

Guantanamo and other cases of enforced medical treatment. A biopolitical analysis

Guantánamo y otros casos de tratamiento médico forzoso. Un análisis biopolítico

Francisco José Ballesta*

Ateneo Pontificio Regina Apostolorum,
Roma, Italia

<https://doi.org/10.36105/mye.2023v34n4.06>

Garasic, M. *Guantanamo and Other Cases of Enforced Medical Treatment. A Biopolitical Analysis.* Springer Briefs in Ethics. New York: Springer; 2015.

This work belongs to a collection of small volumes on very specific and current ethical issues, treated in a detailed and profound way. The author is a young researcher of Israeli origin who, during his training, has attended various research centers on ethics, politics, social sciences and bioethics in Israel, England, India, the United States and Australia. His activity as a teacher and researcher has focused on Italy where he has collaborated with our Faculty of Bioethics and other university centers.

* Profesor in the Faculty of Bioethics, Ateneo Pontificio Regina Apostolorum, Roma, Italia. E-mail: fballesta@arcol.org <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7795-2892>
Reception: 28/04/2023 Acceptance: 08/05/2023

The fundamental point of the book is the questioning of the absolutization of the principle of autonomy in an individualistic key, considered central to the dominant paradigm in bioethics today. The principle of autonomy, which has been presented to us as strong in an artificial contrast to the principle of beneficence, reveals its real weakness and relativity when considered in the socio-political context. The author focuses his attention on the application of the principle of autonomy to the case of food. Respecting a hunger strike or refusing a medically assisted diet would seem the most obvious, considering the principle of autonomy in a simplistic way. The reality is more complicated. The interpretation/application of the principle of autonomy is not homogeneous, it depends on many elements.

The author notes:

The initial premise of the book was that the advent of bioethics created new challenges for the way in which we understand and deal with autonomy [...] the Anglo-American bioethical community has increasingly defined autonomy as a self-standing notion insulated from its political context [...] This work has examined the validity of such approach by bringing to the fore bioethical cases that clearly highlight the fictional status of the Anglo-American notion of autonomy (p. 94).

As a corrective to this individualistic view of the principle of autonomy, he notes:

We are free to choose individualistically if our choice does not significantly affect society (be it the family, the state or the community). Where it does affect society, authority comes into play and reaffirms what can and cannot be tolerated (p. 97).

The book is structured into 5 main chapters to which is added another, shorter one, entitled “conclusions”. The first chapter is dedicated to a theoretical consideration of the concepts of autonomy, competition and biopolitics. Here we already find a diversity in the way of understanding the term autonomy.

Obviously, this has its repercussions in the applications to particular cases. The second chapter is dedicated to the analysis of the problems presented by cases of anorexia nervosa, taken as a model for the more general problem of the establishment of forced treatments to keep a person alive. The third chapter analyzes a curious case “The case of Charles Laverne Singleton” in which a person sentenced to death, and with psychiatric pathology, receives medical treatment, in a forced way, so that he can preserve the necessary psychological competence, by law, so that the sentence can be carried out. The fourth and fifth chapters are dedicated to analyzing the case of the hunger strike. The fifth chapter focuses on the force-feeding of Guantánamo prisoners and opens the discourse to reflections on autonomy and medical deontology (the role of doctors and their dual loyalty, hippocratic oath or political agenda?), and a biopolitical analysis of the issue.

This work is under international License Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0)

