

Editorial: Morals and Medicine

There is a simple proof that administration cannot be done well, and ought not to be attempted. An administrator is either a scientist or he is not a scientist. If he is not a scientist he is unfit to do administration. If he is a scientist he ought to be doing something more important than administration.

This view is held with special conviction by some medical scientists. The arrogance that is rebuked by Professor Grant in this issue is an extreme form of a reaction to which any man is liable who combines the authority of the natural scientist with the authority of the physician. The only remedy is an awareness of the distinctions between questions which do and questions which do not allow of authoritative and expert answers. It is clear to everybody that euthanasia, abortion and contraception are moral issues first and foremost, and hence that they concern us all. Nobody would deny that questions about the physical effects of smoking or thalidomide are primarily questions for informed medical opinion. There are indefinitely many intermediate and mixed problems on which most laymen feel inhibited by their lack of professional knowledge and some doctors not sufficiently inhibited by their lack of common sense, humility or humanity.

Many of the difficulties that arise from these confusions are matters for the citizen and his elected representatives with experts giving evidence and not making decisions. This applies above all to the establishment of priorities in expenditure and in the allocation of scarce resources. There are some issues whose analysis calls for more than the common sense and practical experience of the man in the street or the man from the Ministry. It is to be hoped that an increasing number of philosophers will follow the path taken by Professor Grant and apply their own expertise—chiefly their training in distinguishing one question and one kind of question from another—to some of the other issues that urgently call for such elucidation: organ transplantation, homosexuality, euthanasia and genetic engineering.

Philosophers are as liable as other specialists to exaggerate the scope and value of their techniques. But at least they are professionally conscious of the danger, and on issues of such public interest and importance any errors they may make are unlikely to go unchecked.