Competition in medical ethics

Persons and Values

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The problems presented in the story about Phillip Green are clearly tragic. What is recounted is a not unfamiliar pattern of events involving a transition from a life of interest, activity and satisfaction to one of apathy, passivity and irritation. As is also often the case, these changes bring great unhappiness to others, in particular to members of the subject's family. Indeed, as in the example of Phillip Green, this unhappiness is so great as to threaten the continuity of family life.

In what follows, the particular problems outlined by the story will be considered from three perspectives: from those of the main characters *Phillip* and *Patricia Green*; and from the viewpoint of a *philosopher* interested in the nature of persons and personal values. (These characters are not here represented as being in dialogue.)

The Philosopher

Patricia's concluding remark about her husband is suggestive. She says: 'It is like being married to a stranger; it would have been better had he died'. Of course, we can simply regard this as an expression of anguish, which it is; but to treat it as nothing other than this risks dismissing what may also be the expression of a moral view.

Her remarks suggest two thoughts which have long interested philosophers. First, that personal identity is a matter of psychological character, and hence that if changes in personality are sufficiently radical one should conclude that, notwithstanding the fact that one is presented with the same *human being*, one is no longer acquainted with the same *person*. This view has implications for the present case to which I shall return.

The second idea which may be implicit in Patricia's words concerns the value of life. Here we need to distinguish two views which it will be convenient to term '*intrinsicist*' and '*extrinsicist*.' According to the latter, the value of an individual life is given by the difference it makes to the world – through its achievements and its effects upon others. Life itself has

no value; mere existence is worthless and if that existence should have bad effects the life may be judged to have disvalue. In contrast, the *intrinsicist* argues that whatever value attaches to human beings through their accomplishments, they also have a basic intrinsic value which is immune to the effects of failure. Whatever one achieves or fails to achieve, however one affects others or is affected by them, one's life retains (without increase or diminution) its basic intrinsic value.

The relevance of this distinction in the present context is that if one regards the value of life as given by the values and virtues realised by and in it, then if these should reduce, or be replaced by 'vices', it makes sense to suppose that it would be better if an individual so affected were to die. For the *intrinsicist*, however, while a life turned sour has lost much that gave it point and worth it retains its basic 'existential' value.

Patricia Green

My strongest feeling is of despair. I don't know what to do; how to act for the best. Phillip and I were very lucky. We built our lives together; we made a family in which we were all close and we created a happy home. We both worked hard and looked forward to enjoying the fruits of our labour. When Phillip retired it seemed we could hope for many years of happiness. Things even became better: Phillip had his friends and his hobbies; he didn't pine after his old work but enjoyed the freedom to develop his gardening and was happy to have more time for me and the family. I was also happier than ever before. We could relax and share things together in a way that hadn't been possible before.

We had a good marriage and were becoming even closer but then Phillip had his stroke. At first I thought he was going to die and I prayed and begged God to spare him – I couldn't imagine living without him. Then he was saved and seemed to be recovering. He was able to get out of bed and walk around. His speech was all right and although he was irritable and distracted I put this down to the stroke and the shock it gave him. Of course, I didn't think he would be exactly as before; I knew for instance that there wouldn't be any more dancing and that his gardening wouldn't be the same. But I supposed that there was

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enough in our life together for us to be happy again.

Now I can see that the stroke wasn't like a broken leg that would simply stop him getting around as well as before. It was more like the *death* of the man I had married and lived with all these years, and his replacement by someone whom I don't like or want to be with but who makes demands on me which everyone thinks I should obey.

I know it sounds cruel and selfish but I want to be free of this hell. The man I loved was destroyed by the stroke; the one who sits at home ordering me about, who has none of the interests of Phillip and has little time for friends or family, is a stranger. Surely it isn't right that I should be forced to be with this man until the end of his or my days? I am sorry for him but I cannot say I love him. It would be better for him and all concerned if he were dead. It would be better for me if I were free.

Phillip Green

Some time ago I had a stroke. It left me partly disabled and so I can't do all the things I used to; but that apart little has changed for me since my retirement. It seems these days, though, that Patricia isn't so concerned about me as I think she should be. She wants too much and bothers me by going on about friends and family.

I like to see people but she can't understand that I also want peace and quiet. I was a working man for over forty years and brought home the money that bought this home, supported the family, paid for holidays, and so on. Now I'm entitled to spend my days in rest.

She should be more considerate and attentive. Especially since the stroke I need looking after, but these days Patricia doesn't seem to be bothered, or else vexes me for not doing what she wants. I think she should be grateful for what she has got and give me the attention I need.

The Philosopher

Perhaps the central feature of this case is the way in which Phillip and Patricia have changed their perceptions of one another. Of course the stroke wrought havoc in their settled life together; but as important as the objective circumstances are the ways in which they now regard one another. Patricia oscillates between a view of her husband as the same person as before though changed for the worse, and a view of him as so altered as, in effect, to be a different person. Phillip unknowingly sees himself quite differently from in the past but supposes that Patricia's behaviour is an indication of both her inability to make the transition to a life of retirement and her lack of sympathy for his condition.

We know what Patricia says she *would* like to do, and it is within the bounds of practical possibility that she *could* be relieved of the task of living with and caring for Phillip. The philosophical question to be considered, however, is: What *should* be done? Obviously a good deal might be said on behalf of all parties about the difficulties created by this tragedy in their lives but in

the space available I think it will be most useful to return to the issues of the nature and value of persons.

