

pain and distress'—a duty which is urgent and inescapable. There are dying patients who want, quite simply, an end.

The question of voluntary euthanasia is undoubtedly difficult, and even harrowing by the very nature of the sufferings and indignities which too often surround death. Dr Trowell is ready to admit, unlike more staunchly traditionalist members of his profession, that there is in fact a human problem requiring new attitudes and perhaps new procedures. But he also firmly implies that if we only leave it to the doctors all will be well, for they know what is best for us. With profound respect it needs to be asserted that the doctor ultimately is the servant of the community. Occasionally the community has to insist on the recognition of new options by doctors, as for example in the Abortion Act which obliged a divided but mainly unwilling medical profession to adopt new attitudes. Supporters of voluntary euthanasia say: 'Change the law, and so change medical attitudes, and the patient will at last dare to ask for what he wants.' It runs altogether counter to historical experience to assert, with the British Medical Association, that 'a change in the law would hamper changes in attitudes'.

In conclusion I must pay a grateful compliment to the Editor of this journal, who has invited me to reply to Dr Trowell. He, and this journal's readers, for the best of religious reasons, may be offended by my point of view. But in our pluralist society people must be allowed to have their own discriminations about death and dying. There can be no Roman Catholic or other religious veto over the evolution of our values. It is widely recognized that euthanasia problems will become more and not less urgent, even possibly acute on demographic grounds alone. The medical profession must necessarily be conservative over its basic values, but it is equally incontrovertible that the doctor derives his ultimate authority from the patient and is his servant and agent as well as his adviser. In an age of growing complexity, increasing options and technological refinement, the doctor is no longer the only arbiter, immediate or ultimate, in the management of our health and illness, life and death. From that plain fact the right to voluntary euthanasia under certain circumstances flows inevitably—and in due course, sooner or later, that right will be recognized by the law.

Footnote

by the Editor

Both the distinguished contributors to our debate have explicitly avoided what they call the 'religious' objections to euthanasia. It is not clear that there are any specifically religious reasons for or against the practice—I mean as there are religious reasons for or

against praying for the dead or worshipping idols—but there are certain relevant moral principles that have become traditional amongst Christians and which tend to be upheld by them when they are rejected by others. Whether this is because the gospel helps us to a greater insight into what it means to be human or whether it is just that Christians are old-fashioned, is not for the moment our question. In any case it seemed worthwhile adding a note about these principles.

I am personally inclined to agree with Dr Trowell that talk of the 'right to die' is muddling. Certainly it will not do to say that because life involves death there must be a right to die as there is a right to live. The right to live, if it means anything, means the right not to be killed. The right to die would seem to mean the right to be killed—whether by one's own hand or another's. (I do not understand why Mr Downing thinks it wrong to say: 'There is an intention to kill in every euthanasia'; it may not be an adequate account of euthanasia but it is manifestly correct as far as it goes.) There is no contradiction in having both a right not to be killed and a right to be killed. In England I have a right not to wear purple boots and a right to wear purple boots. It is only in very authoritarian societies that—as the man said of the Roman Church—everything is forbidden until it becomes compulsory. I seem to have the right to keep and the right to get rid of my personal possessions, and what is more personally my own than my own life?

It is just, I think, at this point that traditional morality enters its protest. It has been thought that killing always stands in need of *justification*, that we have, in fact, to show that it is the only available remedy for some colossal evil on a scale that exceeds individual human well-being. Here there is normally invoked the concept of the social order, the community that exists to ensure life and security to her members and upon which all of them depend. Thus it was thought reasonable to kill people if this was the only way to stop them destroying the social order—this was the justification offered for killing the soldiers of an unjust aggressor and it remains the justification for violent revolution when this is the only way to remove a ruling group which has begun systematically to destroy the lives and security of the citizens. By an extension of this, it was thought right to kill certain malefactors if there were clear evidence that this and only this would (by deterring other potential criminals) hold down the crime rate. This was the only rational justification for capital (or indeed any other) punishment. Traditionally it was thought unreasonable, because contradictory, to propose the killing of *innocent* people for the good of the social order, since the whole purpose of this order was to preserve the security of such people.

Clearly in this traditional view there is no room for the killing of the innocent and it is simply irrelevant to this theory whether the innocent victim is oneself or another.

For a great number of people, including Christians, these principles

based on securing innocent life have recently been replaced by a different set centred on the idea of violence. These people believe that it is wrong to do serious violence to any man, whatever activity he may be engaged in; they are thus pacifists and their objection to capital punishment is not simply that it is unnecessary and therefore unreasonable in our society, but that it is evil in itself because it is violent. These people would perhaps accept euthanasia on the grounds that it is a kind of self-killing and it may not be possible to do violence to yourself, just as you cannot cheat or rob yourself.

In the traditional view, life was a social reality; my individual life is in some respects part of, and dependent upon a larger and more important social order. It seems that we have moved away from this collectivist idea to seeing life in more personal, more individual terms; my life is now first of all my own. It is not difficult to see in this a reflection of the move from a collectivist feudal order in which the individual is subordinated to the social group, to the individualist bourgeois society. My life no longer means my sharing into the common existence of the group, it has become something like a commodity that I own. Just as I have now an absolute right to do what I like with my property, provided I do not infringe the similar rights of others, so I have, in principle an absolute right to dispose of my own life. This right would be limited, as property rights are, by the requirement that I do not harm, for example, my dependants; but supposing my death would do no harm to anyone then it seems obvious to the bourgeois way of thinking that I may reasonably kill myself if I want to.

To say bluntly, with St Thomas Aquinas, that society is of more value than the individual just as the whole is greater than the part, probably does not do justice to the mystery of human spontaneity and freedom. The exploration of the individual person carried on, for example, in the development of the novel, forbids us to accept any simple statement of a collectivist view. On the other hand we surely do violence of another kind to the mystery of human life if we regard it simply as a privately owned commodity. Nor does it seem a satisfactory solution to retain the commodity metaphor while transferring the ownership to God.

We need, in fact, a way of talking about the value of human life in which men are seen neither simply as fragments of a larger whole nor as autonomous individuals; and this is an urgent need. Our age is one of considerable concern for human suffering but outstanding unconcern for human life, one in which euthanasia, abortion and genocide have each seemed to some people reasonable and to everyone on occasion inevitable, one in which, at enormous trouble and expense we have constructed the machinery for wiping out the entire human race in a few hours. We cannot any longer afford to rely on a general feeling that life is a good thing; we very desperately need some hard new thinking about what it means to be humanly alive and why it matters.

H.McC.