

Personal View

In a world, girdled as it is with a network of communications systems, natural first impressions are hard to come by. Perhaps it doesn't matter, but I am thankful that I am old enough to have seen the slowly enlarging vision of the Battery from the deck of a Cunarder as it approached New York and not on a TV newflash. Some sights, the sea approach to Venice or the Piazza San Marco with its dreamlike quality, even familiarity dares not stale. Some sounds too, yet enviable is he who hears the music of Figaro for the first time at a live performance of the opera.

Lately I paid a first visit to Delphi, awesome, serene, majestic, and asked a question. Would I have felt the same sense of the numinous if my classical education, meagre as it was, had not conditioned my expectancy? From the oracle no answer came. Had it come I might not have understood words from a source renowned for the subtle ambiguities of its pronouncements. How different the latterday oracle, the media expert. His not to mess about but to pontificate. Shine the television lights on him, hang the microphone about his neck, dub him expert, and he throws circumspection to the winds. Even for a doctor, as familiarity grows so does temptation. Gently he slips into areas not strictly medical and yet, so complex are the issues, not strictly the province of any other profession.

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It is no surprise that he plays his expected part, yielding to the temptation to dogmatise. He belongs to a profession always set apart but recently armed by technology with new powers, frightening in their consequences, powers literally over life and death. Life support systems and organ transplants, giving a new meaning to survival, are in his hands. AIH, AID, and the culture of test-tube babies transform him from expectant midwife-obstetrician to creator. By the turn of a switch or the termination of a pregnancy he brings life to an end. Over these services he wields the power to grant or to withhold.

By what considerations does he reach his decisions? Is there science in it, logic, or justice? Or is the answer to be found by the exercise of conscience, that rudimentary relic of a bygone knowledge of good and evil, or by reference to some philosophy of life compounded of the doctor's personality and his beliefs with a dash of politics thrown in? In the event the answer is likely a pragmatic one personal to the patient and the doctor who review together all the circumstances that seem to be relevant at the time. The imperative is to save patients from pain and suffering, relatives from expense and physical and mental fatigue, and the State from the need to furnish expensive and elaborate services, without any reference to eternal values if indeed such there be. Viewed thus it is only the modern version of the doctor's ancient dilemma—can this be done? Ought it to be done in this case? Can we predict all the consequences and can we measure them?

The need for organs to transplant has focused attention on, to put it shockingly, the corpse to be raided for its parts. Committees have sought to define death in a way that would satisfy the law, the would-be generous donor and his family,

and what is equally important, though less easy to identify, the feelings of the general public. The recipient patient's wishes also need to be respected. We have a working answer to the question, what is death? We await, since we are ready with opinions about the quality of life, a committee answer to the complementary question, what is life?

Meanwhile, we seem as a society to accept that fetal life may be terminated by doctors more or less on request, provided that an acceptable formula of words can be agreed. Some room for argument remains. There is little argument when the mother's health, physical or psychological, is deemed to be at risk. There is none when the fetus is suspected of some congenital abnormality. Here is an example of the sublime illogicality of the human race. Once you are born you have the right to life and to call on science and the neonatologist to give you every aid there is with no regard for the expenditure of professional services, time, or money. But the pregnant woman has the right to ask for the death of her fetus if it might be abnormal (there is seldom absolute certainty). In this Year of Disabled People we do not mean to say in words to the congenitally disabled that we do not want the burden of their care in our society. Our deeds give a different message. It is not a logically defensible position but it is undeniably human. Years ago I asked at a paediatric meeting should we not avoid the danger to the pregnancy and to the fetus, the expense of the clinical and laboratory work entailed, and the certain sacrifice of some potentially normal babies by stopping our fetal screening programmes. We could await the study of the newborn baby. If then we did not like what we found, that would be the time for termination. My colleagues gasped in horror. Neither nurses nor doctors could execute so coldblooded a policy—unless in time the practice of these powers over life and death promoting the image of ourselves as, not healers, but creators and destroyers corrupt our judgment.

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I began with the thesis that modern technology may deprive us of the freshness of our impressions. To be fair it has been generous with new experiences. I am still childlike enough to enjoy the sight from an aeroplane at 10 000 feet of the minuscule world below. Thinking about power and this aerial landscape I am reminded that someone 2000 years ago took a man up into an exceeding high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world, and the glory of them. Do we discern in the gift of some of our present powers, and not all are medical, the hand of that same tempter? For while we may have sent the Devil packing, we still understand temptation. We cannot deny nor destroy technology's powers. We grow at every point in life more and more dependent on them. Where do we look for a code of conduct for their use? Is a time coming when roles are reversed, when we become slaves and technology master?

ALFRED WHITE FRANKLIN

London