, in the sense that many of them are so uselessly maintained and operated?"

Even if we agreed that the machine represents the human being as a whole, it would still remain unclear to know for sure *what position is more reasonable* to Nietzsche's eyes. Indeed, Nietzsche suggests two options but formulates objections *only to one option*: option a), namely, stopping the machine before it deteriorates would mean throwing away resources that could still be of use. As for option b), namely, maintaining the machine at all costs, Nietzsche does not express his opposition. It does not mean, however, that Nietzsche supports this option. In sum, the analogy between humans and machines has not clarified the philosophical position of Nietzsche. Nietzsche seems to be endorsing an external observer looking at the industrial revolution in the late 19th century Europe and considering its impact on our moral and religious lives. But we still have learned very little about Nietzsche's own position on suicide!

Third, Nietzsche does not clarify his position when he is supposed to. The reader who expects an explanation of the analogy will be disappointed. For Nietzsche does not explain the meaning of "machine". What is more, Nietzsche introduces a heavy-weighted philosophical pair of opposed concepts, namely, "involuntary/voluntary", without explaining them. The reader is at sea with the juxtaposition of "involuntary" with "natural". The oddest pair is certainly the opposition "reasonable/natural". Does Nietzsche refer to, and possibly endorse, the Stoic position on suicide, as Stellino indicates (Stellino 2013)? Stellino is right to underline the important influence of the Ancient Stoic position on suicide, with which Nietzsche was indeed very familiar. However, there is no explicit element in §185 which indicates that Nietzsche acquiesces to it. Furthermore, there are texts, for instance, the *Enchiridion* by Epictetus, wherein the Roman philosopher argues that it is "unreasonable to leave", as it does not follow the rational principle to live according to nature (*secundum naturam vivere*) (Epictetus 2004, 16-17).

The obscurity of §185 reaches its climax when Nietzsche explicates why natural death is unreasonable. Here too, the language he uses can easily mislead the reader. Indeed, Nietzsche uses the metaphysical language of dualism (shell/kernel) to show that the shell, the body ("the pitiable substance") determines the life of the soul, the kernel. Nietzsche is using the model of platonic dualism *ad absurdum* in order to demonstrate the primacy of the body over the soul. By doing so, Nietzsche seems to argue that the only kind of death *at our disposal is natural death*. Death cannot possibly be decided by reason. Nature decides when the soul dies. But if it is true that there is only natural death, and no reasonable death, why speak of "reasonable death" at all if we may not choose? One possible way out of this apparent contradiction is to distinguish between *reasonable death* and *dying reasonably*. For Nietzsche, dying reasonably would be to accept the power of nature. Furthermore, as Sommer suggests, choosing the option of "dying in a reasonable way" implies giving up the belief in the immortality of the soul and the body (Sommer 2010). Dying reasonably

or philosophically would imply accepting one's finitude. However, Nietzsche doubts whether humans can give up their belief in a postmortem life so easily, as the matter of dying is not only a matter of reason. This is where the second problem appears: our religious, moral, and metaphysical expectations. We shall concentrate our attention on the religious view, particularly the Christian conception of death, as it is the main focus of Nietzsche's critical analysis in §185.

14.3 The religious interpretation of suicide

In §185, religion seems to be the root of the problem. More precisely, the religious way of looking at our life, as well as at our death, creates an obstruction, so Nietzsche argues. And here, "religious" should not be understood in a strict confessional, or theological way, although, by "religious", Nietzsche often means a Christian-based view. "Religious" refers to a typical moral view consisting in claiming that the natural world as it is – i.e., creature of lower ontological and moral value – needs to be changed, in order to be saved by God. Let us transpose this dualistic construction onto the issue of suicide: religion claims that natural death is not something trivial that we ought to accept. Furthermore, it is God qua *higher reason* who decides upon the humans' lives qua *lower reason*. The religious perspective inverts the relation between nature and reason: divine reason is not submitted to the laws of nature. As the creator of all, God gives and takes away human life. Humans are not considered autonomous beings (e.g., 1 Samuel 2, 6; John 1, 3–4).

There is one further point to elucidate. If religion conquers nature, why is it only within the religious perspective that "natural death" is glorified? "Natural death" does not appear as a trivial phenomenon, for it is decided by divine commandment. One would commit a sin against nature, if one were to decide one's own time of death. Unlike this religious naturalism, which sees in "natural death" the sign of God's almighty power, Nietzsche sees suicide qua "natural death" as a human phenomenon.

