

11-1-1980

[Book Review of] *Humanism and the Physician* by Edmund D. Pellegrino

Thomas A. Shannon

Follow this and additional works at: <http://epublications.marquette.edu/lnq>

 Part of the [Ethics and Political Philosophy Commons](#), and the [Medicine and Health Sciences Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Shannon, Thomas A. (1980) "[Book Review of] *Humanism and the Physician* by Edmund D. Pellegrino," *The Linacre Quarterly*: Vol. 47: No. 4, Article 11.

Available at: <http://epublications.marquette.edu/lnq/vol47/iss4/11>

Humanism and the Physician

Edmund D. Pellegrino

The University of Tennessee Press, Knoxville, Tenn., 1979. xiii + 248 pp., \$15.50.

Dr. Pellegrino's wide background and range of activities as physician, hospital administrator, dean, and now a university president have uniquely prepared him to author these previously written essays and to assemble them into a coherent whole. Although Pellegrino himself recognizes the danger of putting old wine into new skins, he has avoided this problem by recasting the essays so that there is a remarkable coherence in the volume, achieved by addressing common themes from different perspectives and the integration of the material. Additionally, Pellegrino has much to say, and it is worth listening to by physicians in private practice, medical school students and faculty, and the administrators of medical schools.

The ongoing discussion in the book focuses on the role and place of the humanities in medicine and medical education. Pellegrino uses the term "humanities" consistently to mean "a spirit of sincere concern for the centrality of human values in every aspect of professional activity" (p. 118). This orientation does not exclude the traditional disciplines in the humanities conceived of as a body of knowledge, but rather allows the contribution of these disciplines to be experienced in a threefold way: an understanding of the value dimensions in the practice of medicine, an encouragement of self-examination within the profession, and the conferring of attitudes which "distinguish the educated from the merely trained man" (p. 3). Pellegrino has three foci for his essays which illustrate his central theme: medicine and the humanities, humanities and medical ethics, and humanistic medical education. In pursuing these themes, it should be noted, Pellegrino avoids two attitudes that could destroy a concept of humanistic medicine: a suggestion that each physician must have academic credentials to qualify as a liberally trained physician and an implication that scientific and technical proficiency is less important than true compassion for the physician. Pellegrino succeeds in avoiding each extreme and integrates the two dimensions extremely well.

In general, the essays cover a broad range of topics, exhibit a remarkable breadth of background in literature and philosophy, and address in a helpful way real dilemmas in medical education and practice. In particular, I was struck by the essays on humanistic medical education. Not only do these chapters contain suggestions that could actually be implemented to the benefit of any curriculum, but they also reveal an extraordinarily sensitive insight into the problems in medical education, the difficulty of being a physician in today's society, and the value context in which professionalization occurs. Pellegrino has an excellent chapter on the ethics of medical education in which he examines several issues that require ongoing institutional debate: the social role of a medical school, problems of matching supply and demand, equity of access to medical education, assuring

competence and integrity in the student, and obligations to the patient. Pellegrino's suggestions are not without their limitations, but he succeeds in identifying several problems, stating the issues within each problem, and making reasonable suggestions to resolve them. He also succeeds in putting his finger on many of the problems that need serious debate within medical schools.

These essays are not to be read quickly. Each has something to say, and it is worth considering. The book deserves a wide reading among physicians in private practice and especially by those physicians and other individuals who are involved in medical education.

— Thomas A. Shannon
Associate Professor of Medical Ethics, Department of Psychiatry
University of Massachusetts Medical Center

The Ethics of Homicide

Philip E. Devine

Cornell University Press, 124 Roberts Pl., Ithaca, N.Y. 14850. 1978, 247 pp., \$12.95.

Among other things, this book gives a survey of recent views in secular philosophy on abortion, euthanasia, rights of animals (and plants), and rights of persons. After reading this survey, a Catholic with a decent upbringing can only come away with the overwhelming impression that the chief characteristic of modern secular ethics is its utter moral bankruptcy. (This judgment does not apply to Devine himself who tries to stand apart from the general trend.)

What else can we conclude when a philosopher of obvious good-will must twist and turn through several pages (46-106) to prove that a human person deserves more respect than a cabbage? (Devine reports, and tries to refute, the arguments of philosophers who hold that rights are based on "interests" and since plants as well as humans have "interests," then the statuses of plants and humans are basically the same [pp. 48-49].) What else can we conclude when a philosopher of good-will feels required to treat with respect (although disagreement) the ethical condoning of infanticide (pp. 64-69)? And what finally can we conclude, except that modern secular ethics is corrupt, when a large number of philosophers will condone any act, from judicial murder to geronticide and genocide, if it appears that it will produce the best results in the long run?

A case in point of the gymnastics some philosophers will perform to keep their desired conclusions is Michael Tooley. Philosophers had shown that if you deny fetuses (unborn babies) the right to life, then, logically, you must also deny infants the right to life. Whereupon, Tooley concluded that infanticide must be permissible, arguing that a being has rights only if it is self-conscious and has desires that can be frustrated. It was then pointed out that both common sense and the law attribute rights to infants, such as not to be mutilated, or not to be robbed of an inheritance. Tooley replied that such rights are based on the fact that the infant will, in the future, come to desire that the violation (e.g., mutila-