

book reviews

Aiming to kill: the ethics of suicide and euthanasia

By Nigel Biggar. Darton Longman & Todd, London 2004. 240pp. £10.95.

Opinion polls show up to 80% of the public in favour of euthanasia, yet rather like capital punishment – also consistently supported according to the pollsters – it remains illegal. With the Assisted Dying Bill now before Parliament, this could change. Even if, as most expect, the Bill fails, the debate over euthanasia will have achieved greater prominence. So Biggar's book comes at a particularly opportune time. It is, above all, a book about ethics. It does not contain lengthy details of law cases or legislative attempts around the world to legalise medical killing. The long history of euthanasia is not covered, although inevitably there is some discussion of the Dutch experience – where euthanasia has now been legalised after a lengthy period of practice under agreements between legal and medical bodies. Nor does the book pad itself out with lengthy discussions on other end-of-life issues. Rather, what Biggar seeks to do is engage in focussed argument with all the advantages of single authorship. In doing so, he has produced one of the more compelling books in this area of medical ethics, worthy to sit on the shelf alongside Dworkin's *Life's dominion* (1993).

Biggar is a professor of theology at Dublin. As he concedes, some non-theists may find his references to God, human creaturehood, divine vocation and so on a reason to dismiss the argument. This objection is met head on. Firstly, a genuine Christian ethic does not operate in purely theological terms. He does not appear sympathetic to those who want to quote the Bible at every opportunity and there are no such quotes here.

Secondly, the Christian tradition is internally diverse and dialectical, even if it does have – as it must – a measure of coherence. These issues dominate the first pages of the book and they would constitute a valuable argument on their own, and one of interest to readers of all persuasions. But Biggar is also a formidable moral philosopher, supporting his arguments with examples from film, literature and drama. He states his approach at the outset: to review as judiciously as possible two opposing fronts as seen from no man's land. But he does not pretend dispassionate neutrality and declares a conservative conviction against legalising either assisted suicide or active killing. Three questions are considered basic: what is it that makes human life valuable? Can it be moral to intend to kill someone? And how should we fear the wider, social effects of legalising euthanasia or assisted suicide?

At the end he arrives where he started, but 'knowing the place far better'. He proceeds by outlining, and then analysing, the opinions of the main protagonists in the debate, and a glance at the bibliography reveals the names of every significant modern contributor: Dworkin, Singer, Rachels, Harris, Finnis, Keown and many others. The advantage of this approach is that the arguments are never ducked. So Biggar is prepared to discuss the distinctions between

killing and letting die, defend the doctrine of double effect, expound autonomy, analyse the evidence for the 'slippery slope' and address whether we have a greater responsibility to deal with evil that is certain (the patient's suffering) than to worry about evil that is not (the societal risks of a change in the law). In doing so, he takes issue with both supporters and opponents of euthanasia. For example, he finds the absolutist objection to assisted suicide and euthanasia *as such* unacceptable. If they depended in part on arguments about contingent social phenomena and probabilities, those would be controversial. But why, he asks, does that make the suggestion unworthy of serious consideration? Perhaps it is the conditions under which killing is proposed that is of greatest moral significance – a position of some subtlety. Thus, he supports the Bland judgement and argues that the liberalisation of Dutch law producing instances of non-voluntary euthanasia *need* not be morally objectionable. What he produces in the end is a comprehensive exposition of the arguments. Whether you are convinced or not, you will be wiser. As an up-to-date account of current thinking, his book can be unreservedly commended to anyone interested in the issues and especially to any doctor who deals with the dying patient. Incidentally, at £10.95 it is also excellent value for money.

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What price better health? Hazards of the research imperative

By Daniel Callahan. University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles CA 2003. 330pp. £18.95.

This recent publication from the authoritative pen of Daniel Callahan of the Hastings Centre and Harvard Medical School in the United States deals with the so called 'research imperative' which is gradually making in-roads in the field of scientific research, very often at the expense of established ethical principles. The reader is guided through the various phases of medical research: its goals, the means adopted in pursuance of these goals and the development of public policy on research. Callahan evaluates critically the objectives of medical research, the values of science and the social obligations of scientists. The topics covered are wide-ranging and include the validity of two characteristics of contemporary research: the war of medicine against death and ageing and the goals of medicine in relation to the concept of health.

Callahan tackles very adequately the principal means of carrying out biomedical research – the use of human subjects for clinical research – and highlights the importance of maintaining a balance between human subject protection and research needs. As one might expect in a publication of this sort, attention is drawn to the

problems generated by the use of research methods that raise serious moral questions. Callahan also goes through the stages of how the integrity of science was protected from the increasing demands of the research imperative. Misconduct, falsification of data and conflicts of interests are all discussed against the background of institutional imperatives, such as research being universal. In a pluralistic society where religious, philosophical and ideological differences prevail, consensus on controversial issues is difficult to achieve. One such issue has recently attracted a great deal of debate: research, for reproductive and therapeutic purposes, on embryonic stem cells and its relationship to human cloning.

