Merciful Death

Gerald Larue


Derek Humphry, the doyen of the euthanasia movement and author of best-sellers Jean's Way and Final Exit, has written another powerful book dealing with the most controversial issue in present day medical ethics: changing the law on medical assistance in dying for the terminally ill.

"Individual freedom," Humphry asserts, "requires that all persons be allowed to control their own destiny, especially at life's end. Existing law does not permit this basic right" (p. 19). His concern is to produce "thoughtfully framed laws that will make physician aid-in-dying possible without fear of abuse or prosecution or stigma." To this end, Humphry examines the history of attempts to enact laws in the states of Washington and California. He critically examines and evaluates these efforts with regard to the ways in which the initiatives were worded, what promotional techniques were employed, why the initiatives failed and by what percentages. He suggests ways to improve the laws, and finally he produces "A Model Death With Dignity Act."

This important and readable little book is written in clear precise terms and is loaded with examples, including ethical guidelines for the prevention of abuse drawn from the Dutch experience. Indeed, the legal guidelines set up by the Parliament in the Netherlands are reprinted in full.

Surveys have demonstrated that a majority of American people today believe that, should their dying be painfully prolonged, they should be able to ask a physician to bring their lives to a dignified close. Humphry anticipates the day when such requests will be honored legally and compassionately. This cutting-edge book is required reading for those wishing to be up-to date and prepared for the time when this important issue is placed on the ballot.

Books in Brief

American Philosophic Naturalism in the Twentieth Century, edited by John Ryder (Amherst, N.Y.: Prometheus Books, 1995) 566 pp., cloth $34.95. The richness of this philosophical tradition is amply displayed in this collection of seminal articles by such stalwarts as John Dewey, George Santayana, W. V. Quine, Thelma Lavine, Paul Kurtz, and Roy Wood Sellars. Editor Ryder has a fine introduction on the many meanings of "naturalism" and the role it has played in American thought.—Timothy J. Madigan

Without Miracles: Universal Selection Theory and the Second Darwinian Revolution, by Gary Cziko (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1995) 385 pp., cloth $30.00. Gary Cziko, an educational psychologist, critically examines different interpretations of evolution. His own mechanistic and naturalistic perspective rejects outright miracles, innatism, teleology, and natural theology. For the philosophical naturalist committed to materialism supported by the empirical sciences and rational thought, Without Miracles is a strictly Darwinian presentation that balances the current attack on evolution.

—H. James Birx

Entities: Angels, Spirits, Demons, and Other Alien Beings, by Joe Nickell (Amherst: Prometheus Books, 1995) 297 pp., cloth $24.95. Nickell, whose 1978 de-shrouding of the Turin cloth made history, now takes up the controversial claims of people who report having experienced guardian angels, demonic spirits, and extraterrestrial visitors. Like a detective, he looks into ghostly habitations, poltergeist disturbances, attacks by devils or demons or witches, Marian apparitions, spiritualism, séances, near-death experiences, alien creatures, ancient astronauts, crashed saucers, wee folk, and all such subjects that intrigue makers of horror movies. It is not surprising that Nickell was unable to substantiate any of the various claims, but he does provide lucid explanations as to why people claim they have come into contact with such entities.

A Celebration of Humanism and Freethought, by David Allen Williams (Amherst: Prometheus Books, 1995) 302 pp., cloth $29.95. Williams, a Utah writer and world-traveler, combines several hundred artistic illustrations with appropriate observations from humanist sources. Under authoritarian or dogmatic regimes, he shows, such humanistic creations could never have been possible. Included are some rare steel engravings in what admittedly is an unusual collection.


—Warren Allen Smith