

27) "Common Sense Suicide: The Final Right" by Doris Fortwood (Los Angeles: Hemlock Society; New York: Grove Press, 1933, \$8.00). Reviewed by Marvin Kohl.

The Rationality of Suicide.

Ms. Fortwood has written a readable and most useful introduction to the problem of voluntary death. She provides valuable information about suicide and the law, and a rather delicious chapter on the so-called religious taboo. She correctly reminds us that the decision we make in choosing death is ours to make, that we give up our autonomy too easily when we become old and weak, and that it is time to talk and know more about the phenomenon of suicide.

Ms. Fortwood presents a largely personal philosophic point of view and does so with great charm. Moreover, her advocacy of suicide as a rational method of problem-solving is well-intended, often lovingly done. The question is whether good intentions are enough. Russell, as most of us know, maintained that "Neither love without knowledge, nor knowledge without love can produce a good life." The same, I believe, is true of a satisfactory suicide policy. When it comes to vital life decisions, love must be supported by the best knowledge available. And what does this knowledge indicate? The best evidence indicates that suicide is sometimes rational, but most often not; that most acts of suicide are not the rational solution. Typical adolescent suicide and cases of the chronically depressed in which external conditions do not seem to warrant self-judgment of death are perhaps the best examples.

Let us, nevertheless, recognize the rationality of some acts of suicide. Let us say that a society that refuses to allow its members to exit when their lives are irreparably blasted by the infirmities of existence is neither a just nor a benevolent society. There is, however, another side of the coin. Having reasons is not sufficient. What is needed are good reasons, reasons or evidence which will adequately show that the act in question is the preferable means of problem solving, the best means of protecting the interests of the individual in question. By all this I mean to stress not the motive but the resulting act. I mean to stress the need to reasonably know, and not merely believe, that the act in question is the preferable solution.

A further emendation should be mentioned. It is not sufficient to say, as Fortwood does, that suicide must neither be raised to the heroic stature it enjoyed under the Romans, nor be embraced with the frantic delight of the primitive Christians. A more adequate description of the problem would have added that there is a vital difference between those who threaten or attempt suicide as a cry for help and those who want to exit from life because they feel helpless or hopeless and have reasonable evidence that their life is irrevocably meaningless. More important, a life that is, in balance, unhappy is not necessarily an empty life. It still may possess opportunity for great moments of satisfaction. So that exiting from an unhappy life is one thing, exiting from an irrevocably meaningless existence another.

Of course, it is true that it is possible for a sane or non-chronically depressed person, thinking logically, to set off the intolerable aspects of his or her life against the chances for betterment and find the result weighted on the side of death. Indeed, some kind of rational calculation is often possible and always desirable. But why a simple balance sheet? Why say, as Fortwood does (pp. 34-35), that a slight tipping of the scales is sufficient? Is the choice of death sufficiently like buying a garment, where other things being equal, the color determines the choice? I think not. Existence is not always a good. Bare biological life is neither the primary good nor death the greatest evil. But if we follow the logic of Fortwood's argument, then we seem to be committed to encouraging most or at least too many human beings to commit suicide. For if one should choose death when life merely tips to unhappiness, and if most human beings have lives which are, in balance, unhappy, then it appears to follow that most human beings should end their lives.