

Brave New Biology

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By Leon R. Kass

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The achievements of modern medicine are a boon, but when scientists offer to enhance and improve human nature, they threaten human dignity.

One of the world's leading humanist bioethicists is Dr Leon Kass, of the University of Chicago, a member and former chairman of the President's Council on Bioethics. He has been an outspoken opponent of human cloning and dehumanised sexuality. Below are excerpts from a lecture which he gave at the University of Navarra, in Spain, earlier this month.



The urgency of the great political struggles of the twentieth century and the new global struggle against terrorism and fanaticism seems to have blinded many people to a deep truth about the present age: nearly all contemporary societies, East as well as West, are travelling briskly in the same utopian direction. Nearly all are wedded to the modern technological project; all march eagerly to the drums of progress and fly proudly the banner of modern science; all sing loudly the Baconian anthem, "Conquer nature, relieve man's estate." Leading the triumphal procession is modern medicine, which is daily becoming ever more powerful in its battle against disease, decay, and death, thanks especially to astonishing achievements in biomedical science and technology—achievements for which we must surely be grateful. [...]

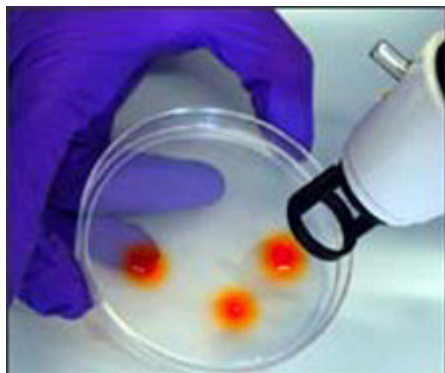
In a word, we are quick to notice dangers to life, threats to freedom, risks of discrimination or exploitation of the poor, and interference with anyone's pursuit of pleasure and happiness. But we are slow to recognise threats to human dignity, to the ways of doing and feeling and being in the world that make human life rich, deep, and fulfilling..[...]

It is impossible to exaggerate the debt we Americans and the world at large owe to the political triumph of... liberal democratic principles. Thanks to liberal democracy, and its fruitful contract with modern science and technology, many ordinary human beings today live healthier, longer, freer, safer, and more prosperous lives than did most dukes and princes in pre-modern times. Yet, though it may appear ungrateful to do so, especially when modern liberal societies have so recently come under lethal attack from religious zealots, we must acknowledge that these liberal principles are by themselves inadequate for dealing with the threats of the brave new biology. [...]

Even a little thought shows how life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness are perfectly compatible with a slide toward our dehumanisation. A preoccupation with supporting life embraces all innovations that will push back mortality, no matter what the moral cost. A preoccupation with preserving liberty is no defence against freely made choices that would contribute, wittingly or not, to our degradation. And a preoccupation with attaining happiness understood as contentment would find little reason to object to shaping our moods or gaining our pleasures through drugs obtained from the pharmacist. In a word, the freedom to pursue happiness—that is, to *practice* happiness

understood as living one's life as one sees fit—is perfectly compatible with utter self-indulgence, mindless pursuits, and the factitious gratifications of high-tech amusements and drug induced euphoria. Brave New World? Why not?

Defining human dignity



What is missing from the liberal pantheon of goods? What goods besides life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness do we seek to defend? What has been lost when we discern degradation, debasement, and de-humanisation? The obvious candidate is “human dignity.” Yet if “human dignity” is to be more than an empty slogan, we need to articulate its meaning, and in ways accessible and persuasive to our fellow liberal democrats. This is no easy matter.

The first trouble with “dignity” is that it is an abstraction, and a soft one at that. The harm of a broken bone, a burned-down house, or a stolen purse are concrete and easily recognised; assaults on human dignity—especially those that are self-inflicted—are much harder to notice. Second, not everyone agrees about what human dignity means. Third, dignity is, at least to begin with, undemocratic. It is an aristocratic idea, tied to excellence or virtue. In virtually all of its original meanings, dignity is not something which, like a nose or a navel, is to be expected or found in every human being. Fourth, in so far as philosophers do talk today about human dignity in some more universal sense, they tie it to “personhood,” and personhood they define in terms of autonomy—mankind’s rational will and its capacity for moral choice.[...]

