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## BOOK REVIEWS

### *Human Life in the Balance*

by

David C. Thomasma

Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville, 1990. 268 pp.

*Human Life in the Balance* by David C. Thomasma is an attempt to clarify the moral issues which attend the rapid development of technology. It is a broadly philosophical work which engages the religious and cultural aspects that must necessarily contribute to a societal dialogue about crafting health care politics in a pluralistic society.

Thomasma presents an *apologia* or "case" which is essentially pro-life, based not solely on rational arguments but on the highlighting of "cognitive dissonances," differences between what one perceives and what one believes, that are "resolved" by different belief traditions. Belief is not the same as knowledge. Belief provides a matrix or context by which knowledge is rendered meaningful. Thomasma attempts to bring others to a belief in the inherent dignity of human life by persuasive rational argumentation which is not precisely equated with scientific knowledge. Practically speaking, switching from the pro-abortion to the pro-life side of the fence does not result so much from a recital of genetic facts as it does a *conversion* from one set of beliefs to another.

Technology is integral to being human. Tool-making has been part of the human enterprise from the beginning. In this era, two large belief-systems (or myths) are in stark conflict: the "myth of religion" and the "myth of the machine" (or science or technology). "Myth" is used by Thomasma in a precise sense to mean "any theoretical and practical system of meaning that embodies the values of a particular culture . . . The myth die[ies] absolutes that relate to human conduct and the goals of human life." p. 61.

Thomasma's thesis is that good technology is designed by a recognition of the fundamental needs and aspirations of humanity. These human needs are not found in technology itself, but in human life. There is, then, a need to *direct* technology by a common (societal/global) will. Technology, therefore, obviously has a moral dimension. This is obvious from consideration of something as global as the nuclear arms race to something as (unfortunately) common as the "911 mentality" of not shutting off a single machine until it is clear we are defibrillating a corpse.

The contemporary problem is our failure to direct technology resulting from a loss of a shared vision of the value of human life. This allows technology to direct itself, to suggest its own avenues of development, ultimately for its own refinement, not in the service of human needs. The value of human life is threatened. Thomasma goes on to state that un-directed technology *is* the cult of the machine. This "myth" contradicts the value of human life which is a belief proposed persistently by religion, philosophy and law.

This clash provides the context for Thomasma's examination of the moral issues of nuclear war, abortion, defective newborns and the right to die. The final two chapters are the coda of the work, providing Thomasma's proposals for resolving in a practical way the theoretical issues he has so far developed. He deals with the critical issues of controlling life-prolonging technologies, sorting out decisions about the end of life, and providing just access of health care to every segment of society. In the final chapter, the author also provides a theoretical schema or strategy by which technological society can reorient its perspective back to a life affirming society, by dealing critically yet positively with contrasting positions or beliefs about the value of human life in a pluralistic society.

Thomasma offers a great deal to think about. Sometimes the reader's problem begins precisely where the text ends. For example, the author does not say how a cultural discussion about

discerning the authentic human values which must be designed into technology will proceed. Will this take place at the level of the UN or by means of international summitry?

A word must also be said about Thomasma's philosophy of religion. His presentation about the "moral force" of religion lacks its proper context. (cf. pp. 94ff.) The salvific basis or fundament of religion is not mentioned. Religion is not primarily a moral code. This is the Pelagian problem. It can be argued that religion, unlike philosophy, arises from the "crack" of original sin, or evil, as *the* problem to address and overcome (viz. sin and death). Throughout the text, in fact, the author does not come to grips with the problem of evil, but he comments (inaccurately, I think) that the "instinct for violence and death [are] caused in us by the Machine." (p. 67). In fact, however, there is something more basic in *us* that shows up and takes life in the machine. The illuminative and liberating role of religious dogma is not sufficiently articulated.

Despite a fine and thorough examination of the issues of the value of human life, there is a troubling undercurrent to Thomasma's ethical theory. Assumptions made by the author about basic ethical reflection and method are highly questionable. For example, early on in the book, Thomasma makes the assertion that in conflict situations in which one life or another will be sacrificed, "we ought to own up to the terrible dilemma. We must act immorally" (page 39). This is a fundamental stumbling-block for the reader of the non-consequentialistic school. Classical and Catholic moral theories (with certain contemporary exceptions) develop ethical reflection precisely to avoid *ever* having to do moral evil.

This assertion of Thomasma is an ominous starting shot for the rest of the book. Only toward the end of the book does the author employ the principle of the double effect. The first part of the presentation would have been greatly enhanced if it had been employed or at least dealt with prior to its premiere on page 176, dealing with pain control (narcotics) vis-a-vis foreseen yet unintended suppression of respiration. The reader is left wondering why this important principle could not have been used when Thomasma was delineating "positions" about the value of human life which end up being caricatures or straw-men, rather than credibly defined belief systems. The author presents a description of three belief systems regarding the value of human life (as absolute value, a value in relation to other personal values, and as relative to the "degree of life" and the social context). Particularly disappointing is the development of "Position A" which maintains an absolute respect for human life but which fails to distinguish the direct/indirect effects, and does not acknowledge the principle of double effect (page 140-146).

The very omission of any discussion (pro or con) of the principle of the double effect leads to a certain frustration on the reader's part, and to a lack of clarity and nuance in the text itself. Also, in the end, despite the author's own stated sympathy for "pro-life" belief, his practical resolutions or guidelines give more benefit to the side of "pro-choice" (=choices for willful violation of the good human life). He comes to this practical solution because he believes issues like this are best resolved by dialogue than by legislative act. I think that this slant, however, betrays a lack of trust in the philosophical integrity of one's own position. And the author's solution in fact abandons a critical, prophetic role for philosophy in the public forum. With this, his argument seems to deflate.

On the whole, however, the book is a valuable contribution to the study of the value of human life. It can be used as a whole or in parts for undergraduate or graduate students interested in bioethics. It deserves to be read thoroughly, but also needs to be read critically.

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