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Ethical Decisions In Medicine

Howard Brody

Little, Brown and Company, 34 Beacon St., Boston, Mass, 01106, 1976. XXII + 294 p., no price given (paper).

This is a large (over 150,000 words) and intellectually stimulating book intended as a text for medical students, to be used either as a guide to self instruction or in conjunction with a formal course. The author, who teaches at the Michigan State University College of Human Medicine, has packed the work with scores of case studies to dramatize and illustrate the very difficult types of ethical decisions that medical practitioners must make today. His probing analyses touch all the key areas (e.g., the doctor-patient relationship, informed consent) and most controverted issues in medicine today (e.g., control of reproduction and behavior, human experimentation, care of the dying, screening, genetic engineering, etc.).

Brody also develops an ethical theory for "validating" the ethical decisions that doctors must make. This theory, along with the types of decisions that it supports, is a broadly humanistic one, cogently argued and persuasively presented. The difficulty, however, is that it is a theory which in my judgment is totally incompatible both with a Christian understanding of human existence and with a proper philosophical understanding of the significance of human acts.

Brody's theory is a variant of consequentialism. The type he advocated is immensely superior to the grossly arithmetical and quantitative type championed by Joseph Fletcher's situational calculus ("so long as more people are helped than hurt the action is right and loving"), and in the course of his argument Brody has some incisive criticisms to make of this kind of simplistic utilitarianism. But his theory is nonetheless a consequentialism, one that looks to the results of an action, universally prescribed in a rule applicable to actions in all similar situations, for the moral justification of the action, the rule, and the decision to accept this rule and to do this deed.

Brody argues that we ultimately validate our values by looking to the consequences that will come about when we make it a rule to act in accord with them (Ch. 18) and that we validate our ethical decisions by which kinds of actions will best realize our values (Ch. 2). We can never *know* that the values we choose are really valuable, but we can give them rational support. For Brody the highest value worthy of our choice is the survival of a human culture in which there is an equitable and fair distribution of the world's goods, with the greatest possible room compatible with this provided for individual uniqueness (Ch. 18).

Brody advocates ethical decisions in medicine that will best enhance the quality of human life and that will afford the greatest possible respect for individual human beings. But his theory, precisely because it is consequentialist, denies that there are any inherently evil deeds. The reason is simply that the significance of human deeds is totally exhausted by their results, their consequences, and that they have no moral significance other than that given to them by their consequences. In his honesty Brody recognizes that there are alternative kinds of ethical theory, and he notes that a "deontological" type of ethical theory based on the notion of the sanctity and not the quality of life is such an alternative. His discussion of the sanctity of life view, however, is flawed by a misunderstanding of what it is all about and what it signifies. But fundamentally his theory is erroneous because it is a "nongnitive" theory of

ethics. For him ethical statements are neither true nor false, and can thus be neither verified nor falsified. Rather they are prescriptions that can be validated by values. But the values validating them are ultimately matters of human choice, for we can never know that what we value is truly, really, valuable. *His* values, fortunately, are different from those of Attila the Hun and Hitler; but they are surely not those of a Christian. Human life, for him, is valuable, and individual human beings are valuable, but only so long as they serve the highest value: the survival of human culture.

It has not been possible, in this short review, to do full justice to Brody's book. He poses serious and difficult questions that need to be given intelligent and carefully thought out answers by all who accept the sanctity of human life and believe that what our actions have to tell us about ourselves is more important than what they succeed in accomplishing (although we can by no means ignore their consequences). His book may infuriate at times, and the medical decisions (e.g. abortion of "defective" fetuses, killing dying patients with kindness, sperm shopping in A.I.D., etc.) his theory validates are surely wrong, but the arguments he develops need to be taken seriously and the challenge he presents met forthrightly.

—William E. May, Associate Professor of Moral Theology
The Catholic University of America

Books Received

- Body Hot Spots: The Anatomy of Human Social Organs and Behavior.** R. Dale Guthrie, Van Nostrand Reinhold Co., 1976. \$8.95, 240 p.
- Contraceptive Technology.** Robert A. Hatcher, et al. Halsted Press, 1976. \$2.95, 144 p.
- Death: Current Perspectives.** Edwin S. Shneidman, ed. Mayfield Pub. Co., 1976. \$7.95, XXIII + 547 p.
- Death Without Dignity: Killing for Mercy.** Rev. Paul Marx, O.S.B. The Liturgical Press, 1975. 47 p., no price given.
- The Demographic Explosion: The Latin American Experience.** Benjamin Viel, M.D. Halsted Press, 1976. \$14.95, XIII + 249 p.
- Ethical and Scientific Issues Posed by Human Uses of Molecular Genetics.** Marc Lappe and Robert Morison, editors. N. Y. Academy of Sciences, 1976. 208 p., no price given.
- Ethics and Population.** Michael D. Bayles, ed. Schenkman Pub. Co., 1976. XXVIII + 190 p., no price given.
- Eugenics Then and Now.** Carl J. Bajema, ed. Halsted Press, 1976. \$25.00, XV + 382 p.
- Genetic Research in Psychiatry.** R. Fieve, D. Rosenthal, and H. Brill, editors. Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1975. \$16.50, XV + 301 p.
- Human Territories: How We Behave in Space-Time.** Albert E. Schefflen and Norman Ashcraft. Prentice-Hall, 1976. \$3.95, XVI + 210 p.
- Human Values in Medical Education.** John R. Ellis, M.D. Society for Health and Human Values, 1976. 28 p., no price given.
- Moral Problems in Medicine.** Samuel Gorovitz, et al, editors. Prentice-Hall, 1976. XXIV + 552 p., \$11.50.
- Natural Family Planning: The Ovulation Method.** Dr. John Billings. The Liturgical Press, 1975. VI + 38 p., no price given.
- The 9 Most Common Marriage Problems and How to Overcome Them.** James J. Rue, Ph.D. Liguori Publications, 1976. \$1.00, 64 p.