



Humanum

Issues in Family, Culture & Science

2014–Issue 2, Re-conceiving the Human Person: A.R.T. Conference

When Art Replaces Nature

MICHAEL HANBY

Dr. Michael Hanby is Assistant Professor of Biotechnology and Culture at the Pontifical John Paul II Institute for Studies on Marriage and Family, and the author of Augustine and Modernity (Routledge, 2003). He received his PhD from the University of Virginia.

To understand the problem implied by the title—when art *replaces* nature—we must first understand the original meaning of the distinction between art and nature, between the realm of the ‘born’, (*nascor, natus*) and the made. The distinction is probably as old as philosophy itself, but it was Aristotle who gave it to us in the form that would become axiomatic in the West till the seventeenth century: “Art imitates nature.” Imitation, here, has both a positive and a negative sense. In its positive sense, it means that artifacts, in their rational organization, in their end-directedness, in their semi-permanence, and even in their beauty, can serve as analogies for understanding nature more deeply. Indeed it seems endemic to the human condition that we understand ourselves in the image of our artifacts. Despite the allergic reaction of scientists, and especially evolutionary biologists, to even the hint of ‘design’ in nature, this is truer now than it has ever been. It’s simply that the designing hand of history has replaced the hand of God, that computers and information systems of the 21st century have replaced the clocks of the 18th century in our imagination. Negatively speaking, to say that art imitates nature is to say that a natural thing—which for Aristotle means primarily a *living* thing—has something that an artifact lacks, or better, *is* something that an artifact is not. A natural thing, according to Aristotle, is characterized by *entelechia*, by having, or rather *being*, its own end, its own project. An artifact, by contrast, is not an end in itself. Rather its end is imposed upon it from the outside and bears only an accidental relation to the stuff from which it is made. Its project is not its own, but its maker’s. Thus Aristotle and Aquinas both say that “*we* are the end of artificial things.”

The difference between being one’s own end and not translates into a difference in the *kind of unity and organization* which each sort of thing exhibits. A living thing from the beginning of its existence is a genuine *whole*, what the scholastics would call a *per se* unity, whose being is both simultaneous—given all at once—and successive, unfolding in time. It remains *existentially* indivisible so long as it is the being it is, despite the constant recycling of its matter, and to just this extent, its unity transcends and thus *ontologically* precedes the temporal development of its parts. This is why we can ascribe a history of development *to* the organism and say, for example, that I was once a

blastocyst. An organism is thus, in Kant's words, both cause and effect of itself: its parts develop *for the sake of* and *by means of each* other, as the parts of the organism whose parts they are. The unity of an artifact, by contrast, is simply a unity of aggregation and organization which binds together otherwise independent parts in an accidental relation—though this organization can obviously be quite complex. An artifact does not ontologically precede and transcend its parts except in the mind of its maker—its unity, which also imitates the unity of a natural thing and often times outlasts it—does not properly belong to it. Consequently, an artifact does not *develop* as a living thing does; rather it comes about as the consequence of its piece by piece assembly.

We can see from all this that the distinction between nature and art thus signifies two radically different ways *of being a thing*, two ways that things stand in relation to their being. A living thing, though it has its being as an unsolicited gift, nevertheless *possesses its being as its own*, internally, as a subject. And so it moves itself from the inside out in the project of maintaining its being undivided: assimilating the world to itself, growing, developing, repairing itself, and generating others like itself. An artifact has only *an external or accidental relationship to its own being*, and so is not really a subject of being in the same way. At best it can merely imitate some of these activities, even though it can be designed in such a way so as to exceed the capacities of its maker in some of them, thus magnifying its maker's power. The living thing is therefore characterized by an incommunicable *interiority*—and thus a *freedom*—that an artifact lacks, an interiority and freedom that that make it a surprise even to itself. "I have become a question to myself," said St. Augustine. It is an index of this interiority that we can ask the question of Thomas Nagel's famous essay—What is it like to be a bat?—because a living thing, as a subject of being occupies a unique and unrepeatable perspective within the cosmos. It is *like something* to be a living thing. Whereas the question 'what is it like to be an iPad?' makes no real sense, because it's not like anything.

With the advent of modern science in the seventeenth century, this distinction collapsed. There is a complex philosophical history here that I won't go into but as a result of this history, art would no longer *imitate* nature. Rather nature would be conceived as artifice—manufactured at first by God and later by history or natural selection. With nature reduced to artifice, *logos* becomes *techne-logos*—the technological fusion of knowing and making announced in Bacon's famous formula, 'knowledge is power'—and so knowledge of nature becomes a kind of engineering. We know nature precisely by unmaking and remaking it. The truth of nature becomes precisely identical to the various forms of control we can now exercise *over* nature: in the form prediction and retro-diction, successful replication of experiments, or manipulating nature for our own ends.

If a natural thing is distinguished from an artifact by its unity, interiority and freedom—and ultimately, by having its own being—then we can see what the conflation of nature and art amounts to. To conceive of nature as artifice is to reconceive an organism as a mere unity of organization and aggregation, to impinge upon its freedom, to empty it of its interiority, and to instrumentalize its being. It is, in essence, to deny that living things are their own project and to make them *our* projects. As John Dewey would put it early in the 20th century, "Things *are* what they can do and what can be done with them."