In the Western philosophical tradition, the most high-minded attempt to supply a teaching of universal human dignity belongs to Immanuel Kant, with his doctrine of respect for persons. Persons, *all* persons or rational beings, are deserving of respect not because of some realised excellence of achievement but because of a universally shared participation in morality and the ability to live under the moral law. It is the moral life that gives to rational creatures—and only to rational creatures—their special dignity. [...]

Kant: bold, but blinkered

Yet Kant’s view of human dignity is finally very inadequate, not because it is undemocratic but because it is, in an important respect, inhuman. Precisely because it dualistically sets up the concept of personhood in opposition to nature and the body, it fails to do justice to the concrete reality of our embodied lives, lives of begetting and belonging no less than of willing and thinking. Precisely because it is universalistically rational, it denies the importance of life’s concrete particularity, lived always locally, corporeally, and in a unique trajectory from zygote in the womb to body in the coffin. Precisely because “personhood” is distinct from our lives as embodied, rooted, connected, and aspiring beings, the dignity of rational choice 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. Not all of human dignity consists in thinking or choosing. Human dignity embraces more than thinking and willing.

It is easy to see why Kant’s notion of “personal dignity” is of but limited value in meeting the challenges of bioethics. True, a bioethics stressing personhood and rational choice is very useful in defending respect for autonomy against violations of the human

will, including failures to gain informed consent in the use of human subjects in research or excessively paternalistic behaviour by physicians and other experts. But this moral teaching offers us very little in our battle against the dehumanising hazards of a brave new world. For Kantian dignity is, in fact, perfectly compatible with foetus farming, surrogate motherhood, cloning, the sale of organs, the use of performance-enhancing drugs, or even extra-corporeal gestation, because these peculiar treatments of the body or uses of our embodiments are no harm to that homunculus of personhood that resides somewhere happily in a morally disembodied place... The defence of what is humanly high requires, as I will shortly suggest, an equal defence of what is seemingly "low."

The account of *human* dignity we seek goes beyond the said dignity of rational *persons*, to reflect and embrace the worthiness of embodied human life, and therewith of our natural desires and passions, our natural origins and attachments, sentiments and repugnances, loves and longings. What we need is a defence of the dignity of what Tolstoy called "real life," life as ordinarily lived, everyday life in its concreteness. It is a life lived always with and against necessity, struggling to meet it, not to eliminate it. Like the downward pull of gravity without which the dancer cannot dance, the downward pull of bodily necessity and our mortal fate in fact makes possible the dignified journey of a truly human life. It is 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. Human aspiration depends absolutely on our being creatures self-conscious of our need and finitude, and hence being creatures capable of lofty longings and deep attachments.

Most of our contemporaries will have a hard time with such a suggestion. What, they may well ask, is so dignified about our embodiment? What is inherently dignified about, say, human procreation? What is so dignified in the fact that we rise from the union of egg and sperm, grow as an embryo and foetus in the darkness of a womb, or enter the world through the birth canal—all rather messy matters, truth to tell—rather than, say, as a result of being designed perfectly in the light and tidy laboratory? What is so dignified about being the product of chance rather than of human design? Of natural sex rather than of human artfulness? What, for example, would be wrong with cloning or any other sex-less form of making babies?

A new look at the facts of life



To start to answer these questions, we must begin not with laboratory technique and questions of safety, or with questions of reproductive freedom. We must consider the deep anthropology—both natural and social—of sexual reproduction. We need to understand deeply what it means to be a sexual being and what that fact contributes to human dignity. Permit me to remind you of the basic "facts of life," told non-reductively, and some of the things that follow from them.

Sexual reproduction—by which I mean the generation of new life from (exactly) two complementary elements, one female, one male, usually through coitus—is established (if that is the right term) not by human decision, culture, or tradition, but by nature; it is the natural way of all mammalian reproduction. By nature, each child has two complementary biological progenitors. Each child thus stems from and unites exactly

two lineages. In natural generation, moreover, the precise genetic constitution of the resulting offspring is determined by a combination of nature and chance, not by human design: each human child shares the common natural human species genotype, each child is genetically (equally) kin to each (both) parent(s), yet each child is also genetically unique.

These biological truths about our origins foretell deep truths about our identity and about our human condition altogether. Every one of us is at once equally human, equally enmeshed in a particular familial nexus of origin, and equally individuated in our trajectory from birth to death—and, if all goes well, equally capable (despite our mortality) of participating, with a complementary other, in the very same renewal of such human possibility through procreation. Though less momentous than our common humanity, our genetic individuality is not humanly trivial...

