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**LETTERS**

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**"Life & Death in The U.S.A."**

MELVIN MADDOCKS' cynical sketch (ENCOUNTER, December) of the surge of American interest in the phenomenon of death and dying is cleverly, often brilliantly done. But, as with most forms of cynicism, wit is achieved at the price of over-simplification.

Contrary to what Maddocks suggests today's "veritable babble" about death is not merely a frantic game of cultural catch-up being played by the descendants of Babbitt. Rather it is part of a widespread unrest and increasing dissatisfaction with the way society treats its more unfortunate members. It is part of a movement to make American society second to none in the application of human rights and social justice. It is true, of course, that this movement is often commercially exploited. What this reflects is not the underlying motives of most Americans, but the defects (perhaps only the extremes) of the capitalistic system.

*The Humanist's* "A Plea for Beneficent Euthanasia" (July-August 1974), which I had the privilege of co-authoring, is neither a rehearsal of an old credo nor is the title a redundancy. "Euthanasia" is "the allowance or inducement of a relatively painless quick death." On the other hand, an act is an act of beneficent euthanasia only if it is the allowance or inducement of a relatively painless quick death, the intention and actual circumstances of which are the kindest possible treatment of an unfortunate individual. These definitions have the merit of not begging the moral question by the use of persuasive rhetoric, and allowing us to identify and adamantly oppose non-beneficent varieties of euthanasia like that, for example, practised by the Nazis.

The "Plea" is new in at least one important sense. It does not advocate the legalisation of beneficent euthanasia. What it does urge is the legalisation of beneficent euthanasia in cases where the patient gives free and fully informed consent and where he or she is suffering from an incurable disease or accident in its terminal stage. Hopefully even conservatives like Maddock can agree, *first*, that when human beings are terminally afflicted they ought to have the legal right to die (where possible), how, when, and (to the extent the request is reasonable) where they choose to; *second*, that to compel those who are terminally ill (especially those who, because of irreparable organic damage, have come to despise their present existence) to live, is patently cruel, if not barbaric.

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I CAN UNDERSTAND why Dr Kohl, from his point of view, found my approach cynical, though I regret that. Like most people accused of cynicism, I prefer the word scepticism. Nobody but a fool would be cynical about death.

In any case, my scepticism (or cynicism) scarcely could lead to "oversimplification", as Dr Kohl goes on to suggest. Distress over the simplifications of others is what, in part, prompted the piece; and Dr Kohl's letter does nothing to dispel my apprehension. He speaks with (to me) rather terrifying over-simplification of "incurable", "terminal", "irreparable" stages of dying. There never appear to be border lines in these dramas—always the vegetable with tubes or the mindless bag of bones rocking on the nursing-home porch. Where are all the marginal cases? To paraphrase a Boston doctor: "I'm not sure whom I'd trust to pull my plug if the hospital needed another bed. . . ."

Still, if the pain of dying were simply a catastrophe to the flesh, everybody could be reduced, as Dr Kohl tends to see it, to liberals vs. conservatives (whatever the terms mean here); and then the details of going-over might be arbitrated through practical compromises and small mercies. But this, in my view, is the fundamental oversimplification. Surely the point is that a great deal of the suffering about death occurs before the actual business of dying. Mortality is a life-long crisis—an intolerable insult to the spirit as well as the body—or else all religions and most artists have been badly mistaken. This remains my prejudice: despite his evident kindness and goodwill, Dr Kohl and those who approach the mystery of death in a mood of problem-solving commonsense are doomed to misconstrue the Enemy even more than the rest of us. Pain must be dealt with—who's disagreeing?—but they only prescribe anaesthesia as the cure for the disease.

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