Carrick, P. (1985). Medical ethics in antiquity: Philosophical perspectives on abortion and euthanasia. Dordrecht, Holland: D. Reidel Publishing (Pallas pb).

Review by Jack Yates, 2008

This book, by a professor of philosophy, presents and discusses the medical ethics of classical Greece and its Roman derivatives, quoting especially from Hippocrates (469-399 BC), the "Hippocratic authors" (fifth through second centuries BC), Plato (429-347 BC), Aristotle (384-322 BC), Seneca (94 BC-65 AD), and Galen (129-199 AD).

The earliest extant statements of medical ethics came in the Code of Hamurabi (1727 BC), which detailed state regulation, licensure, and penalties for physicians. Around 1500 BC, codes in Persia and Assyria defined abortion as murder. Carrick's book, surprisingly, does not include any mention of the ethics of the Books of Moses in its pre-Classical background. The background of Greek social patterns and thought of the Fifth Century BC are presented as the first of three parts of the book, then Carrick goes on to Hippocrates and his Oath.

Apparently euthanasia (and suicide) was widely accepted in Classical Greece, and abortion almost universally accepted and often practiced. The Hippocratic Oath was, then, not a mainstream position but a radical position for its time and place, probably formulated and sworn by members of a sect which followed the ideals of Pythagoras (580-497 BC). The Pythagorean Brotherhoods (yes, the same Pythagoras who discovered the geometric theorem on right triangles) believed that each human soul is a fallen divinity, whose body is a temporary tomb from which it can win release by the study of (and living by) philosophy and mathematics. They derived from this belief a prohibition against the killing of humans or animals, and defined human life as beginning at the moment of conception. These positions were non-consequentialist, derived strictly from principle.

The Pythagorean or Hippocratic Oath position is compared in detail by Carrick to the positions of Plato, Aristotle, and Seneca. Plato favored widespread abortion for economic and eugenic reasons of state, proposing in the Republic state-enforced abortion of illegitimate children and state-enforced infanticide of "unfit" babies. Aristotle favored abortion to control family size and population, but only before the baby has reached around 40 days gestation. Plato favored suicide in cases of chronic disease; Aristotle opposed it as lacking in courage, but did not define it as morally wrong. The Roman Stoic philosopher Seneca admired and glorified suicide as a demonstration of freedom and total self-control (a position similar to the current promotion of suicide by Derek Humphries and others).

How, then, was Hippocrates later venerated, and his Oath adopted, since his views were not shared by most physicians nor philosophers in his time, nor was his Oath even mentioned in any of the medical literature of his time? Imperial Rome (beginning first century BC) venerated fifth century Greece as the Golden Age, and the leading Roman physician Galen named Hippocrates as its leading physician. The Library of Alexandria attributed dozens of medical treatises to Hippocrates, although it is quite certain that they had multiple authors, largely later than Hippocrates. And the Hippocratic Oath (whose author is not at all certain) turned out to be congruent with the ethics taught by the early Christian Church Fathers, so the Oath came to be used more and more beginning in the second century AD. Abortion was prohibited by the (Christian) Council of Elvira in 305 AD, and by the end of the fourth century AD, Christian ethics were the new social consensus and the Hippocratic Oath was required of all physicians.

(note for possible revision to the Sanctity of Life Workshop script: it seems that the consensus of Western medical ethics on the prohibition of abortion and euthanasia, expressed in the Hippocratic Oath, did not run for 2300 years but closer to 1700 years)

Students of medical ethics might find interesting a few notes from various portions of Carrick's book. The common practice of "exposure" of infants in classical Greece and elsewhere was not necessarily a form of infanticide: the baby might die, might be picked up to be raised by adoptive parents, or might be picked up to the raised for slavery or prostitution. The term "euthanasia" in Classical Greece "primarily involved a favorable appraisal of the subject's state of mind, not the means by which death came." So it was a psychological, not moral, category. Similarly, in Classical Greece (and in Imperial Rome), suicide was thought of as a mode of dying, not as an act of killing (in contrast to Christian thinking). Suicide and euthanasia were therefore seen as a part of the ethics of *eudaimoneia* (good spirit), subjective and psychological, rather than as right or wrong in principle. The same contrast is seen in the two Latin-derived terms: suicide (self-killing, used by the Christians) and *mors voluntaria* (voluntary death, used by the Stoics). Much of Classical Greek ethics (in contrast to the Hippocratic Oath) was based on proportion, measure, order, and aesthetics, not on a concept of moral law.

So the major point of the history recounted by Carrick is that the Hippocratic Oath was a small-minority position from the time of its formulation to the achievement of Christian consensus over six hundred years later. The Pythagorean principles of a "rigorous, unitary, and unconditional … respect for life ethic" were the exception in a climate of diversity and plurality in ethics.

Carrick sees that diversity in ethics as “epitomizing the dynamism and strength of the Greek mind.” He would presumably be pleased that we again find ourselves in such a state of diversity (and implicit relativity) of ethics. The book’s forward, by Joseph Margolis, says, “Our orientation must be perennially refashioned and refitted to the features of every changing time.” Carrick, in his epilogue, proposes that “new dilemmas abound” in medical ethics, which again is the result of his thinking historically and relatively rather than reasoning from principles. Our Moral Coherency and Sanctity of Life Workshops would disagree with Margolis and Carrick in these views. Carrick closes by noting that the Hippocratic Oath is today seldom sworn and never studied, but that he believes it has continuing relevance as a spur to our thinking and practice.