Human societies virtually everywhere have structured child-rearing responsibilities and systems of identity and relationship on the bases of these deep natural facts of begetting. The mysterious yet ubiquitous natural “love of one’s own” is everywhere culturally exploited, to make sure that children are not just produced but well-cared for and to create for everyone clear ties of meaning, belonging, and obligation. But it is wrong to treat such naturally rooted social practices as mere cultural constructs (like left- or right-driving, or like the difference between burying and cremating the dead), that we can alter with little human cost. For what would kinship be without its clear natural grounding? And what would identity be without kinship? We must resist those who have begun to refer to sexual reproduction as the “traditional method” of reproduction, who would have us regard as merely traditional, and by implication arbitrary, what is in truth not only natural but most certainly profound. [...]

The soul-elevating power of sexuality

Sexuality brings with it a new and enriched relationship to the world. Only sexual animals can seek and find complementary others with whom to pursue a goal that transcends their own existence. For a sexual being, the world is no longer an indifferent and largely homogeneous *otherness*, in part edible, in part dangerous. It also contains some very special and related and complementary beings, of the same kind but of opposite sex, toward whom one reaches out with special interest and intensity. In higher birds and mammals, the outward gaze keeps a lookout not only for food and predators, but also for prospective mates; the beholding of the many-splendoured world is suffused with desire for union, the animal antecedent of human eros and the germ of sociality...

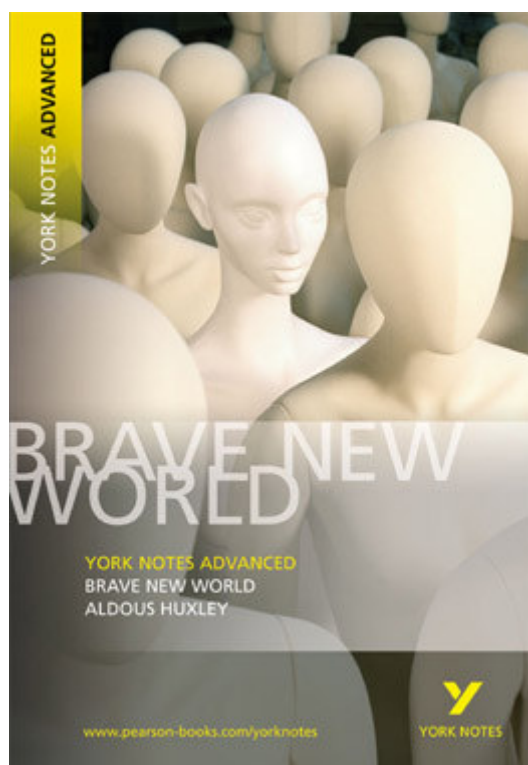
The soul-elevating power of sexuality is, at bottom, rooted in its strange connection to mortality, which it simultaneously accepts and tries to overcome. Asexual reproduction may be seen as a continuation of the activity of self-preservation. When one organism buds or divides to become two, the original being is (doubly) preserved, and nothing dies. In contrast, sexuality as such means perishability and serves replacement; the two that come together to generate one soon will die. Sexual desire, in human beings as in animals, thus serves an end that is partly hidden from, and finally at odds with, the self-serving individual. [...]

Through children, a good common to both husband and wife, male and female achieve some genuine unification (beyond the mere sexual “union” that fails to do so). The two become one through sharing generous (not needy) love for this third being as good. Flesh of their flesh, the child is the parents’ own commingled being externalised, and

given a separate and persisting existence. Unification is enhanced also by their commingled work of rearing. Providing an opening to the future beyond the grave, carrying not only our seed but also our names, our ways, and our hopes that they will surpass us in goodness and happiness, children are a testament to the possibility of transcendence...

Human procreation, in sum, is not simply an activity of our rational wills. It is a more complete activity precisely because it engages us bodily, erotically, and even spiritually, as well as rationally. There is wisdom in the mystery of nature that has joined the pleasure of sex, the inarticulate longing for union, the communication of the loving embrace, and the deep-seated and only partly articulate desire for children in the very activity by which we continue the chain of human existence and participate in the renewal of human possibility. Whether we know it or not—and in the world of recreational sex and assisted reproduction, we are already well on the way to forgetting it—the severing of procreation from sex, love, and intimacy (or, conversely, of sex from love, intimacy, and procreation) is inherently dehumanising, no matter how good the product.

