Finding the Human in Christian Bioethics

Post Date: 04/07/2006
Author: Amy Laura Hall, PhD
Issues:
Bioethics
Human Dignity
Human Enhancement

- Download audio file
- Length: 14:38 minutes (13.4 MB)
- Format: MP3 Mono 44kHz 128Kbps (CBR)

Is this indeed love, to want to find it outside oneself? I thought that this is love, to bring love along with oneself. But the one who brings love along with himself as he searches for an object for his love (otherwise it is a lie that he is searching for an object ? for his love) will easily, and the more easily the greater the love in him, find the object and find it to be such that it is lovable.


Does an orphan in the woods have a voice if there is no one to hear her cry? What if another forest-dweller perceives her as his next meal? Is this propositional orphan a `she` in any meaningful sense, calling in any relevant way for care or attention from those who would neglect, manipulate, or devour her? The biotech revolution evokes again this question ? a question that is much older than the Human Genome Project or the debate over embryonic stem cell research. How does one detect the features attending a life worth living, a life worth saving, or a life worth protecting?

The relatively new field of bioethics runs on the motor of boundary-breaking science. As university scientists craft pig-people and ?humanzees,? as pregnancy.com offers women the opportunity to terminate for sex selection ?before they show,? some moral philosophers and theologians seek to call a halt by digging into the definitive markers of humanness.

There are thus various voices shouting *Enough!* in the United States. Drawing on different strands within
Western philosophy and theology, American scholars who agree on little else find themselves eager to cooperate to delineate the boundaries of truly human life. McKibben?s eco-interrogation of medical technology Enough: Staying Human in an Engineered Age has become a key text for lefties suspicious about unfettered biotech. Warning in particular about human germline genetic intervention, McKibben suggests that post-genetic enhancement generations may be, in an important sense, no longer human; grandchildren will no longer be the same sort of creatures as their grandparents. In the face of this disconnect with our primordial genetic heritage, it is time to say Enough, for, McKibben concludes, ?We?re [already] capable of the further transformations necessary to redeem the world.?\(^1\)

Francis Fukuyama draws similar conclusions in his recent work on bioethics. Drawing from his previous, Hegelian interpretation of democracy as a kingdom of ends, Fukuyama now hopes to shore up the basic contours of given, human existence against erosion through biotechnology. In his book Our Posthuman Future: Consequences of the Biotechnology Revolution, Fukuyama opens the first chapter with a quote from Martin Heidegger?s The Question Concerning Technology:

The threat to man does not come in the first instance from the potentially lethal machines and apparatus of technology. The actual threat has always afflicted man in his essence. The rule of enframing (Gestell) threatens man with the possibility that it could be denied him to enter into a more original revealing and hence to experience the call of a more primal truth.\(^2\)

The sense that there is, underneath the accretions of culture, the ?call of a more primal truth? propels both Fukuyama?s and McKibben?s resistance to Our Posthuman Future. The source of that truth, according to Fukuyama, may be found within a basic, foundational layer running beneath the specific traditions of Western religion.\(^3\)

In teaching undergraduates, this philosophical move becomes immediately applicable. I have found myself thinking: ?Surely buried under the technological accretions of the new generation?s cyborg existence there is some sense of what it means to be purely, naturally human.? I have also found myself relying on the reality of a discernable division between past and future. Again, I tell myself as I prepare pedagogically to tackle cloning, chimeras, or prenatal testing, ?Even those within the iPod/TiVo generation surely must perceive the truth of a boundary between, on the one hand, a truly human, more natural, prior and, on the other hand, a biotechnologized future that is becoming post-human.? At my most desperate, I find myself taking up the persona of Dana Carvey?s Church Lady, mixed with his rendition of the Grumpy Old Man. ?Why, when I was a kid, we didn?t need pre-implantation genetic testing or somatic cell nuclear transfer, and if we had, we would have recognized them as tools of Satan.? The quest for a verifiable humanness and some boundary between before and after biotechnologized existence is appealing.

