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Life, Liberty and the Defense of Dignity

THOMAS HURLEY

Leon R. Kass, *Life, Liberty and the Defense of Dignity: The Challenge for Bioethics* (Encounter Books, 2002, 313 pages).

Leon Kass sets out to defend human dignity in the context of advancements in biotechnology which he sees threatening humanity, not merely in their details but in their technological structure, potentially propelling us towards the "abolition of man" (in C.S. Lewis's phrase). Kass begins by considering our general situation in relation to technology and bioethics, following this with chapters on more specific issues, including embryonic research, *in vitro* fertilization, cloning, organ selling, and euthanasia, and concluding with more general reflections on biology.

The strongest part of the book lies in Kass' reflections on technology in the introduction and first chapter. A recurring image in the book is that of Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, and Kass argues persuasively that such a dehumanizing dystopia will not require any totalitarian imposition from above, but is being gradually embraced by human beings engaged in the technological pursuit of desire. This involves a forgetfulness of humanity rather than an explicit rejection of it. Our beneficent intentions can carry dehumanizing meaning, for the technological approach has already changed what we mean by humanity.

Kass suggests that in liberal democratic principles there is something lacking, which can be expressed in terms of human dignity, though he does not question the compatibility of liberalism with dignity as he describes it. Kass recognizes that human dignity, if it is to stand in the way of technological dehumanization, must be a human dignity precisely as embodied, and that in defending such a dignity, the "defense of what is humanly high requires an equal defense of what is seemingly low" (p. 17).

This *embodied dignity* points to a fundamental problem in modern biology, where the human body is reduced to mechanized stuff, not interiorly striving towards any good. This goes hand in hand with the problem of technology as Kass understands it, which concerns not merely the use to which we put our tools, but a foundational approach to the world, in which modern technology is "a setting upon, a challenging forth, a demanding of nature" (p. 32). The technological approach applies to ourselves as well, and thus inevitably makes claims about meaning - or lack of it - in the human being. Thus, there is a need for renewal in biology and anthropology in order to address ethical questions posed by technological advancements.

Unfortunately, Kass's conclusions on particular issues in later chapters do not always live up to the broader insights he offers. To take one example, Kass appears to grant that human life begins at fertilization, but holds "that a blastocyst is not, in a *full* sense, a human being" (p. 88). He recognizes that embryos need to be approached with a sense of wonder and mystery that is due to human

beginnings, and that embryos thus command some respect. However, he seems less than clear about what it means to be a human being. Instead of a given all-at-onceness of dignity in human existence that transcends human control, and is not dependent on what human life looks like or what any particular human life is able to do, we seem to be left with a kind of continuum in which we must establish standards to evaluate intuitively how much dignity various stages of human life should be allowed, based upon their appearance and action, or lack thereof. It is not a question of whether this is what Kass wants; it simply seems that this is where his thought will leave us. Thus, while Kass wishes to restrict embryo research significantly, one appears to be left with little clear anthropological reason for specific restrictions.

Similar issues could be raised about ambiguous positions taken by Kass on *in vitro* fertilization. Kass affirms the profound point that, in terms of human beginnings, a "yes" to manufacturing is a "no" to *eros*. However, while raising concerns about IVF, Kass suggests that there can be no objection to it in cases involving a married couple intending to pursue and love a child of their own flesh. In this sense, he does not seem anxious for clarity about whether this action of production inherently carries the meaning of a dehumanizing attack on *eros* and giftedness in humanity. In the separation of babies from sex, here and also in marital contraception, Kass appears to privilege the broader intentions of the married couple over what is concretely being done in a bodily way.

On other issues as well, Kass courageously calls for ethical concern in areas where few others are willing to do so, but he is inconsistent about bringing us beyond that level of concern. Perhaps these points are evidence of underlying gaps in Kass's own anthropology, despite his best intentions. As part of an effort to avoid excessive abstraction, Kass criticizes much of philosophical ethics and calls for a more political bioethics, but his book does not offer a coherent philosophical understanding of humanity. Nevertheless, he raises questions, particularly in relation to biotechnology, that are important for any adequate response to our modern technological situation, which he recognizes as an existential challenge for truly human life.

