Some critiques take the form of smoldering reflections, others are explosive provocations. This book is the latter. Its author, Jeffrey Bishop, is exquisitely placed to offer the critique. He is simultaneously a medical doctor, an ethicist, and a philosopher. He heads the Albert Gnaegi Center of Health Care Ethics at Saint Louis University. His winsome personality should not disguise the radical nature of his critique.

Contemporary medical education, the author maintains, perpetuates the culture of the corpse, the culture of death. “It is not odd that [medical students’] first patient is dead, literally a patient beneath the dissecting knife . . . So the medical study of life originates with a decontextualized dead body; the body of the dead cadaver represents the bodies of the living . . . The great paradox in all of this, and the subject of this book, is that death serves as the cultural and political motivator for medicine. Indeed, one come claim that medicine—Western medicine, at least—is founded in a dream as old as humanity itself: to defer death” (14-17).

In medicine, “the dead body is the epistemologically normative body, and medicine’s metaphysics is one dominated by efficient causation—the animation of dead matter” (23). Thus, the author’s thesis is that “medicine has pulled the dead body out of community, stripped it of its communal significance, and found the ground of its knowledge in the dead, decontextualized, and ahistorical body” (27). The remainder of the book traces the implications of this thesis for truly human medicine.

Bishop subjects medicine to a deep analysis through Foucault’s, Birth of the Clinic, as the lens. In the evolution of medicine, diseases, claims Foucault, were defined independently from the body in which they were found. Over time, a new
priesthood emerged as physicians donned their own vestments, occupied their sacred place at the bedside, all of this taking place in the sanctuary of the clinic. Medicine gained new powers in the emerging biopolitical context.

Consequently, these epistemological and metaphysical shifts have reshaped the way we think about the role of medicine in the care for the dying, according to Bishop. Today, patients are the sovereign choosers and physicians have become the mediators who employ medicine’s techniques and technologies to prolong life indefinitely. “On this logic, a death is a good death only if it’s chosen” (280). To complicate matters further, dichotomies dominate: vitalism on the one hand, or radical individualism on the other. “For social conservatives, bare life is deserving of the good life; for social liberals, the possibility of the good life is the condition for deserving bare life” (282). “A good death can only be known as good if it can be assessed by those who know death, who have measured it, and who have seen it deep within the dead body—and within the living body. Medicine cannot let the dying be” (284).

Bishop does not end his lament in pessimism. His final chapter, “Anticipating Life,” modestly offers a radical proposal for reforming medicine. Bishop argues for what he calls an embodied holism in medicine, where patients and their bodies are not dissected from their lives, communities, projects, health, or illness. He calls all of us—physician or not—to rehabilitate the theology of “being-there-with-others and suffering-there-with.” The entailments of doing so would profoundly change the way we care for the dying.

As has been said, this is a provocative and very important volume. It is beautifully written, carefully argued, and ably supported by endnotes, bibliography, and index. Because of its profundity, it is slow going in places. Bishop’s philosophical analysis is not easy, but it is brilliant. Having said that, there is enough light in the non-philosophical portions of the book to illumine everyone. Physicians, nurses, pharmacists, and other caregivers should read this volume. But so should pastors, chaplains, clinical
social workers. Its greatest benefits might be discovered in an interdisciplinary discussion where a community could reimagine a truly human view of death and dying.

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