**TOPIC:**

From the Irish Giant to the Ancient One, is it ever ethical for scientists and museums to study bodies without permission?

**SUMMARY:**

Death is, of course, ‘natural’. Medically and biologically, we die because our bodies and brains can no longer sustain the functions requisite for life. We all die of ‘natural’ causes in that sense. But in an era where we have such extensive freedom over death – when it occurs at the end of a prolonged and often highly medicalised process punctuated by choices about when and how dying will occur – it is no longer credible to depict dying as cordoned off from human freedom. A comparison: we now appreciate that ‘natural disaster’ is a misnomer. Natural disasters are unavoidable insofar as they result from the operations of physical systems that we largely cannot control, but exactly how and when they occur (the particular ways in which they prove ‘disastrous’) can be shaped by where, when and how human activities are organised. And just as it is foolhardy to fail to prepare for or to mitigate natural disasters, so too is it foolhardy not to prepare for or mitigate the harms of dying. Fortunately, we now enjoy unprecedented ability to exercise freedom over death to reduce its harms.

Collectively, we are still adapting to this newfound freedom. One sign of our lingering discomfort with this freedom is the belief that assisted dying represents a kind of hubris, a misguided attempt to control or manage death. Some hold that, rather than doctors providing assistance in dying to patients facing particularly gruelling conditions, we should instead let nature (or God, or a person’s illness) ‘take its course’, merely doing our best to ensure that the individual dies without pain and with dignity. As Leon Kass put it: ‘We must care for the dying, not make them dead.’ Assisted dying, from this perspective, foolishly tries to place death itself under human authority.

The trouble with this worry is that we already have a surprisingly large freedom over death, a freedom almost no one opposes on grounds of hubris. The course of dying belongs less and less to nature or God than to us, a fact that those who are not religious objectors, such as Christian Scientists, welcome. There is no social momentum in favour of denying individuals choices regarding life-extending treatments, palliation and the like. If assisted suicide represents a hubristic attempt to usurp nature and replace it with human judgment, then why is it not equally hubristic to try to *delay* death through medical means, or to hasten it by choosing hospice care, rather than further treatments aimed at extending life? Assisted dying’s opponents draw arbitrary lines concerning which exercises of freedom over death should be permitted.

Therefore, assisted dying cannot be rejected because it amounts to an ‘unnatural’ intervention in human mortality. Rather, it is merely the latest major incarnation of a freedom over death that we have rightfully embraced. We no longer need stand aside and let nature ‘take its course’, and thank goodness for that.