Eliminating sex and crushing transcendence



It was not an accident that Aldous Huxley introduced us to the Brave New World by inviting us into the fertilising room of the Central London Hatchery, where new human life is produced to order outside the body and cloning is routine. It was not an accident that “birth” and “mother” are regarded in that society as smutty notions, or that sexual activity is regarded as “no big deal.” For there is a deep connection between these perversions of our bodily beginnings and attachments and the degraded flatness of soul that characterises the entire society Huxley depicts. Why? Because to say “yes” to cloning baby manufacture is to say “no” all natural human relations, is to say “no” also to the deepest meaning of human sexual coupling, namely, human *erotic* longing. For human *eros* is the fruit of the peculiar conjunction of and competition between two competing aspirations conjoined in a single living body, the impulse to self-preservation and the urge to reproduce. The impulse to self-preservation is a

self-regarding concern for our own personal permanence and satisfaction; the urge to reproduce is a *self-denying* aspiration for something that transcends our own finite existence, and for the sake of which we spend and even give our lives.

Nothing humanly fine, let alone great, will come out of a society that has crushed the source of human aspiration, the germ of which is to be found in the meaning of the sexually complementary “two” that seek unity, wholeness and holiness, and willingly devote themselves to the well-being of their offspring. Nothing humanly fine, let alone great, will come out of a society that is willing to sacrifice all other goods (including the seeds of the next generation) to keep the present generation alive and intact. Nothing humanly fine, let alone great, will come from the desire to pursue bodily immortality for ourselves.

Towards a richer understanding of man

Finding our way to such insights is, I admit, an increasingly difficult task in modern America. A culture that offers endless remedies to prolong the lives of the living is less likely to be a culture devoted to or interested in procreation. A society, when it does procreate, that sees its children as projects rather than as gifts is unlikely even to be open to the question of the meaning and dignity of procreation. And a culture instructed about life by a biology that sees whole organisms mainly in terms of parts or, what's worse, as mere instruments for the perpetuation of genes—"A chicken is just a gene's way of making more genes"—will reject the question of meaning altogether, because it believes that it already has the answer.

Here at last we have come to the bottom of our troubles. It turns out that the most fundamental challenge for bioethics posed by the brave new biology comes not from the biotechnologies it spawns, but from the underlying scientific thought. In order effectively to serve the needs of human life, modern biology reconceived 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 us no standards to guide its use. Worse, it challenges our self-understanding as creatures of dignity, rendering us incapable of recognising dangers of our humanity that arise from the very triumphs derived from the brave new biology.

What is urgently needed is a richer, more natural biology and anthropology, one that does full justice to the meaning of our peculiarly human union of soul and body in which are concretely joined low neediness and divine-seeking aspiration. In our search for such an account, we can get help from pre-modern sources, both philosophical and biblical. We can learn, for example, from Aristotle an account of soul that is not a ghost in the machine, but the empowered form of a naturally organic body. We can learn from thinking about Genesis what it means that the earth's most God-like creature is a concretion combining ruddy earth and rosy breathing; why it is not good for the man to be alone; why the remedy for man's aloneness is a sexual counterpart, not a dialectic partner (Eve, not Socrates); why in the shame-filled discovery of sexual nakedness is humanity's first awe-filled awareness of the divine; and why respect for a being created in God's image means respecting everything about him, not just his freedom or his reason but also his embodiment and his blood.

Exploring these possibilities is for another day. For now it is sufficient if we have seen the need for both a new bioethics and a new biology, a richer ethic of bios tied to a richer logos of bios, an ethical account of human flourishing based on a biological account of human life as lived, not just physically, but psychically, socially, and spiritually. In the absence of such an account we shall not be able to meet the dehumanising challenges of the Brave New Biology.

Dr. Leon Kass is the Hertog Fellow at the American Enterprise Institute, Washington, D.C., and Addie Clark Harding Professor in The Committee on Social Thought and the College at the University of Chicago. He is also a member and former chairman of the [President's Council on Bioethics](#).

The opinions expressed in this lecture are solely his own, and they do not necessarily reflect those of the Council or any of its other members.

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