

Book reviews

Euthanasia: The Good Death

Ludovic Kennedy, 54 pages, London, £3.99, Chatto and Windus, 1990.

This book is number 13 in the series *Counterblasts*, a series of pamphlets in which writers are offered the opportunity to explain in some detail their opinions and ideas, known to be in opposition to the dominant views of our time. *Counterblasts*, it is said, are written to surprise, to stir up debate – and to change people's minds. They are not intended to present all sides of any argument; bias is frankly acknowledged.

Ludovic Kennedy's views on euthanasia are well known from his broadcasts and newspaper articles. In this pamphlet he does more than simply reiterate them. He explains how he came to develop his opinion and then explores, point by point, the stance maintained by those who are in agreement with his views and of those who object. He gives an overview of the position of voluntary euthanasia societies worldwide; there are 31 groups in membership with the federation of the 'right to die' societies, belonging to 18 countries. Opinion polls in the UK show that in 1985 seventy-two per cent of the population believed that terminally ill people should be allowed to choose when to die. Thirty-five per cent of British doctors said they would be prepared to practise in a way which assisted the death of those who wished it, if it were to be legalised.

Ludovic Kennedy emphasises that every pro-euthanasia group stresses the importance of the *voluntary* aspect. It is not other people who are asked to decide, it is the patient, *only the patient*. Doctors, in their position document, 'pretend' that it is they who are asked to decide when a patient should be allowed to die. Ludovic Kennedy is critical of

their arrogance and the distortion of the language used to justify their stand. 'Putting patients away', 'dispatching', 'killing' are emotive words used in their rhetoric. No one suggests that people should be dispatched for the convenience of others.

The author quotes the anti-euthanasia position of the religious bodies, especially of the Roman Catholics, but he has little sympathy for the words of the Pope in 1980, that 'suffering in the last moments of life has a special place in God's saving plan...'. The view of many famous people in favour of helping people to die with dignity are quoted, people such as doctors, writers, philosophers. Opponents are also cited, people like Dame Cecily Saunders, but Ludovic Kennedy is convinced that such people simply cannot understand that for some patients life has lost all meaning. The 'slippery slope' argument advanced by many is simply based on the lack of understanding that only 'voluntary' termination of such meaningless life is under discussion. The thrust of the ethical argument in favour of euthanasia is based on the principle of autonomy. The examples of practice in Holland and the account of personal suffering of people lend weight to the perspective which the writer adopts.

ANNIE T ALTSCHUL
*Emeritus Professor of Nursing Studies,
University of Edinburgh
24 Bruntsfield Gardens,
Edinburgh EH10 4EA.*

Prenatal Diagnosis: Confronting the Ethical Issues

Agneta Sutton, 226 pages, London, £10.95, The Linacre Centre, 1990.

This book, aimed at a wide range of

professionals including those involved in health care, the clergy, lawyers and philosophers, purports to undertake a discursive consideration of the principal moral issues involved in prenatal diagnosis. However, those who read it in the hope that it will assist them in elucidating the complex ethical dilemmas associated with prenatal diagnosis will be disappointed, for in reality it is little more than thinly-veiled anti-abortion propaganda.

The first part of the book deals primarily with facts, yet even these, while largely correct, are not presented dispassionately. Throughout the supposedly factual description of the various procedures by which, and disorders for which, prenatal diagnosis can be made, the reader is encouraged to condemn the very concept of diagnosing abnormalities in the unborn child. Thus, one is constantly reminded that prenatal diagnosis is performed most frequently with a view to 'elimination of defective fetuses', that it has a primarily 'destructive aim', and that it 'constitutes a way of identifying children thought to be socially undesirable'.

This theme is expanded in the section of the book, entitled 'The ethical dimension'. In considering the attitudes of the Church towards prenatal diagnosis, the author describes almost exclusively the views of the Catholic Church, with historical references to various papal statements on abortion. There is little, if any, mention of dissension amongst non-conformist Catholics, and no mention of the views expressed by leaders of other denominations or religions.

There is really only one section of the book that could be accepted as an examination of the moral issues surrounding prenatal diagnosis, namely, the chapter entitled 'Arguments for abortion of abnormal fetuses and the moral status of the developing embryo'. However, even