In a familiar sense of the expression Phillip is undeniably a 'different character'. His *personality* has altered and this affects the way he acts and the way he thinks about himself and others. Yet the changes in his psychology are not so radical as even to suggest the possibility that he should seriously be considered a different *person*. For what is essential to persons is not that they retain the personality they have developed but that they continue to exhibit characteristics constitutive of personhood. These include psychological and physical features but it is not necessary that the same features should be preserved. A man whose body has been destroyed ceases to exist; one who has been badly injured and had limbs and organs replaced is radically changed yet remains the same individual as before. Likewise, had all indications of personality vanished from Phillip we might say he had ceased to be a person, but in the story this is not the case and, moreover, for all the differences in him he is largely psychologically-continuous with his former self. The person from whom Patricia wishes to be free is undoubtedly one and the same person as that whom she married and with whom she was happy to make her life. Accordingly, she cannot legitimately claim that her duties and other moral attachments to Phillip do not extend to the man with whom she still shares part of her life.

Turning to her thought: that given the loss of so much that was of value about Phillip prior to his stroke (for example, his abilities, interests, affections etc), it would now be better if he were dead, this betrays a view of persons that is both logically and morally unacceptable. In part, Patricia's problem is a failure of imagination. She cannot see things from Phillip's new perspective and is unable to appreciate that his life has as much reality now as it had before, or as has her own. Whatever may have befallen him he is still a person – a locus of consciousness and agency – and as such is deserving of equal respect. In point of personhood he is no less real than anyone else. This fact is independent of his merits and of the benefits and losses he brings to himself and to others. It is the basis of the respect owing to him, just as Patricia's personhood is the ground of her basic rights. In affirming these entitlements on her own behalf she cannot coherently deny them to Phillip.

Not all moral features are similarly basic and impartial, however. Some obligations hold in virtue of special relationships between persons both as individuals and as the occupants of social roles. Accordingly, while there may be some duties which we owe to all persons (and from which we are not discharged by changes in our relationships with them) there are others that only attach to specific circumstances. (Consider, for example the special duties of a *teacher*, of a *bus conductor*, of a *friend* and of a *parent*, etc). Patricia has responsibilities of both these sorts towards Phillip.

Firstly, she owes him the respect due to a *person*, and

this prohibits the attitude that it would be better for all concerned had he died as a result of his stroke. Whatever losses are incurred by his change of circumstances his life has a reality and a value which demand respect. He should not now be thought of simply as an impediment to the happiness of others, any more than he should previously have been regarded simply as a means to the end of general welfare. When all was well Patricia no doubt thought of Phillip as someone whose life had intrinsic value, and since nothing has changed in regard to his status as an autonomous person it would be wrong of her to regard him any differently now.

Secondly, Patricia owes Phillip the respect due to a *husband*, and this is at odds with her view of their present relationship as being like one between strangers. For all that Phillip's character has changed he is the same person whom she married and their connection as husband and wife remains as before. In the course of time personalities develop in various ways which we usually find it relatively easy to accommodate in our relationships. Phillip and Patricia are unfortunate in that his character has changed in a manner and at a rate that would not normally be expected. This presents deep and difficult psychological problems of adjustment and may impose burdens which their marriage cannot bear. But so far as concerns the moral relationship between them this is unchanged. Patricia Green's responsibilities to Phillip are those of a wife to a husband.

Indeed, their difficult circumstances may be seen as disclosing how far marital responsibilities extend. Vows taken in a wedding ceremony commit the parties to a shared life together and are not contingent upon that life proceeding in a single direction: towards the attainment of ever more and greater benefits. The extent of the commitment may never reveal itself yet it is implicit in the marriage. Thus, Patricia cannot consistently be grateful for her marital relationship with Phillip and now seek to be free of its implications. Either she must disavow her marriage, regarding their past lives together as a co-operative endeavour justified only by mutual advantage; or else she must affirm it, in which case she now faces the difficult task of caring for

him and of finding new ways of their taking pleasure in one another's company.

It is also important to emphasise that Patricia's duties are accompanied by entitlements. For although Phillip's faculties are diminished he retains moral responsibilities to his wife. Of course, reciprocity is easier to describe than to realise in practice – even in favoured circumstances. But it is necessary to insist that to the extent that Phillip remains a fitting object of *respect*, he is thereby also a proper subject of claims *to be respected* made by his friends and family.

The philosophical ideas set out in the foregoing discussion also have practical implications both in the sense that they prescribe a norm for Patricia's conduct with regard to Phillip – she is to treat him as one deserving of respect as a *person* and of loving as a *husband*; and in the sense that they suggest a course of action which may serve to improve the situation. As was seen earlier, both parties are inclined to view matters from the perspective of their own concerns. In the case of Phillip this is obvious enough both from the story and from his statement given above. In the case of Patricia it is implicit in her remarks to the social worker and in her observations recorded here.

The philosophical unacceptability of neo-solipsism and of a concern only with the extrinsic values of lives have been discussed. These tendencies are best overcome by attempting to achieve in turn both impartial and partial viewpoints. That is to say, one needs to see others and oneself as being equally real and equally deserving of respect and this is achieved by a perception of oneself from the impartial viewpoint: as being but one among many persons. But equally, if one is to care for others one must feel a sympathy towards them and this requires the ability imaginatively to enter into their perspective: to share for some while their partial viewpoint. Patricia's difficult task might be made easier and Phillip's outlook might be improved if each could be encouraged to make greater efforts to see things from the other's point of view and from the impartial perspective sought for by the philosopher. In that way some kind of limited solution to their problem might be forthcoming.