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Kass, Leon. *Life, Liberty, and the Defense of Dignity: The Challenge for Bioethics*. San Francisco: Encounter Books, 2002. 313pp. \$26.95 hardcover.

Over the past several years, a number of biotechnologies have inspired serious ethical and political debates: the human genome project, stem-cells, general embryonic research, and human cloning, to name a few. While other political matters such as the threat of terrorism currently dominate our political discourse, there can be little doubt that these biotechnological issues will have an enormous long-term impact.

As a result, vast amounts of human thought, energy, and resources are put into navigating a political course for such technologies. Think-tanks hire scholars solely to research these issues. All the major news organizations cover the technologies almost weekly. Large numbers of scientists and professionally trained "bioethicists" are asked to comment for magazines, newspapers, and radio programs. Corporations and states hire consultants to consider the costs and benefits of research into and use of new technologies. Even President Bush himself spoke about the ethics of stem-cell research in a televised address to the nation. Biotechnology is here to stay, and will most likely continue to force an ongoing political dialogue for years to come.

Enter Leon Kass. A longtime professor at the University of Chicago and co-founder of the Hastings Center, Kass was asked in 2001 to advise President Bush on the ethics of stem-cell technology, and thereafter was named chair of the President's Council on Bioethics. Kass was trained as a physician and biochemist, and has written extensively on bioethics for over thirty years, covering a wide range of culturally significant medical technologies, from in-vitro fertilization, abortion, and organ transplantation to stem-cell technology

and human cloning. His newest book, *Life, Liberty and the Defense of Dignity: The Challenge for Bioethics*, is the culmination of decades of careful consideration in such matters.

Despite his unique qualifications as an expert in bioethics, Kass is not a typical "bioethicist." Indeed, he avoids that term in self-description. Professional bioethicists, who are in increasing demand as consultants to hospitals and research organizations, typically frame ethical dialogue in terms of beneficence, respect for persons, justice, and patient autonomy. Criticizing the limitation of these principles outright, Kass exposes their meekness both in theory and in use, noting that, under their guidance, "the possibility of willing dehumanization is out of sight and out of mind."

The potential dehumanization resulting from increasingly competent biotechnologies unleashed by "woefully inadequate" bioethical principles is Kass's central concern. Both our biotechnologies and our bioethics get their guiding light from the individualism intrinsic to modern liberal democracy specifically and Enlightenment principles generally. The political thought of Hobbes, Locke, and the founders of American democracy is in some fundamental respect wedded to the scientific "relief of man's estate" espoused by Francis Bacon and others. Though this combination makes for "healthier, longer, freer, safer, and more prosperous lives" than ever before, the excessive commitment to liberal individualism, inherent especially to the modern notion of autonomy, eventuates in loss of human dignity. Kass warns that eugenics, psychopharmacology, the buying and selling of organs, cloning, euthanasia, and the unchecked use of nascent human life for research, all risk a dangerous and dehumanized "posthuman future," to be avoided at all costs. In short, biotechnology, "threatens human flourishing precisely because, in the absence of countervailing efforts, we may use the fear of death, our various freedoms and rights, and our unrestrained pursuit of profit and pleasure in ways that will make us into human midgets."

Such dehumanization through technology is highly reminiscent of Aldous Huxley's classic, *Brave New World*. Kass frequently uses this work as a warning:

As Aldous Huxley made clear in his prophetic *Brave New World*, the road chosen and driven by compassionate humaneness paved by biotechnology, if traveled to the end, leads not to human fulfillment but to human debasement. Perfected bodies are achieved at the price of flattened souls. The joys and sorrows of human attachment and achievement are replaced by factitious ecstasies that come from pills. Procreation is replaced by manufacture, family ties are absent, and people divide their time between meaningless jobs and meaningless amusements.

The slippery slope of individualistic liberal democracy wedded to modern natural science culminates in a society of "homogenization, mediocrity, trivial pursuits, shallow attachments, debased tastes, spurious contentment, and souls without loves or longings."

How do we steer clear of such debasement? Kass answers that liberal, rights-based solutions in bioethics ought to be replaced by a compelling interest in the sanctity of life and human dignity. Though some modern interlocutors in bioethics, namely Catholics, have consistently grounded thought and action in a principle of dignity, Kass's vision of dignity is rather distinct. Questioning modern natural science's reductionistic tendencies, Kass calls for a deeper, richer biology, cognizant always of the human organism as a purposive whole. He requests recognition of "what it means to be a human animal, in our bodily, psychic, social, cultural, political, and spiritual dimensions." This understanding is grounded, not necessarily in a religious position though Kass is friendly to religious skepticism of science but rather a renewed Aristotelianism, a revived scientific interest in questions regarding the teleology of the human soul beyond the mere workings of natural selection or reductionistic materialism. Such thinking, Kass argues, helps one grasp the ethical importance of human dignity beyond mere "autonomy," "beneficence," or even "justice." Human dignity is a principle modern science and ethics fail to appreciate sufficiently.

Having exposed the limits of liberalism and grounded political and ethical discourse in dignity, Kass sets off to discuss all the major biotechnologies of the day. He warns of the capitalistic tendency to reduce embryonic life to "raw material for human use, exploitation, and commerce." He defends the "public disquiet" and natural repugnance society feels toward genetic screening and genetic engineering. He criticizes current proposals to establish markets in organs for transplantations, and cautions us always to consider the nature of human organisms as whole, embodied beings. He continues his critique of the "perversions of a rights-based approaches to all moral questions," arguing that a "right to die" is fundamentally oxymoronic, and that human dignity works more humanely than liberal principles as a useful guide in dealing with death. He urges us mentally to push our biotechnological tendencies to their limits, realizing that we wish to stop at nothing short of an artificial immortality made possible by our own misguided human making. And perhaps most important to current political discourse, he urges us to consider children and embryos as mysterious natural gifts, and, in the name of human dignity, recommends as he did as chair of the Council on Bioethics a legislative ban on human cloning.

Someone once referred to Leon Kass as the "Nestor" of Bioethics, and these days this seems an ever-pregnant metaphor for his work. If, through his leadership on the President's Council on Bioethics and through writing works like this, Kass has successfully persuaded the scientific community and congress

to ban dangerous biotechnologies such as human cloning, then he has done more than simply cool a raging Achilles. He has, in fact, brought Achilles over to Agamemnon's side. What's more, he has done it in the grand Nestorian style: by reminding us to heed ideas and people from a bygone age. Through an appeal to the lost but not forgotten virtues of humanity, civility, and most importantly dignity, he has, with hope, elevated forever the discourse of warring factions in the debate over biotechnology.

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