

PRIMER ON BIOETHICS: Part I of II**William E. May, Ph.D., Senior Fellow****June 16, 2009**

The term “bioethics” is of recent coinage. The first to use it was Van Rensselaer of the University of Wisconsin in the late 1960’s, an oncologist who used it in an evolutionary sense somewhat distant from the sense it has acquired. Warren T. Reich, one of the original professors at what was then called the “The Joseph and Rose Kennedy Institute for the Study of Human Reproduction and Bioethics” at Georgetown University and editor of the first edition of the 4 volume *Encyclopedia of Bioethics*, credits André Hellegers, the Dutch obstetrician/fetal physiologist/demographer who founded the Kennedy Institute at Georgetown University as the one “who used the term to apply to the ethics of medicine and the biological sciences in such a way that the name caught on in academic circles and in the mind of the public. He did this initially by seeing to it that the word bioethics appeared in the original name of the Kennedy Institute at its founding in 1971: The Joseph and Rose Kennedy Institute for the Study of Human Reproduction and Bioethics” (see Reich’s essay, “How Bioethics Got Its Name” in *The Hastings Center Report*, Vol. 23, 1993).

Although the name is new, the reality is that for centuries there has been an ethical/moral discipline known as “medical ethics,” with a rich tradition in the Catholic Church and also in medieval Jewish and Islamic cultures. What is even more important is the fact that the normative principles and norms of the natural law, especially the natural law as “fulfilled” and perfected by the “new law” of the Gospel, are those that enable persons of upright conscience to make good moral judgments and choices regarding the issues debated among contemporary bioethicists.

Procedure

I will proceed by summarizing in this essay the key truth at the heart of a bioethics that fully respects the dignity of every living member of the human species as a *person* made in the image and likeness of the Triune God and contrasting this truth with the dualistic anthropology claiming that not all members of the human species are persons but only some, namely, those with exercisable cognitive abilities or the minimal capacity for consciousness and communication with other conscious selves. In a second essay I will show how this key truth about every living human being bears on the hotly debated bioethical issues of our day: the generation of human life; the use of human embryonic stem cells for therapeutic or reproductive purposes; contraception; abortion; use of human subjects for experimental treatments; care of the dying and euthanasia; determination of death and use of organs from the deceased for transplantation.

The major truth about the dignity of every living member of the human species as a person made in the image and likeness of the Triune God can be summarized as



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follows: "Every living human body is a person" precisely because living human bodies are living and human because they are animated by a spiritual soul. This great truth is denied by the dualistic anthropology described above.

Pope John Paul II's Witness to this Truth

John Paul II vehemently rejected a dualistic anthropology in his great Encyclical of 1993, *Veritatis splendor*. In it he faced head-on the charge, commonly made by revisionist theologians, that the Magisterium's understanding of natural law is "physicalistic" or "biologistic" (n. 47). He declares that this claim "does not correspond to the truth about man and his freedom," and that it "contradicts the Church's teachings on the unity of the human person," who, "in the unity of body and soul...is the subject of his own moral acts" (n. 48). Since the definitive teaching of the Church (cf. Council of Vienne, const. *Fidei Catholicae*, Fifth Lateran Council, papal bull *Apostolici Regiminis*, and Vatican Council II, *Gaudium et spes*, n. 14) maintains that the human person "entails a particular spiritual and bodily structure," it follows that "the primordial moral requirement of loving and respecting the person as an end and never as a mere means also implies, by its very nature, respect for certain fundamental goods" (n. 48), goods such as bodily life and marital communion (cf. n. 13).

Here John Paul II clearly affirms that the human body is integral to the human person who is a unitary being composed of *body and soul is defined teaching of the Church* and thus has been infallibly proposed by the magisterium.

He explicitly repudiated as "*contrary to the teaching of Scripture and Tradition*" (n. 49) the view of those who "reduce the human person to a 'spiritual' and purely formal freedom" and thus misunderstand the moral meaning of the body and human acts involving it. Likening this view to "certain ancient errors...always...opposed by the Church" (e.g., dualistic Manicheism), he then appealed to the teaching of Paul in 1 Cor 6.9-19 on the gravity of such sins as fornication and adultery and to the teaching of the Council of Trent which "lists as 'mortal sins' or 'immoral practices' certain specific kinds of behavior the willful acceptance of which prevents believers from sharing in the inheritance promised to them" (n. 49).

