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Book Review

Principles of Medical Ethics

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CATHOLIC physicians, particularly those concerned with medical education, are constantly on the lookout for books that will help them to understand better their position as Catholics in the profession, and to explain themselves to those not of the Faith. This book will be of some use, though it also has some limitations.

"Ethics" is understood by the author to be Catholic ethics, that is, it bases its principles not only on the data of reason but also on those of revelation, and makes use of the decisions and pronouncements of the Church concerning specific practices. Moreover, the author tries to be fairly complete—to cover the major areas of medico-moral problems. In general, his procedure is this: he states the problem briefly, sometimes illustrating it with a case; he explains the facts and principles which enter into the moral consideration of the problem, and then states his conclusion in the form of a moral principle. The argumentation and the conclusions are characterized by respect for tradition and soundness of judgment. If a doctor or nurse is looking for a convenient compendium for guidance in the more ordinary problems of medical and nursing practice, this book can be highly recommended.

The limitations of the book correspond to its excellencies. It is very brief, and its already scanty space is restricted further by the presence in the book of two chapters (32 pages) devoted to general ethical principles and the general considerations of justice and charity. Furthermore, the explanations of the moral principles frequently are couched in technical terms which are not adequately explained in non-technical language. Hence, a teacher using the book as a text would have to make sure that these terms are understood by the students.

But Catholics should be cautious in giving this book to interested inquirers who have no background in Thomistic philosophy. Several instances will make this clear. The doctrines of the morality of material cooperation and of the double effect are almost universally accepted among Catholic writers. These doctrines are valid principles for the solving of certain moral cases, because of the nature of the will act and its relation to its object. Suppose a person has no clear understanding of the activity of the will, and cannot meaningfully distinguish between an object willed materially and one willed formally. These principles will then look to him like sheer quibbling or like laxism.

Again, the evil of suicide and murder are commonly said to lie in this, that they violate the exclusive dominium of God over human life. Why should it be morally good to save a life or lengthen it by interfering with natural causes, though it is morally wrong to destroy or shorten life by a similar interference? Of course, this is not a good question in the mind of one who has any understanding of Divine Providence and the place of man's ingenuity and freedom within the plan of God. But many non-Catholics (and, I fear, some Catholics, too) do not understand these things, and are not satisfied with what, to them, is a mere word.

Finally, consider the arguments based on the frustration of the natural use of a faculty. This is a self-evident principle, true; but its self-evidence does not consist in an enunciation of the words which express it. And when a culture has discarded the whole notion of natural finality, then terms like "frustration," "natural," "unnatural," and so on, become mere words, to be viewed with suspicion, and to be interpreted as evidences of blind, unreasoning authoritarianism.

Unfortunately, this reviewer does not know where the desired explanations are to be found, short of complete treatises on the philosophy of being (metaphysics) and of man.

PRINCIPLES OF MEDICAL ETHICS

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1952, pp. XIII and 208, \$3.25