Yet, I have concerns about this form of bioethical argument.

The first concern I will call the Katha Pollitt rejoinder. Pollitt is a columnist for the Nation, and she asks something along the lines of (and here I paraphrase) ?Look around; does the United States seem like a country of people who recognize the dignity of each and every human life?? ?Yeah, right? respond many critics from the left. This perspective hit home for me recently while rereading Jonathan Kozol?s Savage Inequalities. By my own estimation, cloning human life is morally repugnant, but in a way that is formally identical to my repugnance at the disparity between rich and poor children in the American public school system. Life on the margins is already cheap, or expensive, depending on its use value. Will life in the United States become qualitatively less human if we proceed with procreative or therapeutic cloning? It is hard to argue along these lines, given patterns of current neglect. Consider this passage from Kozol:

East St. Louis ? which the local press refers to as ?an inner city without an outer city? ? has some of the sickest children in America. Of 66 cities in Illinois, East St. Louis ranks first in fetal death, first in premature birth, and
third in infant death. Among the negative factors listed by the city’s health director are the sewage running in
the streets, air that has been fouled by the local plants, the high lead levels noted in the soil, poverty, lack of
education, crime, dilapidated housing, insufficient health care, unemployment. Hospital care is deficient too.
There is no place to have a baby in East St. Louis.⁴

This set of statistics merely touches upon the plight of children living in forgotten neighborhoods across the
country? neighborhoods that Kozol brings to the otherwise sheltered reader. This must provide reason to pause.
Given the gap running through American public education and basic health, it seems almost obscene to argue
that research on human embryos, genetic enhancement, or any biotechnological procedure will blow out the
bridge spanning humanity. Many indigent women in the U.S. would counter that the bridge was never built. I
expect that many of these women would read McKibben’s Enough and wonder why bioethicists concerned with
protecting human dignity, did not holler Enough quite a bit sooner.⁵ Arguments against biotechnological
enhancement or embryo research too often assume that we are a people who presently value human lives. The
arguments draw upon a consensus about human dignity that, seen from the underside, quite frankly does not
exist.

My second concern is related. I am concerned that the search for a more purely human prior is also potentially
to occlude the indignity of human history. Dig more deeply into human history and one will find an infinite
number of techniques for cordon off, using, and exterminating creatures who certainly appear now, in
retrospect, to be human. The same Heidegger to whom Fukuyama appeals longed for a more primal Germany in
a pre-technological past. The roots of the Nazi eugenics campaign came in no small part from such longings.

I have grown to suspect that for Christians involved in bioethics there may be neither a more primal truth nor a
definite human apart from the birth, life, death, and resurrection of one human in particular. This suspicion, and
witness, is informed by my continued study of a somewhat strange Christian layman writing in an obscure
language (Danish) on the faith of what Europeans considered a backwater citizenry, a man who died with a
disability and without children four years before Darwin published the Origin of Species. One line that
Kierkegaard deleted from his Philosophical Fragments seems particularly apropos:

    too bad that Hegel lacked time; but if one is to dispose of all of world history, how does one get
time for the little test as to whether the absolute method, which explains everything, is also able to
explain the life of a single human being. In ancient times, one would have smiled at a method that
can explain all of world history absolutely but cannot explain a single person even mediocrelly . . . ⁶

I have come to suspect that the pressing questions of biotechnology and personhood today require not so much
that we dig deeper into humanity in order to find the definitively human, or some prior, purer, human past, but
that we discover ourselves as found by one who defines, in his own person, life and love itself.

References


2 Francis Fukuyama, Our Posthuman Future: Consequences of the Biotechnology Revolution (New York:

3 Fukuyama is most explicit about the need to recover this layer in Chapters 8 and 9, on ?Human Nature? and
?Human Dignity.?

5 Bill McKibben published an essay in *Harper's Magazine* (August 2005) in which he firmly advocates for the national prioritization of poverty. I believe it to be a crucial addition to the conversation. See “The Christian Paradox: How a Faithful Nation Gets Jesus Wrong.”