[Book Review of] The Emergence of Roman Catholic Medical Ethics in North America, by David F. Kelly

John R. Connery

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
Available at: http://epublications.marquette.edu/lnq/vol49/iss1/13
Its Generation," William E. May gets to the deepest roots of the questions involved in laboratory generation of human life, and shows why it is morally inappropriate to initiate human life by any act other than marital acts of intercourse. His treatment of conception and abortion in this concise but intelligent article reveals a clear awareness of the mindset that leads many moralists to hold such acts sometimes suitable and also his awareness of the reasons why this mindset is itself false to Christian principles.

Very valuable also are Dr. Thomas Hilgers's study of "The New Technologies of Birth," John Noonan's "Is Abortion a Private Choice?" and four brief studies of Father Thomas O'Donnell on a variety of "death issues." In his article on "Introduction to Prolonging Life Issues," Father Donald McCarthy persuasively argues against misleading uses of the term "passive euthanasia." But, even after acknowledging that one can kill by omission (e.g., starving to death a defective child), he strangely insists that the "simple word 'euthanasia' already means active killing" (p. 142). This hardly belongs in a paragraph calling for linguistic precision.

The St. John Center has produced in this volume a useful study of difficult new questions. Its leaders are to be encouraged in their resolve to unite full adherence to Catholic teaching with a rigorous rational reflection in treating bioethical questions.

— Ronald D. Lawler, O.F.M. Cap.
Center for Thomistic Studies, University of St. Thomas

The Emergence of Roman Catholic Medical Ethics in North America

David F. Kelly

Mellen Press, New York, 1979, vi + 520 pp., $29.95 (paperback).

David Kelly, a priest of the diocese of Worcester, Mass., and a teacher of moral theology, traces the history of Catholic medical ethics in the United States. He introduces the subject with a brief history of moral theology during the Christian era and of pastoral medicine from the 18th century. He divides this history into two periods, the first running from about the beginning of the 20th century to 1940 and the second from 1940-1960. The chief interest of the author is in the methodologies of the authors who wrote during these periods.

While recognizing that fast lines can hardly be drawn, he finds the approach of the authors of the first period predominantly physicalist. In the second period physicalism gives way to ecclesiastical positivism. After Vatican II personalism becomes the prevailing methodology.

Those who lived through the period the author covers and who respected the pioneering work of the authors of the time may consider Kelly's account something of a "putdown." In discussing their methodologies the language the author uses is more accusative than descriptive. Objective (ex objecto) morality becomes physicalism; accepting Church moral teaching becomes ecclesiastical positivism. Had he remained in the same accusatory mood, the author might have reduced the personalism of post-Vatican II to individualism, but he was evidently better disposed toward a personalistic methodology.
As for the *physicalism* of the earlier authors, I suppose one should expect some emphasis on physical acts in moral judgments dealing with a science which in those days concentrated on the body and physical ailments. But the charge of *physicalism*, applied by Kelly to their whole methodology, really stems from the arguments which these authors used against contraception. They argued, according to Kelly, that the physical good or integrity of the procreative faculty or function was more important than the personal good of the spouses. Hence the charge of *physicalism*, or as some say "biologism," and the alleged disregard for the person.

A little reflection will show that there is good reason to question this charge of *physicalism*, even in regard to the approach to contraception. It seems to involve a univocal attitude toward all man's physical faculties, and without any reference to their goal. Thus procreation falls into the same category as evacuating the bladder or the bowel, and no attention is given to its unique character. What is unique about this function is that it is life-giving. It is precisely because of this transcendent character that the procreative function has traditionally been accorded a respect that goes beyond other human functions. Also, the product of this function (however physical it may be) will be just as much a person as those who engage in it. If this is taken into consideration, the issue is no longer that of the person of the spouses versus the integrity of a physical faculty or act. It is that of the person of the spouses versus the person of the prospective offspring. Even if one wanted to consider the life of the prospective offspring a physical good, it is still a very basic personal good, unless one wants to deny that a physical good can be a personal good. To put the whole issue in terms of the physical versus the personal is to fail to do justice to, or at least obscure, the unique nature of the procreative act.

