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“Million Dollar Baby” – Assisted Suicide at the Oscars

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Of course, much of the star power is provided by Eastwood himself, who plays trainer Frankie Dunn, who serves as both coach and mentor to Fitzgerald.

The plot takes a dark turn when Maggie suffers a devastating injury in the ring, taken down by an opponent who blindsides her, leaving her paralyzed from the neck down. The great moral crisis of the film arrives when Maggie, confined to a wheelchair and a body she can no longer control, simply decides that she would rather die than accept her new physical limitations. Eventually, Frankie Dunn decides to assist Maggie in taking her own life.

The movie was billed as a fight film, not as a moral consideration of assisted suicide. As a matter of fact, the film's advocacy of suicide was first noticed by Michael Medved, an influential movie critic and talk show host. A Hollywood insider, Medved has been one of the most respected figures in film criticism for years, and his revelations concerning “Million Dollar Baby” landed like a bombshell.

As Medved told Fox News' Bill O'Reilly, “What I object to the most is the dishonesty in the marketing campaign. Finally, finally, finally, the American people are getting the honest idea [that] this is a film that has a very strong assisted suicide theme.” Beyond this, Medved argued that the film presented a decidedly manipulative and one-sided take on the controversial issue of assisted suicide. “This is totally over to one side where assisted suicide, euthanasia is a good thing,” Medved observed. “In fact it is described by the narrator of the film as a heroic act to help somebody kill somebody else.”

The cultural left responded with a vengeance, defending “Million Dollar Baby” and Clint Eastwood and suggesting that Medved was a “spoiler,” out to ruin the movie's commercial prospects.

The New York Times was especially vitriolic in denouncing Medved, with Op-Ed columnist Maureen Dowd coining the word “Medvedized” to insinuate a reckless attack from the right. Frank Rich, formerly the paper's theater critic,

identified “the usual gang of Ayatollahs,” including Medved, whom Rich compared to the Communist-hunters of the 1950s.

In the end, the assisted suicide theme is impossible to ignore. It becomes the major theme of the movie, with Maggie Fitzgerald no longer willing to live, if living means that she can no longer be the boxing phenomenon she once was. Maggie tells Frankie, “I can’t be like this, boss, not after what I’ve done. I’ve seen the world. People chanted my name. I was in magazines.”

Writing at National Review Online, Frederica Mathewes-Green summarizes Maggie’s real situation—she “can’t bear to be a has-been.” As Mathewes-Green warns, “By this standard, anyone who comes to the end of their 15 minutes of fame is justified in seeking suicide. Truth is, a real-life Maggie would be far from unknown. A beautiful, feisty young woman is tragically paralyzed in a boxing-ring accident? She’d be another Christopher Reeve.”

Beyond all this, the worldview of “Million Dollar Baby” represents a direct repudiation of Christianity’s respect for the dignity of human life. Compare this movie to the real-life story of Joni Eareckson Tada, who triumphed over her own paralysis and has become a witness, both to the Gospel of Jesus Christ and to the true dignity of human life, even among those who have suffered disastrous spinal injuries.

Writing at “Joni and Friends,” Joni’s on-line community, Sanda Allyson takes on the movie. “Here’s the thing,” Allyson notes. “When we begin taking life when someone is depressed or has a devastating injury, because it seems so reasonable, or some say, kind, what then would prevent us from taking the life of someone we assume would want to die when they cannot respond in a way that seems reasonable to us? What may seem reasonable to one person may not seem reasonable to another. We’re then confronted with the question, who should die? Based on whose opinion? What about those who can’t speak?”

The real scandal of this movie is its insinuation that the able-bodied owe the disabled the gift of suicide. What kind of message does this send? First, it suggests to the disabled that their lives are really not worth living. This point has hardly been missed by disability advocates. Groups like “Not Dead Yet” have protested outside theaters showing “Million Dollar Baby.”

“Unfortunately, a message like the one in ‘Million Dollar Baby’ just perpetuates exactly what we work so hard to dispel,” said Marcie Roth, Executive Director of the National Spinal Cord Injury Association. That group has been at work since 1948, but Roth laments the fact that, “yet lo these many years later, many people still think having a spinal-cord injury is a fate worse than death.”

