Life Sentences: The Modern Ordering of Mortality

Zohreh Bayatrizi

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Reviewed by Herbert C. Northcott

University of Alberta Edmonton, Alberta, Canada

For much of human history death has been mysterious, inevitable, unpredictable, arbitrary, and chaotic. In very general terms, the social and cultural response to this lack of individual and social control over death in pre-modern times was the creation of discourses in which control of death was assigned to the divine or to fate and the necessity of accepting god's will or one's fate was emphasized. Bayatrizi argues that modern discourses of death, starting in the mid-seventeenth century, changed dramatically from pre-modern times and in this book she traces the evolution of modern discourses about death from around the year 1650 to the present.

Bayatrizi's thesis is that modern discourses about death have evolved over the centuries since 1650 to give "order" to death. A variety of discourses—scientific, statistical and actuarial, medical, sociological, for example—redefine death as something that is predictable and to various degrees preventable or at least manageable. Bayatrizi argues that the discursive re-conceptualization of death since 1650 features four "watershed moments" in which the risk of death was redefined as both measurable and avoidable. These watershed moments include the reconceptualization of violent death, premature death, self-inflicted death, and undignified death.

With regards to violent and premature death, Bayatrizi suggests that discourses about death shifted from a focus on other-worldly salvation following death to this-worldly peace, prosperity, and longevity before death. Scientific, medical, and social discourses re-defined violent and premature death as something to be prevented by the creation of a civil society through political and economic re-ordering. The state

increasingly focused on the prevention of violent, premature, arbitrary, and disruptive death. Peace, prosperity, and longevity were defined as collective goals and as both an individual and collective good.

As death became increasingly defined as a risk to be prevented, delayed, and managed, self-inflicted death (that is, suicide) challenged society's emerging valuation of life (rather than the soul) as the ultimate good. The discursive emphasis shifted from the soul to the body and from life after death to life before death. The pre-modern aversion to self-inflicted death continued but was redefined and the strategies for managing suicide changed. Instead of consigning the soul of the suicide to other-worldly torment (and the body of the suicide to degradation), the focus shifted to this-worldly prevention of suicide. Suicide was medicalized (in particular by psychiatry and psychology) and became an issue for public health advocacy.

The increasing focus on the social, political, legal, medical, etc. prevention of violent death, premature death, and self-inflicted death gave rise to the contemporary notion of the appropriate death—the good death—timely, orderly, well managed, and dignified. This has given rise to the contemporary discussion of assisted suicide and euthanasia and to the modern practice of palliative care to facilitate dying and a dignified, orderly death. Bayatrizi notes that attempts to bring order to violent, premature, and self-inflicted death resist death, while attempts to facilitate a dignified death embrace death. The paradox is resolved in that a dignified death is an orderly death. Making death orderly involves resisting, preventing, and forestalling death but also facilitating death when death itself becomes disorderly and unavoidable.

In an interesting play on words, Bayatrizi summarizes the four watershed moments that she identifies in the discursive reconceptualization of death (the redefinition of violent death, premature death, self-inflicted death, and undignified death) as four "death sentences" phrased as four quasi-biblical commandments: thou shalt not die violently, thou shalt not die prematurely, thou shalt not kill thyself, and thou shalt not die an undignified death, all of which indicate the overriding commandment: thou shalt die an orderly death. While phrased as injunctions imposed on the individual, Bayatrizi is clear that these "commandments" express social norms, values, and goals and that attempts to achieve the modern ordering of death depend on a variety of social institutions including medicine, law, public health programs, suicide prevention programs, and so on.

Bayatrizi notes that these "death sentences" which encapsulate the modern ordering of death are also "life sentences" which dictate how individuals should live their lives (individuals should live long, healthy,

happy, and prosperous lives) and which dictate how society should be organized to facilitate these individual and collective goals.

Following an introduction the book devotes a chapter to each of the four "commandments." The chapter on violent death draws heavily on Thomas Hobbes's thought on the role of the state in providing for the security of its people. The chapter on premature death discusses the work of John Graunt, the father of statistics, and his application of statistics to the study of mortality in populations. Actuarial mathematics and life insurance, epidemiology and demography, and the public health movement all followed from Graunt's groundbreaking work, and all bring a degree of order to the problem of death. The chapter on suicide discusses the re-definition of suicide as a medical and social problem rather than a sin against god and a crime against society. The chapter on dignified death notes that as society has increasingly gained control of death, questions have arisen about the individual's right to a dignified death. Successes in preventing violent death, premature death, and selfinflicted death, ironically have led to the prolongation of dying and to undignified and disorderly death. Bayatrizi notes that societal strategies to make death orderly by preventing or forestalling death are evolving to include strategies to make death orderly through do-not-resuscitate orders, assisted suicide, and euthanasia. A concluding chapter focuses on the social norm that decrees that death should be orderly. Society it is argued seeks an orderly life and an orderly death for its members. Given that death ultimately cannot be avoided, the social imperative is to avoid disorderly death. This book presents a fascinating discussion of the social discourses and practices that have developed over time to order death.