

## The Linacre Quarterly

---

Volume 48 | Number 3

Article 13

---

8-1-1981

### [Book Review of] *Bioethics and the Limits of Science*, by Sean O'Reilly

William B. Smith

Follow this and additional works at: <http://epublications.marquette.edu/lnq>

 Part of the [Ethics and Political Philosophy Commons](#), and the [Medicine and Health Sciences Commons](#)

---

#### Recommended Citation

Smith, William B. (1981) "[Book Review of] *Bioethics and the Limits of Science*, by Sean O'Reilly," *The Linacre Quarterly*: Vol. 48: No. 3, Article 13.

Available at: <http://epublications.marquette.edu/lnq/vol48/iss3/13>

The reader will find *How Brave a New World* profitable reading. He or she will also find that although the author relates the problems he discusses to Catholic tradition and teaching, he does not always follow the one or the other.

— John Connery, S.J.  
Jesuit Community  
Georgetown University

## *Bioethics and the Limits of Science*

Sean O'Reilly

*Christendom Publications, Front Royal, Va., 1980, 174 pp.*

This is a very useful and informative book. My only quibble would be that the title and subtitle should be reversed: *The Limits of Science (in) Bioethics*.

The large question of bioethics — life and its definition, death and its definition — are examined in close detail. There is also an appendix on in vitro fertilization (pp. 160-169). A host of other proposals and applications in contemporary bioethical discussions is not taken up. I do not mention that as a criticism because the notion of science, scientific method and the limits of both are examined in detail and that kind of disciplined reflection should precede highly detailed proposals and applications and it usually does not in popular reporting and contemporary discussions.

The book is 10 concise chapters, basically of two parts. Dr. O'Reilly first defines the terms of discourse (ch. 1). Many like to contrast so-called "exact" or "hard" sciences with "soft" or "imprecise" science so it comes as a surprise that scientific data are always inexact, measurements are approximate, and generalizations known as laws are all approximations. Heisenberg's "uncertainty principle" means even the most precise descriptions of nature must be in terms of probabilities. Faith, order, value, these are all carefully defined as is increasing entropy.

Chapter 2 outlines scientific achievement but notes as well the "law of limits" which does not detract from real scientific achievement but is an honest recognition of limitation.

Next come "What is Life?" (ch. 3) and "The Origin of Life" (ch. 4). The first explains, in digestible form, factors and terms that have entered common speech (e.g., DNA, RNA) but are not widely or really understood.

The chapter on "The Origin of Life" is, perhaps, the most tightly reasoned in the book. O'Reilly poses devastating scientific questions to any theory of "uniformitarian evolutionism." Is creationism a scientific theory? No, not in the sense that science is now defined. Creationism, like evolution, can neither be proved nor disproved by scientific method, but unlike evolution it can be shown that the creation model fits all that science has discovered about matter. If Jerry Falwell's people digest this chapter, there will be no stopping them!

"The Facts of Life" (ch. 5) presents an airtight biological case that individual human life begins at conception.

"The Facts of Death" (ch. 6) helps detoxify some slogans in current use along with a close scrutiny of the concept of "brain death." The determination of death in the vast majority of clinical cases is certain, "but we must emphasize that no

one test, whether clinical or laboratory, suffices" (p. 94). And that medical judgment is best made usually by the patient's attending physician.

The book's second half (ch. 7 and on) concerns ethics itself, its foundations and presuppositions. O'Reilly argues well that bioethics is not a normative science. So where derive its norms? He does not hold for a valid rational ethics apart from the integral vision of man provided by God's Revelation. He critiques (ch. 8) false humanism and faulty ethical systems quite thoroughly. And in outlining true humanism and Christian ethics (ch. 9) he provides an especially clear explanation of the classic "sources of morality" (object-circumstances-end, pp. 129-134) in a chapter that amounts to a blitz review of fundamental moral theology.

The final chapter (10) reviews the authority of the Church in ethics and ethical decisions, particularly authoritative moral teaching post-Vatican II and post-*Humanae Vitae*. In fact, the argument here is more ecclesiological than ethical, but that only fits the post-Vatican II, post-*Humanae Vitae* facts which controversies have been more about the nature of the Church and her teaching than about the pros and cons of specific moral questions.

In summation, O'Reilly succeeds in his first stated purpose — to present the nature of modern science, its method, achievements and limitations. He does this in clearly written, logically coherent and very informative accounts of modern physics and biology.

On ethical theory and its presuppositions, he stresses an objective moral order, ultimately dependent on God, that man can come to know. Given human fallibility, God has given Revelation and the Church as the certain guide for living rightly. In moving from that objective moral order (open to reason) to the need for authoritative Revelation, some Catholic ethicists and moralists might think O'Reilly moves too quickly.

Followers of von Hildebrand will easily follow with O'Reilly, but other Thomists (especially recent ones) will like to see a larger role for "right reason" grounded in St. Thomas's natural law theory.

The book is instructive and it does inform the reader both in scientific information and ethical theory. As at the start, the big questions of "life and death" are treated superbly, as are the nature of modern science, its method and limitations. Several current "hot items" in bioethics are not treated directly, but such specifics can only be considered intelligently when the big basic presuppositions have been defined, delineated and digested. This volume does that first work well.

— Rev. William B. Smith, S.T.D.  
Professor of Moral Theology  
St. Joseph's Seminary  
Dunwoodie

---

## *Infanticide and the Value of Life*

Marvin Kohl, Editor

*Prometheus Books, Buffalo, N.Y., 1978.*

As an example of the kinds of arguments offered by those who favor infanticide for some defective newborns, this book is a very useful compendium. It also ought to be very useful to those who deplore infanticide, for in general, the essays are notable only for their lapses in argument, their evasion of central issues and their vague and inapplicable criteria for deciding which infants shall die. The 17