Disability advocates are outraged that the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences has nominated “Million Dollar Baby” for seven Oscars. “I really can’t imagine this kind of awards attention for somebody who put out a film that relies on the worst stereotypes the audience holds about homosexuality,” noted Stephen Drake, a researcher for “Not Dead Yet.” Nevertheless, disability advocates do not have the clout that homosexuals possess in Hollywood, and thus they represent a group easily targeted by this kind of movie.

Eastwood is undeterred by the criticism. In this week’s edition of TIME magazine, he simply brushed off the criticism as evidence of “extremism.” Eastwood, who is also nominated in the Best Actor category for his role in the film, stated: “Extremism is so easy. You’ve got your position, and that’s it. It doesn’t take much thought. And when you go far enough to the right you meet the same idiots coming around from the left.”

In other words, Dirty Harry is telling those who don’t like the assisted suicide theme of his film to take a hike—or worse.

Eastwood’s dismissal, predictable as it is, is disappointing enough. Nevertheless, ambivalent reviewers are even more disappointing. Take, for example, reviewer Kevin Miller, writing in Relevant magazine. After reviewing the moral quandaries of the film, Miller asserts, “God has given us the power of life and death over our fellow human beings. Isn’t it possible that there are some instances in which exercising this power is not a sin but a blessing? Many people think so when it comes to war, capital punishment, and abortion. Why not euthanasia?”

Keep in mind that Relevant bills itself as a Christian magazine, and Miller presumably means to be understood as a

Christian reviewer. He seems to understand the problematic nature of his review. “Lest anyone think that I am endorsing euthanasia in this review, I am not. I’m not advocating against it either, though, because, frankly, I don’t think I have answered the above questions well enough for myself yet. However, I do know that as I watched Frankie bend over and kiss Maggie one last time, he had no motive other than love in his heart. I also realized that no matter how miserable she was, there was no way I could have brought myself to reduce this beautiful, spirited girl to nothing but a cold lump of flesh. It just goes to show that when it comes to life-and-death choices like this, sometimes emotions can cloud your judgment. At other times, though, I think they make things perfectly clear.”

Tragically, it is Miller’s own confusion that is perfectly clear. The Christian worldview asserts the absolute dignity of every single human life from the moment of conception until natural death. How can Miller assert that in helping Maggie to kill herself, Frankie “had no motive other than love in his heart?”

This isn’t a depiction of genuine love—certainly not love understood in a genuinely Christian sense. Christians are called to love persons unto death, not to help persons reach a premature death. True Christian love would assist Maggie to understand that she still possesses human dignity and enormous gifts that could and should be employed for the benefit of herself and others.

The Christian worldview leaves absolutely no room for assisted suicide, euthanasia, or any other form of what the secular world increasingly embraces as the “good death.”

In reality, “Million Dollar Baby” is a sophisticated advertisement in favor of moral nihilism. Without doubt, Clint Eastwood is a gifted director who brings decades of experience in Hollywood to the big screen. This movie, already a commercial success, just may walk away with several of the big awards on Sunday night. Regrettably, it will also serve as a prophetic reminder that the sanctity of human life is now routinely denied, even in the name of personal liberation and “love.”

Helping a friend to die is not a heroic act. True heroism consists in affirming human dignity and in lovingly calling hurting people out of depression, not into suicide.

All this would be troubling enough if the controversies over assisted suicide were limited to the Academy Awards and Hollywood. Will viewers of the Academy Awards program on Sunday night be thinking of Terri Schiavo as they watch the ceremony? Terri, whose husband has been attempting to remove her feeding tube, faces the very real prospect of a horrible death—all in the name of a “right to die.” Her parents have been waging a noble fight for her life, but time appears to be running out as the courts have so far chosen to embrace death rather than life.

The big fight over assisted suicide will not be waged over the Academy Awards. Just this week, the U.S. Supreme Court agreed to review Oregon’s assisted suicide law—a measure that has been disastrous for human dignity.

“Million Dollar Baby,” even if it wins all the Oscars for which it has been nominated, will soon be added to the Hollywood backlist, and the movie industry will move on to new films and new controversies. But the issue of assisted suicide will not go away, and we should not allow the controversy over this movie to evaporate without learning a significant lesson about the true challenge of contending for the sanctity of human life against the seductive and sophisticated assault of the Culture of Death.

We desperately need true moral heroes, willing to fight for the dignity of human life, for the disabled, and for the least of us. But then, true moral heroes are not awarded with Oscars. Their reward will have to wait—for now.