Now we come to the point. ARTs [Artificial Reproductive Technologies] *are* the logical outworking of this deep-seated ontology. They are this ontology in action, so to speak; this ontology turned on us. The very act of removing conception from the body, manipulating embryos through IVF, ISCI, or Assisted Hatching, and the standard regime of pre-implantation diagnosis, genetic screening, and embryo selection treats embryonic life as an artifact, as an aggregation of component parts to be controlled, selected, and worked upon, with humanity 'supervening' only at some later point, either

with the emergence of certain ‘essential’ characteristics, or whenever *we* develop an emotional attachment to it. This mechanistic regard is *built in* to the technique itself, irrespective of how I might think or feel about the embryos in the petri dish.

What we see here is that, this technology essentially forces parents to become the artisans of their children. Like the power of Tolkien’s one ring, this power is an excruciating burden to bear, since it forces parents to make intolerable choices that are too big for them. Even more ominously, though, than making parents the artisans of their children, ARTs make the scientists whose growing body of expertise is built upon these techniques, *the artisans of future generations of children*, a burden shouldered much more lightly without the additional weight of love and responsibility. The power of the artisan over his product is *essentially* despotic in relation to incipient life, even where it is exercised benevolently. For by treating the embryo *as if* it were an artifact—by treating it as our project rather than their own—this power instrumentalizes its being, and thus does violence to what the child in its embryonic stages *is*.

This violence is most evident while the child is still in its embryonic stage where, sadly, ‘instrumental’ often means ‘disposable’ if pre-implantation diagnosis determines that the embryo is not what the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority in the UK calls “quality.” Or if it happens to be a girl. Or if it is just unlucky. Abortion is an inherent feature in the standard ART regime of manufacturing, testing, and selecting embryos. The pro-life community needs to be clear-sighted about this. What arguably makes ARTs even more egregious than ordinary abortion *in utero* is that these ‘spare’ persons are being manufactured, in essence *in order to be aborted*.

Other dimensions of this violence are more subtle. Given the impossibility of gathering longitudinal data on the children conceived by these techniques prior to our actually conceiving them, ‘instrumental’ for those who are allowed to live means ‘experimental.’ Which is of course how evolutionary biologists more or less think of living things in the first place: as the accidental result of a long history of trial and error. We often lament the fact that ARTs lead to experimentation *on* embryos. We lament too late. We need to think more deeply about the fact that the persons conceived through ARTs are already conceived, and in a sense live their lives, *as experiments*. Knowledge is power, you will remember, and the more penetrating our knowledge of the embryo’s fitness, genetic makeup, and propensities, the more complete is the power that will have already been exercised over him. This power is inherently incomplete to be sure. This is true even of what Jonas calls ‘dead matter’ engineering. Such products, once they are launched into the stream of time, often elude our control. And it is more profoundly true in the case of bioengineering. “Its’ deeds,” says Jonas, “are irrevocable. You cannot recall persons or scrap populations.” Nevertheless to be someone else’s experiment, to have been ‘selected’ for quality after careful testing and screening is to have already been denied the freedom of being a surprise to oneself, well before we come to any second order experimentation. The more ‘successful’ the experiment, the more complete that power is. But it is precisely because these technologies *already* conceive of embryonic life as an artifact, and indeed an experiment, and not because they are ‘*applied*’ immorally, that it has led ineluctably to the warehousing of frozen embryos in a kind of limbo, to embryonic research, and to eugenical fantasies of three parent embryos, germline manipulation and other designs to better produce the living artifact in our image and according to our specifications.

Of course parents who resort to ARTs *intend* none of this. They are not *thinking* of dominating nature or seizing control of evolution. They simply want a child and are blinded by their desperation to the true nature of their deed. Inasmuch as it is this deed is ontological, its consequences are unavoidable; for reality will not go forever unavenged. And so I am convinced that even parents who

succeed in conceiving through IVF eventually find themselves haunted in all sorts of ways by unanticipated anxiety over the gravity of their deed. It must be unbearably difficult. One can repent of an abortion. But it is difficult to acknowledge the violence inherent in IVF without feeling at the same time the need to repent of what no parent should ever be asked to repent of, namely the existence of the child that she loves more than she loves herself. What parent would ever accept that? Faced with the anguish that follows upon this violation of the truth of being, the parents' life can easily become a rearguard action against having to confront this unbearable truth and to repent of the unrepentable, to face up to the questions: What was I thinking? What have I done? We have heard from personal experience, that something similar often occurs on the side of the child, as he or she struggles with the violence and ambivalence at the origin of her existence. How am I supposed to lament the act that gave me life, and yet how can I not?

This creates a massive inducement *not to think deeply* about what we have done, or who we are. This inducement is social as well as personal, and it affects the way we speak, the way we teach our children, the cultural inheritance and institutions we pass on to them. Which is to say that it affects everything. It's like living in a communist country where you have to speak a public language that everyone knows is a lie and a private language of truth, until the one infuses the other and you can no longer tell the difference. We are building a culture, or destroying one, depending upon how you look at it, on the back of an ontological lie.

What all of this shows is that parents are not the masters of this experiment, so much as they are physically, spiritually, and socially a part of a much larger experiment. And so the issue is *not* really the *subjective* motives of those who, in their desperation, take recourse to these techniques. The issue is rather the *objective inner logic* of ARTs and the underlying ontology it represents. The deeper issue, in other words, is *what the child is* from the vantage point of these technologies. I have argued that from the point of view of ARTs, and of the society which is recklessly riding the wave of ARTs toward a bleak eugenical future, that the person is an artifact, which is to say, not really a person at all. In which case the arrival of ARTs—where responsible procreation takes place in the laboratory—is the final triumph of art over nature, and over the *humanum*.