

spent an estimated \$1.7 billion on television ads, more than twice what they spent in 1998. The “direct-to-consumer” advertising “has paid off handsomely” for the drug firms, says Belkin. Pfizer, for instance, “upped consumer advertising for its cholesterol drug, Lipitor, by more than \$45 million in 1999, and sales of the drug jumped too—56 percent, to \$2.7 billion.”

Proponents of the liberalized FDA policy contend that “it creates a more informed patient because viewers see the ads, then have an intelligent give-and-take with a doctor,” says Belkin. Critics, however, maintain that the ads encourage patients “to seek out expensive, potentially dangerous drugs that they—and too often their doctors—know lit-

tle about.” Sales of Celebrex, an arthritis drug, reached \$1 billion even before the final clinical-trial results were published in a peer-reviewed journal.

“Patients can be difficult to dissuade,” one physician told Belkin. It complicates the doctor-patient relationship, he added, when the patients start directing the treatment “based on what they learned on TV.” A further complication, notes Belkin: Some impressionable TV viewers don’t even bother to see a doctor before obtaining the advertised drugs from “the growing number of Web sites that sell prescription medications without a doctor visit.” The FDA is scheduled to review its new approach to TV ads this summer.

RELIGION & PHILOSOPHY

The New Clergy

“Avoiding Moral Choices” by Gordon Marino, in *Commonweal* (Mar. 23, 2001), 475 Riverside Dr., Rm. 405, New York, N.Y. 10115.

About 30 years ago, a stranger began to appear at the bedside of the sick: the bioethicist. Today, America swarms with ethics experts, thousands of them, dispensing their putative wisdom not only in medicine but in business, law, engineering, sports, and other fields. But do these secular specialists really know much more than the rest of us about right and wrong? Marino, a professor of philosophy at St. Olaf College in Northfield, Minnesota, is doubtful.

Most professional ethicists are lawyers or doctors of philosophy who have studied ethical theory and its application to concrete situations in the professions. They “may have extraordinary acumen in the dissection of moral problems,” Marino acknowledges. But their moral reasoning, just like that of nonexperts, “is based on assumptions that, in the end, cannot be justified against competing assumptions.” Ultimately, “we are all flying by the seat of our moral pants.”

Given even a common, straightforward problem, ethics experts often disagree, he points out. In a *Journal of Clinical Ethics* study, 144 ethicists were asked whether life support should be removed from a

patient in a vegetative state. Their answers were “all over the board,” Marino says. So how expert can they really be? Many ethicists would respond that certain other fields, such as economics, also are rife with disagreement. But at least economic theories generate predictions, Marino observes, which then “either confirm or deny the theories. It is hard to fathom what consequences would confirm a bioethicist’s recommendations for stem-cell research.”

One thing that ethicists do agree upon is that they should be relatively disinterested parties with respect to the issues and cases they handle. But instead, Marino asserts, they “are often in the pockets of the hospitals and corporations that employ them.” The market for ethicists is small, he notes, and ethics consultants who continually arrive at inconvenient conclusions may find their career prospects limited.

Though in many cases their advice is no more than common sense, professional ethicists “have done some good,” Marino believes. “In the medical field, [they] have made sure that people undergoing surgery or participating in experiments give their

informed consent,” and most businesses that employ ethicists “are, ethically speaking, better off for their presence.”

Nevertheless, Marino warns, the rise of the ethicists as “the new clergy” poses this dan-

ger: that the rest of us, taking the easy way out, will avoid moral decisions and issues on the excuse that they are too complicated and best left to the “experts.” Unfortunately, he says, there aren’t any.

The Chastened Liberal

“Bertrand de Jouvenel’s Melancholy Liberalism” by Brian C. Anderson, in *The Public Interest* (Spring 2001), 1112 16th St., N.W., Ste. 530, Washington, D.C. 20036.

Many of today’s enthusiasts for liberal democracy overlook its serious weaknesses. A neglected French thinker named Bertrand de Jouvenel (1903–87) knew better. “[His] melancholy liberalism has a lot to teach us,” writes Anderson, a senior editor of *City Journal*.

Born into an aristocratic French family and educated at the Sorbonne, Jouvenel saw the rise of totalitarianism firsthand. A radical socialist in his twenties, he then swung to the other extreme, but rapidly became disillusioned with it, too. As a journalist in the 1930s, he interviewed Mussolini and Hitler at length, and witnessed the Austrian Anschluss and the Nazi invasion of Czechoslovakia. Jouvenel joined the French Resistance, eventually fleeing to Switzerland with the Gestapo on his heels. By then, Anderson says, he was “the full-fledged anti-totalitarian liberal that he remained for the rest of his life.”

In exile as the war raged, Jouvenel wrote his first major work of political philosophy, *On Power: The Natural History of Its Growth*, examining how the modern state—even in contemporary liberal democratic societies—had become dangerous to liberty. Outside of small communities, the doctrine of popular sovereignty, if taken literally, is absurd, he argued, since the people themselves cannot actually govern. And whoever governs in their name can invoke the doctrine to justify almost anything, from the rounding up of political foes to the bombing of civilians. The notion of popular sovereignty also burdens the state with a host of new responsibilities, all supposedly to secure the people’s well-being. By making right and wrong a matter for each individual to determine, moreover, popular sovereignty unleashes a moral relativism that inevitably leads to

social disorder and to demands that the state suppress it.

“Despite its excessive pessimism,” writes Anderson, “*On Power* stands as a permanent warning to the citizens and statesmen of liberal democratic regimes that their freedom is difficult to sustain, for reasons inseparable from the logic of their own principles.” And later, particularly in his 1957 masterpiece *Sovereignty: An Inquiry into the Political Good*, Jouvenel developed “a more constructive political science,” which viewed liberal constitutionalism more positively.

In *Sovereignty* and other writings, he offered “a dynamic and political conception of the common good” that was more than just the sum of individual goods. Jouvenel was not a libertarian, wishing to do away with politics; neither was he an “armchair communitarian,” eager to restore the ancient Greek polis. For Jouvenel, says Anderson, the moral task of the modern democratic state “is to create the conditions that let ‘social friendship’—a common good compatible with the goods and freedoms of modernity—blossom. . . . To nurture this mutual trust is the essence of the art of politics.” Balancing innovation and conservation, the liberal statesman must do “everything possible to help a culture of ordered liberty prosper short of imposing a state truth.” This includes regulating “‘noxious activities’” and deflating “hopes for a permanent solution to the political problem.”

Liberal democracies can achieve genuine human goods, Jouvenel believed, but politics is seldom guided by the light of reason. Fragile liberal democracies, notes Anderson, “must remain on guard, lest their many weaknesses—from the erosion of personal responsibility, to their tendency toward collectivism, to the abiding hope for final solutions—make dust of these goods.”