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“Licensing People to Put Others Down” — The End of Human Dignity

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Baroness Mary Warnock is one of the most influential figures in British life today, and one of the most influential specialists in medical ethics on the international scene. When she speaks, the medical community listens. Given what she has just said, every single one of us had better pay attention.

The Baroness, known for her 1984 report that led to the legalization of so-called “test-tube” babies and embryo research in Britain, recently granted an interview to *Life & Work*, a magazine published by the Church of Scotland. In “[A Duty to Die?](#)” Warnock makes some incredible arguments, including her assertion that those suffering from mental dementia should be “put down,” or euthanized.

Here is the most clarifying statement in the media coverage of the interview:

“If you’re demented, you’re wasting people’s lives – your family’s lives – and you’re wasting the resources of the National Health Service.”

In other words, if you are suffering from Alzheimer’s disease or any other form of mental incapacity, you should simply die and get out of the way, freeing up precious resources and relieving your family of the obligation of your care.

This is a chilling argument, but one that is absolutely consistent with the direction of much modern secular thought.

“I’m absolutely, fully in agreement with the argument that if pain is insufferable, then someone should be given help to die, but I feel there’s a wider argument that if somebody absolutely, desperately wants to die because they’re a burden to their family, or the state, then I think they too should be allowed to die,” she said.

Those words, frightening enough in their own right, seem to suggest that this decision to end life would be made by the individual suffering the dementia — presumably through an advance directive that would set the plan in motion when the sufferer still possesses mental capacity.

But, in another statement, Warnock goes on to put this decision into the hands of others:

“If you’ve an advance directive, appointing someone else to act on your behalf, if you become incapacitated, then I think there is a hope that your advocate may say that you would not wish to live in this condition so please try to help her die.

“I think that’s the way the future will go, putting it rather brutally, you’d be licensing people to put others down.”

Licensing people to put others down? This is the stuff of nightmares. Baroness Warnock is no stranger to controversy, but her stature means that these arguments have to be taken seriously. As reported in *The Telegraph* [London], Neil Hunt of the Alzheimer's Society said: "I am shocked and amazed that Baroness Warnock could disregard the value of the lives of people with dementia so callously. With the right care, a person can have good quality of life very late in to dementia. To suggest that people with dementia shouldn't be entitled to that quality of life or that they should feel that they have some sort of duty to kill themselves is nothing short of barbaric."

Few issues throw the chasm between the Christian and secular understandings of humanity into such sharp focus. The biblical worldview begins with the premise that every single human being possesses full human dignity at every stage of life and development, simply because each human being is made in the image of God. Life is a divine gift to be celebrated and received under God's own dominion. Human life is thus to be treasured and protected from conception until natural death.

The secular worldview, on the other hand, can see human beings as no more than highly-developed organisms in an accidental cosmos. Given that starting point, it is virtually inevitable that life will then be defined in terms of certain capacities or qualities that are more and less present in human beings. Thus, ethicists such as Peter Singer (and Baroness Warnock) start from the assumption that the ability to communicate and possess self-consciousness is necessary in order for an individual to be considered fully human — and thus to possess basic human rights.

Before long, the secular worldview devolves into a cost/benefit analysis. Some lives are simply more important and more valuable than others, this worldview implies. Like the medical motto taken up by Nazi Germany asserts, some people represent "life unworthy of life." Baroness Mary Warnock now extends that argument to the mentally incapacitated.

This is a challenge that touches every family at some point. Given the longer life spans of modern populations, the number of people suffering dementia in advanced years is growing. Euthanasia for the demented elderly is a concept soon obvious to those who are ready to define some lives as not worth living.

Of course, the cost to the society at large is nothing less than the subversion of human dignity — the discounting of all human dignity and the unraveling of human rights.

Baroness Warnock now offers the perfect poison pill for a society running headlong into a social suicide pact and a massive death wish. We can only hope that the horror so many have expressed in the face of her proposal is a sign that not all are yet ready to embrace the Culture of Death.

We discussed this issue on Monday's edition of *The Albert Mohler Program* [listen [here](#)].

SOURCES: "[Baroness Warnock: Dementia Sufferers may have a 'Duty to Die,'](#)" *The Telegraph*, September 19, 2008. http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/2983652/Baroness-Warnock-Dementia-sufferers-may-have-a-duty-to-die.html?source=EMC-new_19092008

"[Dementia Patients 'Right to Die,'](#)" BBC News, September 19, 2008. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/health/7625816.stm>