From another point of view, it is a mistake to reduce human procreation to a purely physical function. As Pius XII once said, human procreation is not just the bringing together of two germ cells. If it is to be truly human, the procreative act must be a unique expression of conjugal love. It is precisely because of the importance of this relationship that Pius XII was critical of technological reproduction. To reduce procreation to the purely physical or biological level is to dehumanize it and, in this respect, put it on the level of animal or even technological reproduction.

Even if one could make a case for a charge of *physicalism* in regard to these authors' approach toward contraception, it would not warrant the claim that their whole methodology was *physicalistic*. Traditional moral theology has always admitted that physical faculties and functions are for the good of the whole person, and therefore may be sacrificed when this good demands it. I am sure that all of the authors accepted that principle. Nor is it true that this good of the whole person was limited to a physical good. These authors, for instance, generally accepted lobotomy as a remedy for psychological disorders when no less radical therapy was available. So I doubt seriously that a general charge of *physicalism* can be substantiated against them in regard to their general methodology.

By *ecclesiastical positivism* the author seems to mean the acceptance as Church teaching of a normative truth that should but may not be patent to natural reason, e.g., the morality of contraception. It is not really clear why this kind of assent should be associated with positivism, which has to do with law and obedience rather than teaching and assent, and which also involves purely arbitrary or voluntaristic prescriptions rather than insights arrived at under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. The author apparently sees no middle ground between what is accessible to reason and strict mystery. It is this area about which Vatican I spoke when it referred to the need of revelation (and this applies to Church teaching as well) "that those truths, which are not completely inaccessible
to human reason may be known easily by all, with certitude, and without an admixture of error” (Vatican I, Session III, Chap. II). The Council evidently recognized the existence of truths which were theoretically accessible to human reason, but practically (in the above sense) were too much for it. Some of these were undoubtedly moral truths, and more specifically, those of which St. Thomas spoke (Summa Theologica, 1-2, q. 94, aa. 4 and 6) as secondary precepts (or remote conclusions from first principles). Since this same need was repeated in Vatican II (Dei verbum, 6), it is not clear what the author finds objectionable in an appeal to Church teaching regarding such truths. By calling this kind of appeal ecclesiastical positivism, the author gives the impression that this teaching is purely arbitrary; if it hits upon the truth, it is accidental. While one can certainly admit that authentic Church teaching is not infallible, and therefore is open to error, if it is to be reliable at all, the error must be rare. In other words, it is the error that must be accidental, not the truth. If one accepted the viewpoint of Kelly in this matter, it would seem to involve the denial of the validity of Church moral teachings, except in those areas where certainty can readily be established by reason — where it is not really needed. This kind of limitation would render Church teaching superfluous and can hardly be reconciled with the role Vatican I and II give to revelation.

The author clearly had in mind a service to those involved in the health professions when he gathered together the material for this book. And one can be grateful for what he did in putting the work these authors did in a historical context. But one has to regret that he did not take a more open approach to their work.

— John R. Connery, S.J.
Professor of Moral Theology, Loyola University of Chicago

Human Sexuality and Personhood

Workshop Proceedings of the Pope John XXIII
Medical-Moral Research and Education Center


Two hundred bishops attended a workshop on the above topic, conducted by the Pope John Center from Feb. 2-6, 1981. The Center has been instituted to help the Church respond intelligently and compassionately to the contemporary cultural challenges facing the Catholic view of life, health, and procreation. The overall message of the papers contained in this book, deliberately written to respond to the bishops’ explicit request for a more positive theology of human sexuality and a more effective pastoral ministry in a person-centered context, is that human sexuality permeates human personhood, enabling human sexual love to reflect the infinite love within the Trinity.

Bishop Bernard Law, chairman of the board of the Pope John Center, wrote the preface. The introduction reflects the keynote address given by priest-psychiatrist James Gill, S.J.

Father Gill’s advice to the bishops can well be taken by physicians, teachers, and other authority figures. He says that people shrink from those who bring them high ideals and strong remedies for their passions, even though the bearers are not really being judgmental or condemnatory. And although bishops today are