Another remarkable witness to John Paul II's vigorous presentation of the preciousness of human bodily life and the truth that the human body is integral to the human person is provided by his December 1989 "Discourse to the Participants of the Working Group [on the Determination of Brain Death and Its Relationship to Human Death]." John Paul II began by emphasizing that the value of human life "springs from what is spiritual in man," and that the body

receives from the spiritual principle—which inhabits it and makes it what it is--a supreme dignity, a kind of reflection of the Absolute. The body is that of a person, a being which is open to superior values, a being capable of fulfillment in the knowledge and love of God (cf. *Gaudium et spes*, 12, 15). When we consider that every individual is a living expression of unity and that the human body is not just an instrument or item of property, but shares in the individual's value as a human



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being, then it follows that the body cannot under any circumstances be treated as something to be disposed of at will (cf. *ibid.*, 14). [1]

Finally, the whole purpose of John Paul’s celebrated catecheses on the “theology of the body” was to defend against modern dualism the reality of the human body as integral to the being of the human person and that in fact the human body reveals the human person.

To put things another way, although angels are bodiless and are indeed conscious subjects aware of themselves as selves and capable of relating to other conscious subjects, when the Triune God created man to his own image and likeness he did not create a conscious subject aware of itself as a self and capable of relating to other conscious selves and then added a body as an afterthought; rather, “male and female he created them...and said to them “Be fruitful and multiply” (Gen 1.28), i.e., he created a species of material living beings sexually differentiated into male and female. Moreover, when he gave the male person a helper “fit for him” he fashioned a woman made from the man’s rib and gave her to him, and the man exclaimed: “This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh, and she shall be called Woman , for from out of her Man she was taken” (Gen 2.23). And, as John Paul II said, commenting on this text in his theology of the body, “By exclaiming in this way, he seems to say: *‘Look, a body that expresses the person’*” (14th catechesis, no. 2).

The Dualistic Anthropology Underlying Contemporary Secularistic Bioethics

This is dramatically illustrated by the great desire and push to kill human embryos to obtain their pluripotent stem cells to use either for reproductive purposes (e.g., cloning) or for experimental therapy on ‘persons,’ (as they define person) i.e., those members of the human species who have some degree of cognitive abilities and/or minimal capacity as conscious selves to communicate with other conscious selves, despite the fact that now there are ethically acceptable alternatives since induced pluripotent stem cells (iPSCs) are available from non-embryonic sources (on this see E. Christian Brugger’s essay for the culture-of-life foundation, “Stem Cells for Dummies”). Were these scientists to propose killing panda or chimpanzee or dolphin embryos to get their stem cells, an outrage would ensue over this immoral proposal to kill members of endangered species!

Leon Kass, the first chairman of the President’s Council for Bioethics perfectly described this dualistic thought pattern and its deleterious effects in his book *Life, Liberty, and the Defense of Dignity* (Encounter Books, 2002). I will close with some citations from his perceptive work:

“The most fundamental challenge posed by the brave new biology,” Kass writes,

comes...from the underlying scientific thought. In order effectively to serve the needs of human life, modern biology reconstructed the nature of the organic body, representing it not as something animated, purposive and striving, but as dead matter-in-motion. This reductive science has given us enormous power, but it offers



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no standards to guide its use. Worse, it challenges our self-understanding as creatures of dignity, rendering us incapable of recognizing dangers to our humanity that arise from the very triumphs biology has made (p.20).

Kass believes that the kind of human “dignity” associated with the new biology and its underlying anthropology is “inhuman,” because it “dualistically sets up the concept of ‘personhood’ in opposition to nature and the body” and thus “fails to do justice to the concrete reality of our embodied lives...and pays no respect at all to the dignity we have through our loves and longings—central aspects of human life understood as a grown togetherness of body and soul” (17, cf. 20).

Kass thus seeks a notion of human dignity rooted in a “proper anthropology” that “goes beyond the said dignity of ‘persons,’ to reflect and embrace the worthiness of embodied human life.” The dignity he seeks is that of a “life that will use our awareness of need, limitation, and mortality to craft a way of being that has engagement, depth, beauty, virtue and meaning—not despite our embodiment but *because of it*” (18).

Unfortunately, mainstream bioethicists today are blind to the signs of dehumanization. Kass believes that, far from questioning the human meaning of the proposed uses of the new technology, they have rather “entered in large numbers into the employ of the biotechnology companies, bestowing their moral blessings on the latest innovations—assuredly not for love, but for money” (9-10).

[1] Discourse of John Paul II to the Participants of the Working Group,” in Working Group on the Determination of Brain Death and Its Relationship to Human Death (10-14 December 1989) (Pontificiae Academiae Scientiarum Scripta Varia, 83), eds. R. J. White, H. Angstwurm, and I. Carrasco de Paula (Vatican City: Pontifical Academy of Sciences, 1992), no. 2, p. xxiv.

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