

## Reviews

**EUTHANASIA, CLINICAL PRACTICE AND THE LAW** edited by Luke Gormally. *The Linacre Centre for Health Care Ethics (60 Grove End Road, London, NW8 9NH), 1994. Pp. vii + 248. £12.75.*

The book on euthanasia that those of us who work in bioethics always recommend—and refer to ourselves time and again—as the best ever statement of the classical position was published in 1982 by the Linacre Centre. *Euthanasia and Clinical Practice* has become 'a classic' not just among Catholic cognoscenti but more widely, for instance on the course lists of secular universities. This is, perhaps, not surprising, given its authorship: some of the nation's greatest ethicists (Anscombe, Finnis, Gormally, Mahoney), and some of its ablest physicians (Hebbery, Higgins, Twycross, Utting, Zachary) are among the remarkable group who wrote the study. But that its relevance endures despite the passing fashions in bioethics and the new directions in the euthanasia debate is a tribute to the authority not just of its authors but of their arguments.

One 'gap' in the 1982 work was its focus on ethical and clinical concerns to the exclusion of legal and political ones. That lacuna has now been filled by Gormally, Finnis and Keown's submission on behalf of the same Centre to the House of Lords Select Committee on Medical Ethics. This work is unparalleled for its professionalism among the submissions made by church groups to state authorities, and even those who were not in full agreement with its views recognized that it was the single most influential submission of the hundreds the Lords received. Its arguments (and very words) are in evidence in the best parts of the Lords' report.

Now the two reports (the first of which has been out of print for some time) have been published together in *Euthanasia, Clinical Practice and the Law*. The new book will undoubtedly be once again the classic in its field. As well as the two reports, this new volume includes articles by Finnis on living will legislation (which demonstrates what a mine field this is), by Gormally on the BMA's case against euthanasia (which it finds wanting in significant respects), and by Keown on the situation in Holland (which dispels widespread illusions about Dutch euthanasia practice).

Book One begins by identifying the trends, issues and confusions in the euthanasia debate. It then looks at euthanasia in five specialised fields of clinical practice—care of the newborn, the handicapped, the dying, the elderly and intensive care—and the thinking behind each. Several influences alien to traditional medical ethics are identified: utilitarianism, individualism, social Darwinism, pluralism, the pro-euthanasia lobby, and economic factors. In the time since writing this book two of these have come particularly to the fore: individualism (under

the slogan of autonomy) and economics (under the slogan of healthcare rationing). The book then presents a classical philosophical and theological analysis of euthanasia, arguing from the point of view of the first that euthanasia is no good exception to the norm against killing the innocent, and from the perspective of the second, that it is a breach of a divinely-given trust. Thereafter follow some important clarifications of the right to refuse treatment, the distinction between 'ordinary' and 'extraordinary' means, and duties toward incompetent patients. Finally some excellent practical advice is offered to healthworkers on good practice in dealing with dying and incapacitated patients and in various specialised fields of care.

This book insists, against common misconceptions of the classical and Christian position, that doctors ought neither to undertreat nor to *overtreat* their patients. There may be good reasons to discontinue or to withhold certain available treatments, without buying into a homicidal or suicidal mind-set or behaviour: treatment may be futile; it may be overly burdensome (in terms of associated pain, indignity, risk, cost...); or (and here the authors chart relatively new territory) the patient may have made a reasonable judgment that he or she does not have an obligation to seek to prolong life, (e.g. where life is wretched, one has no special responsibilities to others, and death is imminent: pp.64-66). Catholics and other 'pro-lifers' do not cling to a survival-at-any-costs ethic: quite the contrary, such an approach can well be due to therapeutic obstinacy, a refusal to face up to the limitations of healthcare and human mortality, a product more of despair than respect for life. Death is an evil, but not the greatest evil. For many people it is a merciful release, the natural end to a life story well-written and, as we believers claim, the door to eternal life. So while one should always value the gift of life, the time may come when one is no longer obliged to take such strenuous efforts to prolong it; the focus of attention may properly become one on managing pain and dying well.

When Book One was first published a Catholic reader might have been surprised by how little consideration was given to the 'proportionalist' (or Christian utilitarian) case *for* euthanasia, a position which writers such as Mahoney, Anscombe and Finnis would have been well-placed to present and critique. But given how little influence proportionalism has had outside the Catholic ghetto, the fact that it has now rather 'had its day', and the excellent treatment of proportionalism's secular cousins in Books One and Two, this proves in hindsight to be no drawback. Furthermore the work has the admirable feature of relying entirely on the 'common morality' implicit in many of the great world religions, the secular enlightenment, the international covenants on human rights, the common law, and the tradition of medical ethics stretching back at least to Hippocrates and forward at least to the modern declarations of world and local medical associations.

The note at the end of Book One, on the *Arthur Case*, might suggest

that the volume would have benefited from a similar note on the *Bland Case*, and perhaps some of the other British and American cases in this area. But Book Two certainly points us in the right direction by presenting a most powerful case against the legalisation of euthanasia, both voluntary and involuntary. There is a cogent restatement of the basis and content of traditional medical ethics, a critique of influential pro-euthanasia writers such as Dworkin and Warnock, an analysis of the pre-eminent themes in the current debate (dignity, dualism, autonomy...), recommendations regarding appropriate care of PVS patients, and an exploration of the roles of living wills, proxies, 'responsible medical opinion' and the courts. The Centre's 1982 position is greatly strengthened by reflection upon data of recent experience: the outstanding successes of Britain's hospice movement and the appalling failure of the Dutch euthanasia experiment.

As a work of modern apologetics and polemics (in the good sense of each) this volume is a model: forthright yet balanced, fair to opponent views, analytically precise, well evidenced, compassionate, immensely persuasive. Yet as the authors recognize, "it is not to be expected that in a pluralistic culture the insights into the nature of human existence on which the tradition of common morality depends will come easily to all readers, even to all Christian readers." For all that, "unless these insights are reappropriated and medicine honours the traditional conception of human dignity, it is difficult to see what *in principle* stands in the way of a repetition of the historical betrayal of medicine that took place in Germany in the second quarter of this century" (p. 12).

This new volume is a representative fruit of a foundation which has built a reputation not just as the premier Christian bioethics institute in Britain, but as one of the finest in the world, Christian or secular. All this despite resources so meagre it should make the Catholic community blush. Bravo, Linacre Centre.

ANTHONY FISHER OP

**THE CATHOLIC FAITH — A DOMINICAN'S VISION** by Richard Conrad OP, *Geoffrey Chapman*, 1994. Pp 200. £8.99.

The subtitle of this much-needed book — 'A Dominican's Vision' — indicates the inherent reasonableness of belief. 'The truth...goes beyond, but not against, reason'(p.35), and the whole book is really an elaboration on this theme. Fr Conrad's profound Biblical scholarship, and grounding in the Fathers and St Thomas Aquinas are used to brilliant effect in explaining simply and cogently the doctrines of the Catholic Faith. The Biblical and historical background of these doctrines is always the starting-point for further explanation: for example, in the cases of the Holy Trinity and the Incarnation, an understanding of heretical teaching makes it easier for us to focus on the truth. The Introduction, providing a concise outline of what Christian faith is, uses the life story of St