Most scientists naturally resent what they perceive as arbitrary limits set on their right to conduct scientific research. They contend that laypersons are ill-equipped to discuss issues connected with such research, let alone share control in what they do. What needs to be stressed, however, is that human life is too precious a commodity and too valuable an asset to be left solely in the hands of scientists. Society has a right, equal to that of scientists, to participate in discussions over such issues as in-vitro fertilisation, experimentation on human embryos, cloning and other procedures that impinge heavily on the dignity of the human being.

Callahan discusses a wide range of subjects. He refers to some interesting questions being asked by researchers today. The metaphor 'war of medicine against death and ageing' is used to test the validity of traditionally important research goals. Yet how important is research when it involves cutting moral corners, as could happen in stem cell research? Discussing whether there is a research obligation in the fight against ageing, Callahan asks some pertinent questions. Where does ageing stand as an object of scientific research? Is ageing a disease like other physical pathologies, or is it like death, a 'natural' biological inevitability? If it is natural, should it merit research? Indeed, ageing is not a disease but diseases occur in the elderly. There is no doubt that with the demographic changes taking place throughout the world, there is an imperative need for research on ageing in order to foster active and healthy ageing.

On the whole, one agrees with most of Callahan's conclusions except on the particular issue of the early human embryo – an issue which is assuming central importance in bioethics. Whilst acknowledging that respect is due to the early human embryo, Callahan does not accord it the full status of personhood from the beginning of its existence, holding that it acquires this status as it develops and seeing nothing amiss in permitting its use in research which is not intended for its own benefit. On the other hand, there are others who claim, and I agree with them, that all biological evidence confirms the humanity of the human embryo.

With this sole reservation, I consider Callahan's book a valuable addition to bioethics literature. It provides a source of information on many contemporary bioethical issues which the reader will find most useful. Callahan notes that, though moral constraints can be a victim of research, moral corners need not be cut. It has been said, rightly, that not everything that is technologically feasible is necessarily also ethically acceptable. Before establishing what is technically possible and also safe, one should pause awhile to consider whether one should be doing it in the first place.¹

Reference

- 1 German LJ, 'Fundamental ethical issues in assisted procreation'. In: Cauchi MN (ed). *Symposium proceedings in patients' rights, reproductive technology and transplantation* Malta: The Bioethics Consultative Committee, 2000.

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The hand: a philosophical inquiry into human being

By Raymond Tallis. Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh 2003. 364pp. £19.99.

The author hides his intellectual life by masquerading as a consultant geriatrician in Manchester, and Chairman of the College's Ethical Issues in Medicine Committee. In the latter capacity he has already shown a splendidly clear and commonsense appreciation of the NHS and an understanding of its problems.

So imagine my surprise when I read this astonishing book, which is the first part of a trilogy in which Professor Tallis intends to describe and assess all the reasons for the enormous gulf between human beings, with all their achievements, and other animals. He fully justifies his choice of the hand as his starting point. In this book he covers every relevant aspect of anatomy, physiology, psychology and sociology. For example, he notes that man's ability to oppose the thumb has liberated him from the discipline of the other hand joints, and increased by an order of magnitude the effectiveness of the hand in servicing the body. The human hand enables man to make and use tools of all kinds and to communicate with other people. Tallis makes a good case that the functions of the human hand are unique amongst mammals. He might have used the historical development of clavier playing, only a few centuries ago, to illustrate the liberation of the thumb. He might also have commiserated with those of us who have suffered the banal but extremely common osteoarthritis of the proximal thumb joints.

Later he is led into a great number of philosophical avenues, including discussions of human speech and writing. *The hand* is a work of commanding erudition. Most of the book comprises detailed and (as far as I can tell) accurate descriptions. My only criticism is that the detail becomes at times a bit oppressive. However, this is relieved by some charmingly naive asides – when, for example, he reveals that by giving an inadequate answer about the nature of itching in his Final Physiology Examination at Oxford he missed getting the 'expected' First. Elsewhere he says that a 'brief digression into electromagnetism is called for', and reminds the reader that Faraday's discovery was 'one of the greatest events in the story of mankind's ever-increasing ability to understand and control nature'. And then he considers the violin and points out that 'the bowing and fingering must work in concert if the instrument is to bring off its daily miracle of stroking silence until it weeps a world'. One can stand only so much fine writing.

The text is clear, but for my taste he is overfond of commas and dashes. These sometimes make the book sound like an off-the-cuff lecture. For example:

The hand's communication with itself as well as with the objects that it manipulates enhances the sense of the hand as an instrument: the thousand grips with their customised solutions to problems – for