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Book Review

Kevin O'Rourke, O.P., Ed., *A Primer For Health Care Ethics: Essays for a Pluralistic Society*, 2nd ed. (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2000), 323 pages, paper, index.

This book is a clearly written, smoothly edited volume that is practical in the best sense of the term. The reader of this book will find its authors using critical reasoning at the service of answering or at least articulating the most common and urgent medical moral questions. This collection of essays, some new to the second edition and some repeated from the first, is eminently useful in generating class discussions and in giving direction to thought aimed at resolving ethical dilemmas in health care. Drawing upon his years of expertise in teaching at a medical school, Kevin O'Rourke has collected essays of nearly perfect length for the typical medical student to discuss and learn from. In my own experience of teaching medical students, this kind of book works best for their busy schedules and "naturally" pragmatic dispositions. Such a text can get the student right to the heart of the matter so as to leave the skilled teacher plenty of time to unfold the nuances of "real life" in the ensuing discussion.

The book is arranged in ten sections with eighty-one individual chapters of two or three pages in length. Typically, the authors of the essays lay out the question to be analyzed and then move to a discussion. Moral principles are usually presented first, and then a look at the current status of the question is objectively reviewed. The authors do not, however, simply play the role of observer. In the conclusion of each essay there is usually a judgment made by the author regarding the moral question at hand. In the case of cloning, for example, the author notes, "Cloning of human persons should be banned not just because it is currently unsafe or because it is an extreme form of artificial reproduction, however, but because it denies the dignity of the human person as well as the dignity of human procreation" (160).

I have found that such forthright judgments spark better classroom conversation than the more neutral social science "description only" method, which is utilized in some medical ethics textbooks. Characteristic of the O'Rourke method, he mutes that which is explicitly theological in his

writings so as to follow the path to truth by way of what he calls "reasoned analysis." In this way he avoids putting off non-believers while preserving the truths that reason can attain on its own merits. It is a convincing method to use in the pluralistic setting of a medical college. All the essays reflect this method. O'Rourke notes the following in his introduction about the methodology these essays embody: "These essays, though not in conflict with Catholic teaching, are written for a pluralistic community. Catholic teaching has traditionally depended upon sacred scripture and natural law reasoning. These essays are based on principles founded on human reason as well as faith" (xii).

While the judgments found in the essays may not conflict with church teaching individual theologians may have their own disagreements with some approaches and conclusions. An example here would be the issue of artificial nutrition and hydration in what is now a position commonly known to be associated with O'Rourke and his colleagues. Regarding this question, the book concludes that it is moral to remove the conveyances that supply such in the circumstances of persistent vegetative state patients. "In the case of people in PVS, AHN [artificial hydration and nutrition] is an ineffective therapy for the pathology that causes the permanently comatose condition, and it is burdensome as well." (225). The removal of artificial nutrition and hydration in such situations remains, for some moralists, a disputed claim. This is a discussion repeated on numerous occasions in the pages of *Linacre Quarterly* (e.g., vol. 62, no. 2 [May 1995]).

An additional strength of this collection of essays is the foundational section in part one. Here the principles and core values upon which the St. Louis school bases its conclusions are outlined (e.g. a definition of health care ethics, principles surrounding human dignity, the patient-physician relationship, moral methodology, and more). All the authors of the eighty-one chapters are present or former members of the St. Louis University Center for Health Care Ethics, which O'Rourke directed for many years before his recent retirement. The ethical system of reasoned analysis promoted by the school functions as a natural law methodology.

In using this method O'Rourke and his colleagues argue for universal reach, undermining any sectarian tendencies in some religious thinking. The authors of this book use reasoned analysis in the hopes of finding a way to cultural consensus on divisive ethical issues. I believe that by and large the method does succeed. In my own use of the book I have found that at minimum the method invites participants to think about issues in a non-threatening manner. Beyond the method itself, this book's clear, irenic, and principled approach goes a long way in providing a model for what doing ethics in a pluralistic culture should sound like. By developing a book of moral analysis that carries in its tone an invitation to the reader to attentively listen to its authors, the ethicists at St. Louis have our gratitude.

A sampling of the topics covered are: informed consent, use and removal of life support, genetics, organ donation, issues in medical research, suicide and physician-assisted suicide, managed care, artificial generation, and some special issues on pain management, ethics committees, treatment of rape victims, suffering and compassion. I recommend this work highly as a useful text for medical school ethics classes. It can also be a helpful tool in graduate theology or philosophical health care ethics seminars as well.

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