

Playing God at the End of Life

When death approaches, what does it mean to “play God”? Usually “playing God” is used as a pejorative critique of a choice to take more authority than is any human’s to take. Usually the emotive expression “playing God” occurs when a physician or scientist intervenes in “natural” processes. The line may be difficult to draw.

An Associated Press story of Jan. 28, 2003, from Atlanta reported this sad story. A woman who admitted fatally shooting her two terminally ill sons will avoid murder charges by pleading guilty to breaking Georgia’s little-used assisted suicide law.

Under the plea agreement, Carol Carr, 63, will be sentenced to five years in prison, defense attorney Lee Sexton said. “What she did was illegal, but also what she did was moral—she stopped the suffering of these children,” Sexton said.

Carr had faced two counts of felony murder and two counts of malice murder for killing Michael Scott, 42, and Andy Scott, 41, on June 8 in a nursing home in Griffin. Both men suffered from Huntington’s disease, a degenerative nerve disorder that causes involuntary body movement, dementia and death. Their father, Carr’s first husband, died of the disease. Carr’s surviving son, James Scott, 38, also suffers from the disease.

Does Ms. Carr’s defense attorney’s claim of “what she did was moral” ring true for you? Maybe you find her method unsavory, but you find her intent reasonable. If so, then euthanasia is not a form of “playing God.” If not, then euthanasia is a form of “playing God.” The first is an act of controlling biological processes while the second refuses to intervene in biological processes.

What if this distressed mother had taken the legal course? She would have allowed her sons’ conditions to deteriorate (under the best medical care) and insisted that every mechanical and pharmaceutical intervention available be used to keep them “alive” as long as possible? What would be your judgment about her

morality?

Many people find themselves changing their position on “playing God” at this point. Those who critiqued the first story as “playing God” for hastening the biological process of dying, now affirm the correctness of intervening in the biological process to resist inevitable death.

Given the facts that humans are mortal and thus will die, and that we are broken and thus will sin, is the phrase “playing God” useful for any ethical discourse? If the dominant meaning of the phrase is “intervening in biological processes beyond the human limit,” is there a line that we can delimit? While it is a powerfully provocative emotional expression, I suggest that it has no moral meaning.

During the dying process (whatever that means) medical interventions are both an act of hubris and an act of moral necessity. Choices to intervene or not intervene in biological processes must be made. Given the power that modern medical technology places at the disposal of people dedicated to healing, it is not possible for them to avoid playing God.

Medicine now intervenes in biological processes from conception to death. We have also chosen not to intervene in processes within our power to act. Either way, it is human power and human knowledge at work. Unless one wishes to claim that the scientific method unlocks God’s secrets and the habits of medical practitioners unveil the intentions of God, we do not “play God” to choose to intervene or to refrain from intervening. Those are simply human choices made in fear and trembling at the cusp of finitude and brokenness.

Thus, modern medicine is pushing another realm in which we are required as moral agents to “play with God.” Choices to fight death or to allow death are simply human choices that require thoughtful and prayerful consideration. We dare not place our spiritual and emotional language only on the side of heroic interventions as death approaches. Likewise, we dare not place this language only on the side of passive acceptance of biological processes, to say nothing of the

possibility of hastening the inevitable.

How do we understand our responsibility for caring for the suffering when death is eminent? Is the primary responsibility to relieve their pain and comfort their suffering? Or, is our responsibility to fight death to the end?

Death is not always the worst event that can happen to a person. God is not always on the side of prolonging biological existence, but sometimes is.

Are patients, families, physicians and nurses confronted with the experience of “playing God”? Certainly. But a deeper ethical and theological assessment leads to the conclusion that they are simply being asked to make difficult and sometimes tragic choices that are given to humans to make.

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