

Editorial: Life and Death Sciences

'The free man thinks of nothing less than of death.' In recent decades Spinoza's remark about the philosopher has been true in a sense in which he did not intend it. The situation is now being remedied in several quarters, and not least by an important development in the United States. The Institute of Society, Ethics and the Life Sciences was established in 1969 after a series of preliminary meetings between scholars and researchers with a special interest in the life sciences. The Fellows and Associates of the Institute include lawyers, psychoanalysts, theologians, philosophers and moralists as well as specialists in the biological and social sciences. At the Hastings Center, Hastings-on-Hudson, N.Y., there is a small permanent staff and numerous others who work full time for specific periods as research fellows or interns. Colloquia and conferences enlist a still greater number and a still wider range of specialist scholars and thinkers.

The life sciences also deal with death. One of the most interesting and valuable contributions to *The Hastings Center Studies* is a 'Dialogue on Death' in the May 1974 issue, in which Professor Paul Ramsey writes on 'The Indignity of "Death with Dignity"' and is answered by Professor Robert S. Morrison and Dr Leon R. Kass. 'Death with Dignity' has become something of a slogan with the euthanasia lobby in the United States. Professor Ramsey questions on moral and religious grounds whether those who speak in this way can be said to understand either death or dignity. The debate will be of interest to any reader of *Philosophy* who shares Dr Kass's conviction that there may be a *truth* about these questions and that we 'implicitly, even if unwittingly' recognize this 'when we engage in serious discussion about this or any subject'.

The seriousness and value of the work of the Institute and the Center is not in doubt. It is not confined to philosophical and moral discussion, useful though its publications are on these issues. It is also engaged in research and in sustained and concrete discussion of a wide variety of questions that call for a blend of specialist and technical knowledge with logical acuteness, humanity and common sense: psycho-surgery, experiments on prisoners, 'test-tube babies', organ transplantation. These are a small and random sample of the topics dealt with in the *Studies* and *Reports* which have so far appeared. In future the two publications are to be combined under the title of *Hastings Center Report*. The journal deserves the attention and support of scientists, philosophers and all members of the educated public who recognize that the treatment of a social or moral problem may call for technical knowledge and may still allow and require the application of the wider resources of the human reason.