
RELIGION & PHILOSOPHY

*The Ethics of
Euthanasia*

"Euthanasia: A Sympathetic Reappraisal" by Robert Wennberg, in *Christian Scholar Review* (vol. 9, 1977), 955 La Paz Rd., Santa Barbara, Calif. 93108.

Among the Greeks and Romans, euthanasia enjoyed a degree of acceptance and was defended by Plato and Seneca. Christians subsequently rejected the idea of taking the life of a hopelessly ill person, even with his consent. They based their position on the Sixth Commandment, which forbids the "harmful" taking of human life. However, Wennberg, a professor of philosophy at Westmont College, argues that euthanasia, when grounded in mercy and compassion, can be compatible with Christian morality.

Opponents of euthanasia, Wennberg writes, are generally more critical of active euthanasia (or "mercy killing"—the administration of a lethal substance to a terminally ill patient at his request) than of passive euthanasia (or "mercy dying"—withholding treatment from that same patient). In fact, passive euthanasia can at times be compatible with orthodox Christian belief, as when "in the face of imminent death" a person refuses "extraordinary" treatment to prolong his life.

Wennberg contends that there is no moral distinction between passive and active euthanasia. "If it is in our power," he concludes, "to shorten an agonizing death by actively intervening and we do not do so, then we are responsible for the consequences of not doing so, as we would be should we choose to intervene."

*Skepticism,
East and West*

"Jansenism and the *Crise Pyrrhonienne*" by Thomas M. Lennon, in *Journal of the History of Ideas* (Apr.-June 1977), Humanities Building 749, Temple University, Philadelphia, Pa. 19122; "Nature and Function of Skepticism in Chinese Philosophy" by Chung-ying Cheng, in *Philosophy East and West* (Apr. 1977), University Press of Hawaii, 2840 Kolowalu St., Honolulu, Hawaii 96822.

Skepticism, as a method of philosophical inquiry, has been practiced at least since the fourth century B.C., when the Greek philosopher Pyrrho founded the School of Skeptics. Applied differently in the West and East, however, the skeptical approach has led philosophers to very different conclusions.

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Lennon, a philosopher at Western Ontario University, writes that the epistemological crisis of the 17th century led some European thinkers to embrace outright skepticism. (The crisis had its roots in the Reformation debate over how man acquires religious knowledge: Through the Church? Reason? Scripture?) Beginning in France in the 1620s, some Jansenists held that there is "no rationally justifiable criterion of religious knowledge because there is none for knowledge of any sort." They used this proposition to disguise their rejection of papal infallibility as well as to support their claim that Christians can at best "accept docilely" the mysteries of the faith. Antoine Arnauld, a leading Jansenist, also used skepticism to explain his movement's view of grace as a divine (and arguably Calvinist) instrument that causes belief "without justifying it."

By contrast, writes the University of Hawaii's Cheng, in Eastern philosophies skepticism is practiced "positively." Lao Tzu (fourth or sixth century B.C.) and Chuand Tzu (399-295 B.C.), for example, employ "positive skepticism": to delineate the relative value of ordinary knowledge as a means of achieving the *tao*, the ultimate truth of reality. "Knowledge of things," the author explains, "depends on recognition of existing relative distinctions." Cheng claims that negative skepticism, which aims to attack some or all claims of knowledge and/or truth and is evident in Western philosophies, arose as a reaction to excessively stringent requirements for knowledge—requirements dismissed in Eastern thought.

The Roots of Fundamentalism

"Fundamentalism as an American Phenomenon" by George Marsden, in *Church History* (June 1977), 305 E. Country Club Lane, Wallingford, Pa. 19086.

Religious Fundamentalism shared many traits with "mainstream" evangelical Protestantism, but it had its own distinctive doctrines: the "verbal inerrancy" of Scripture, belief in divine creation rather than biological evolution, and a view of history that assumed God's continuing intervention. The Fundamentalist movement, writes Marsden, a historian at Calvin College, was "overwhelmingly American" and played a "conspicuous and pervasive" role in American religion, culture, and politics until the 1930s.

As an early reaction to "modernism," he observes, Fundamentalism grew up first in England; but, he adds, it never became as divisive among British denominations as it did among those in the New World. Although considerable controversy erupted in England over the new theories of Bible criticism and Darwin's *Origin of Species* (1859), the furor soon abated. Marsden speculates that Darwinism and "higher" theological criticism were closely akin to ideas (naturalistic development, the continuity of history) that had been brewing in secular British thought for some time. As far as tolerance was concerned, 19th-century English evangelical religion