Biotechnology's Brave New World

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If Immanuel Kant was awakened from his dogmatic slumber by reading Hume, I have been awakened from my cultural malaise by investigating some of the present medical advances that could radically affect our children and grandchildren. My cursory and all too brief study has made me conclude that ethical issues raised by biotechnology are among the most important to be considered. We stand today at a crossroads where quite literally the future of the human race is at stake. I do not mean the survival of the human race, but something more sinister: the altering of the very concept of what it means to be human. The issue is not whether future generations shall live; the issue is what future people—if we call them such—shall be like. We must face the possibility of Huxley's Brave New World and ask: Is there something we can do to prevent the possibility of a profoundly tragic future from occurring?

When Christians propose limiting the use of biotechnology, they typically face formidable opposition from the non-religious community. Secularists often argue that the Church has always been opposed to scientific progress. Think, for example, of official Christendom opposing Galileo and of religious opposition to the smallpox vaccine on the grounds that the disease was a judgment from God with which we ought not interfere. The Church has often been opposed to scientific progress and can be faulted for lagging behind in its vision of the good that science can do. But having heard the secularist argument, we must counter by affirming that we are not opposed to scientific and medical progress but instead enthusiastically encourage it. We must also, however, refuse to accept the premise that whatever human beings can do scientifically should be done, especially if the identity of the human species is at stake. Indeed, some of the biotech issues that are now front and center—stem cell research, cloning, in vitro fertilization, and the like—could dramatically change our understanding of what it means to be human.

It goes without saying that the Church has often been too late in responding to cultural and moral challenges. In matters of biotechnology, we cannot repeat the mistakes of the past but must instead direct the cultural trends and public opinion rather than reacting to them. We have often heard that we must reclaim God's world, and this certainly involves reclaming what it means to be human. In this article I will raise some foundational issues that I think are critical to the biotech and bioethics discussion.

The Nature of Being Human

Christian theology holds that human beings are created with not just a body, but also with a soul that will exist eternally. Since Christians also believe that at death a believer's soul goes to heaven while his body remains on earth, it follows that the soul is separable from the body. While we reject Cartesian dualism, which holds to such a radical distinction between the soul and the body that one cannot affect the other, we nevertheless assert that the soul is separate enough to exist without the body. The soul and the body make up the imago Dei, the image of God in human beings. The...
News From the Field

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*First Internet Sperm Bank Baby Born*

The work of Dr. Kari Edwards with Hollow image demonstrates the link of the world’s first baby conceived with sperm from an Internet sperm bank. Edwards successfully produced a healthy baby girl from sperm donated by a 44-year-old man living in the American southwest. Edwards reports: "This is the first attempt to fertilize an egg with sperm from an Internet sperm bank, which is not made up by the Internet at all, but by a lab technician who provides the sperm frozen within days of donation."

The baby was born in Britain in July and will likely be reported as the first baby born from an Internet sperm bank. However, the baby was born to a woman who is not the intended recipient of the sperm, and the baby’s father is not the intended recipient of the sperm. The baby’s mother is a woman who has donated sperm to the Internet sperm bank in order to conceive a child.

*Chinese Scientists Claim to Create First Human-Rabbit Embryos*

In their study, the researchers describe the development of human-rabbit chimeras, or embryos containing both human and rabbit cells. They used embryonic stem cells from rabbits to create the embryos, which were then implanted into the uterus of a female rabbit. The embryos developed normally, and some of them developed into live human-rabbit hybrids. The researchers also used these chimeras to study the potential of human embryonic stem cells for treating human diseases.

*What does DI perpetuate?*

Regarding the origin of the soul and its relationship to the body, each human being is unique and possesses innate human dignity. Attempting to create a human being according to our own desires is to devalue the soul. The proper response is to respect the human being according to our own dignity and purpose.

*Implications for the Family*

God intended that children result from intimate sexual union and be reared by both father and mother. As genetic and reproductive technologies progress, children will increasingly be produced according to the will of their creators. The importance of the family is rapidly becoming the only stable institution to define a human being according to the intentions of the Creator. For this reason, we must preserve the integrity of the family to prevent the erosion of human dignity.

*Where Do We Go From Here?*

Some have said that the storm of cloning, genetics, and human manipulation has already begun. We as ambassadors of the Most High cannot sit back and simply watch the wind and the rain. We must engage the bioethics storm head on instead of hiding behind our Christian “umbrella.” It is imperative that we form a robust, biblical anthropology that will help evaluate bioethics and set limits to the scientific enterprise. In seeking to set such limits, we must do four things.

First, we must educate lay persons, as well as professionals. Unless we form a grassroots movement, our desire to stem the tide toward “anything goes” will fail. In the case of bioethics, we face a formidable and daunting task. However, we have the potential to deter human dehumanization and destroy the family structure! With regard to the realm of bioethics, I believe God is throwing a pitch in our direction—we must step up to the plate.