

Death Journal #8: Does It Matter *How* We Die?

Nuland's book is roughly divided according to major causes of death – heart disease, violence, AIDS, cancer, etc. His work is essentially descriptive in nature. The reader learns all the gruesome details of a death caused by a congested heart, repeated stabbing, or scrotal cancer (particularly cringe inducing). Thus far, however, Nuland has only briefly touched upon *prescriptive* or evaluative matters. The most prominent of these is his often repeated view that doctors try far too hard to save patients who are clearly beyond saving, and only cause additional agony. This is a view I wholeheartedly agree with. Yet, for the most part, Nuland does not speak to what any of this death means – and perhaps that is because it doesn't mean anything.

It is important to note that I speak from the position of one who has disavowed all religious beliefs. Thus I do not believe in God, gods, or any sort of afterlife. If I do happen to continue my existence after death, I will be delighted, but I'm not counting on it. The following considerations will exist within this framework. The question I would like to answer is: Does it matter how we die? We might say that someone instantly dispatched by decapitation came to a "better" end than someone who was eaten alive by fire ants over a period of several hours. "Better" in this case seems to mean more comfortable, or at least less painful. But once each of our respective examples is deceased, he will no longer have any sense of pain. Nor will he have any memory of pain. He will have utterly ceased to exist, and so the question remains – why does it matter that his last moments are pain free?

Of course, the answer is that it doesn't. In an objective sense there is no greater positive value to one kind of death over another. However, this same statement applies to literally everything we experience. Value judgments are a product of the human mind. There is no law of

the universe specifying that pleasure is better than pain. The very word better is our own invention, and the concept it denotes is as well. Fortunately, the nihilistic response to these sorts of considerations is a philosophically immature route to take. It is not necessary to attempt to find “greater” meaning, an objective source of value judgments – it is only necessary to accept that all value judgments exist on the highest level that they can: as a product of our minds.

To return from our brief sojourn into abstraction: the fact is that the manner of death matters just as much as the manner of life. In fact, they are identical. The pain felt at the very end of life is no more or less significant than the pain felt throughout. One who wishes to say that the manner of death is irrelevant must also accept that the manner of life is irrelevant, and vice versa. I think it is clear that most of us prefer to think that the way we live matters – our pain is significant, even if only within the limited context of our minds and the minds of others.