To sum up, the religious perspective interprets natural death as the expression of divine reason. Nietzsche's skeptical objection is to say that we do not have sufficient knowledge about death to claim essential links between death and divine reason. This might help us find out Nietzsche's position. As hinted at earlier, we suggest that Nietzsche could opt for "dying philosophically" or "wisely": we should recognize the power of nature over us. In our view, Nietzsche cannot be assigned a clear pro or anti position on suicide. His challenging way of posing the problem of suicide helps us articulate the conception of nature and reason in today's debates in medical ethics – e.g., also Nietzsche's polemical aphorism §36 "Moral for doctors" in his late work *Twilight of the Idols*:

Here it imports above all – in spite of all the cowardice of prejudice – to establish, the right, that is, the physiological, appreciation of the so-called *natural* death, which is ultimately also "unna-

tural" death, suicide. One never perishes through anyone else but oneself. But this [natural] death happens under the most miserable conditions, an unfree death, death not at the right time, a coward's death. *Out of love for life one should want death differently: free, conscious, without fortuity, without invasion.* (Nietzsche 1988, vol. 6, 135; our translation)

The seemingly inevitable confusion over the issues of suicide is well illustrated in the above-quoted passage: "natural" death ends up being "unnatural". The casuistic vocabulary related to death in modern medical ethics equally indicates similar difficulties in determining the ethical and legal framework of physician-assisted suicide (Foot 2002).

If we limit the scope to a medical context, complex ethical issues, such as the concept of patients' autonomy and accountability, ethics of care, free will, or the possibility and the limits of overtreatment need to be considered. The essential issue of the goals of medicine should not be forgotten either (WHO 2002). Opponents of the notion that suicide can be justified often argue that suicide only happens when an individual is depressed (Hecht 2013), thus dismissing the possibility that suicide can be the expression of individual autonomy (Battin 2015). This seems to be an ongoing conflict between palliative care professionals claiming that sufficient palliative care eliminates any reason for a patient wanting to end his or her life on the one hand and advocates of the right-to-die movement for whom patient autonomy is to be respected on the other hand (Nitschke and Stewart 2013).

Can something be done to find an alternative to this unfruitful conflict? Nietzsche's nondogmatic position toward suicide might be helpful, inasmuch as he reminds that patients' autonomy should be linked with the recognition of patients' vulnerability – or as Nietzsche writes, with the awareness of the power of nature over us. Furthermore, Nietzsche's apparent ambiguity on the issue of suicide can be read as an attempt to make room for a number of defensible positions pro and contra suicide. He seems to be suggesting that suicide is a vexed question in modern society, because we continue to argue within the theological, religious frame, without even noticing it: we claim autonomy and freedom of thought but remain in many subtle ways submitted to moral and religious imperatives. Beyond Nietzsche's unflattering portrayal of modernity, it seems that he insists upon the task – how difficult it may be – to attend to the individual's wish to die. And this seems to us an important point for the medical team's attitude to patients' wish to die: assisted suicide should not be about the personal beliefs and morals convictions of the medical team or the patients' family, but about respecting patients' autonomy. The hermeneutic tasks that health-care professionals face when a patient formulates a suicide request are often challenging, as they might be opposed to their own moral principles and/or religious beliefs. A paradigmatic example in the literature is the discussion of the conditions under which the Hippocratic Oath allows assisted suicide (Veatch 2012; Weithman 1999). Therefore, it might be desirable for them to suspend their dogmatic position regarding assisted suicide when dealing with autonomous patients' requests. It might

even help to recall Nietzsche's suggestion quoted above, that "out of love for life" patients might want "death differently".

14.4 Conclusion

This paper contends that Nietzsche is unambiguously endorsing suicide in this often quoted text of §185 *The Wanderer and His Shadow*. We identify two major problems in seeing Nietzsche as an explicit proponent of suicide. First, the undecided, conditional position of Nietzsche in §185 makes it difficult to consider him a militant defending the right to suicide. We argued that the cautious, if not skeptical, position of Nietzsche should not be read as a conceptual insufficiency, but as a salutary nondogmatic position. Second, Nietzsche's primary concern is not to endorse or reject the legitimacy of suicide per se. His focus is much more on calling into question the religious interpretation of suicide, as it does not acknowledge individual autonomy. Finally, the testimony of Overbeck illustrates that Nietzsche's foremost concern is to defend the philosophical legitimacy of autonomy. The fact that he died naturally does not preclude his argument. After all, "reasonable" and "natural" death can both be interpreted as expressions of individual autonomy:

Nietzsche idealized suicide as the 'reasonable death' and gave it the highest recognition in the morality of the future (*The Wanderer and His Shadow*, §185). And under the impression of such statements and similar ones which I heard from him at more than one occasion and which came quasi naturally out of his engagement with the antique world, I thought quite often of suicide as the end granted to him, even with growing conviction, at least until the winter 1883, during which Wagner died and Nietzsche's letters caused me extreme worries in this regard. I almost never thought of madness, or at least very late, shortly before the catastrophe. (Overbeck 1906, 214)

Nietzsche's position toward the ethical issue of suicide contributes in many ways to the rich European tradition starting with the Ancient Stoics. Nietzsche's challenging views also show that the issue of suicide is complex and part of a larger *Weltanschauung*.

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