During our lifetimes, we have become accustomed to a spiraling array of great technological advances. These advances have helped us live longer, made our lives more comfortable, and brought us unparalleled prosperity.

But every new technology is a double-edged sword. While the automobile has given nearly everyone in America the ability to travel long distances in a short amount of time, it has also polluted the air in our major cities, tragically maimed and killed tens of thousands in accidents, and contributed to the stress of countless Americans waiting in endless lines of traffic—often just trying to get to work.

Bioethicists are fond of referring to the 21st century as the "Biotech Century." And it is truly amazing the kinds of advances that have already occurred in the past six years. Many people with previously untreatable diseases such as brain cancer, lymphoma, lupus, sickle cell anemia, and more are being effectively treated with adult stem cells. Genetic diseases heretofore impossible to treat are beginning to be cured. Advances in curing some types of reproductive problems are allowing couples to have children, giving hope to thousands.

But these new powers over the human body?down to the sub-cellular level?have powers that can do great harm and undermine the innate dignity of every human being.

Francis Collins is the head of the government's Human Genome Project, the effort that mapped the entire human genome (all 3 billion base pairs). Now the project is trying to understand what each part of the mapped human genome does. The resulting information will give geneticists and doctors the ability to do amazing things, such as tailor a drug to a person's genetic makeup so it has the precise intended effect without any detrimental side effects.
Collins told me at a conference a couple of years ago, "I lay awake at night worried about how this information that I have helped open up might be used against the very people I hope to help." Collins is concerned about the other side of this new, powerful technology of genetic knowledge and its ability to undermine human dignity. It is already possible to genetically copy or clone human beings to be used for research and so-called "spare" cellular parts. It may be possible to create deadly viruses that attack certain ethnic groups, like Jews or African Americans.

Parents are already beginning to couple genetic technology with in vitro fertilization and create children that avoid certain genetic diseases. They may soon also be able to impart certain genetic traits such as height or eye color. Some may even intentionally limit their child’s natural abilities. Sound far-fetched? The Washington Post reported in March 2002 about a deaf lesbian couple who sought out a genetically deaf sperm donor, so they could intentionally create a deaf child. The couple was successful?twice.

Now we not only have the ability to destroy life that we have possessed since Cain killed Abel, but in a few short years we have begun to gain an unprecedented ability to both create and manipulate life in a way that can dramatically undermine the dignity of human beings.

What is this dignity? In many ways, it depends on who you ask. Some believe that human dignity is based upon your abilities. For Princeton bioethicist Peter Singer, your value is based on your ability to plan and anticipate your own future. According to him, infant children have less innate value or dignity than monkeys, since monkeys have a greater awareness of and ability to impact their surroundings than infants do. For Singer, this means that it may be moral for parents to kill their disabled infant. This narrow view of human dignity means that some slice of humanity is not subject to the protections the rest of humanity enjoys.

For others, human dignity is innate and (for many) it comes from God. For example, Christians, Jews, and Muslims believe that God is the creator of humanity and that our innate value comes from the value God places on us. As God has placed his image on each one of us, we bear a special and unique value that no other human has the right or freedom to manipulate or destroy. This broad view of human dignity covers all of humanity. For most, it covers humanity from creation to natural death.

I believe that innate human dignity, a dignity that demands respect and protection from harm for each individual human being, is the position most people should embrace once they reflect on the issue. Regardless of your religious belief or lack thereof, arguing for an intrinsic human dignity is the only real position that allows our society to function and for people to live without fear.

In a world where human dignity is based upon your capacities or abilities (rather than the mere fact you are human) and where some human beings are not protected from manipulation or destruction by others, the decision of who is protected and who is not is defined by whoever is in control. It is those who are in power who define who is human and subject to any rights and protections. Anyone becomes susceptible to a move from protected status to unprotected status depending on their age, mental or physical state, or the whim of someone else.

On the other hand, when everyone is protected in the same manner, there is great freedom. Knowing that you will not be labeled an "undesirable" by those in control allows you to pursue life with hope, rather than hide in fear. It also means that as we pursue our lives, we must respect the dignity of others within our realm of control. This is especially true of our children, but also of those who depend on us: our parents, siblings, neighbors, and friends. In many ways, we should treat others in the manner of Christ’s words, "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you."

There are many things that a majority of Americans agree should never be allowed. For example, we should not
create chimeras (or animal/human hybrids), create human beings who are intentionally disabled, create children who have no genetic father and mother (by creating sperm and eggs from stem cells or taking them from aborted fetuses), create embryos and fetuses for use as organ farms, or euthanize the disabled or elderly who cannot care for themselves.

Alas, some people, while recognizing the wisdom in the idea of broad human dignity, still want there to be an exception for them. Several years ago, I sat next to a woman on a flight to California who completely agreed that assisted suicide should be illegal, even for those who are terminally ill. And in the next breath she said, "But if I am in that situation, want it to be available for me."

In part, this is why it is so important that our laws reflect the concept of a broad human dignity, one that not only protects our lives but defends us from our darkest selves?selves that would open the door to abuse of others to protect some self-interest. That can be a challenge to the "Me Generation" mentality that seems to thrive so vibrantly today.

It is the role of leaders to draw lines that defend the weak, protect the integrity of society, and provide freedom and hope to all. The question becomes how effectively our democratically-elected leadership will be able to protect us from ourselves.

References


2 For a summary of Peter?s Singer's philosophy, see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Peter_Singer (last visited Sept. 8, 2006).

Editor's Note: This essay also appears in Defending Life 2007, a state-by-state legal guide by Americans United for Life, containing information on bioethics laws in each of the 50 U.S. states?including history, recent activity, and prospects for the future?in the areas of beginning of life, end of life, biotechnology, and rights of conscience.

Podcast Episode:
42
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