

SAINT JOHN PAUL II

LECTURE SERIES IN BIOETHICS

Political Philosophy and Bioethics

James V. Schall, S.J.

Preface

The modern project...was originated by philosophers...to satisfy ...the most powerful of the natural needs of men; nature was to be conquered for the sake of man who himself was supposed to possess...an unchangeable nature; the originators of the project took it for granted that philosophy and science were identical. After some time it appeared that the conquest of nature included human nature and hence...the questioning of the un-changeability of human nature; an unchangeable human nature might set absolute limits to progress. Accordingly, the natural needs of men could no longer direct the conquest of nature; the direction had to come from reason as distinguished from nature, from the rational Ought as distinguished from the neutral is.

-Leo Strauss, *The City and Man*, 1964.¹

Gender theories strip God of his primary creative privileges: assigning indelible features to each individual human being, limiting certain choices, claiming authority over our privacy.... The offer of societal or personal gender assignment excises God from our lives so completely that the only way to return to him would be by a total conversion, an earthquake no one has yet anticipated. For now, the drive towards absolute human autonomy promises to annul the unity of spirit and matter, so characteristic of the Western notion of man.”

-Ewa Thompson, “Disenfranchising God,” 2018.²

I. Introduction³

In his 1922 book, *Eugenics and Other Evils*, G. K. Chesterton reached back to once popular discussions on human biological improvement by means of selective breeding. He had begun to

write on these issues before World War I. “The wisest thing in the world is to cry out before you are hurt,” he began.

It is no good to cry out after you are hurt, especially if you are mortally hurt. People talk about the impatience of the populace; but sound historians know that most tyrannies have been made possible because men moved too late. It is often necessary to resist a tyranny before it exists...

There exists today a scheme of action, a school of thought, as collective and unmistakable as any of those grouping alone we can make any outline of history. ... It is called for convenience “Eugenics”; and that it ought to be destroyed I propose to prove in the pages that follow.⁴

Reflecting on the nearly one hundred years since these words were published, we can rightly say that Chesterton did prove that the core assumptions of this movement, when spelled out, should have been destroyed.

We can say, likewise, that the general populace, when it did not itself join the movement, again moved too late. We are now confronted with this system of action and thought in its most sophisticated and virulent form. Its premises, now spelled out, have, under the names of “progress” or “modernity”, become laws and customs of many civil societies, including our own.⁵

“Eugenics” was the science of “good birth”. It held that science, not religion or philosophy, was the agent of man’s good through a selective control of human breeding. It turned out to be a science that, in practice, as we see today, almost invariably led to a lack of human births or to births outside of the family manner in which human beings were intended to be born and nurtured. Ecology and bio-ethics, themselves often legitimate concerns, are the current loci wherein we find quietly simmering the ideas that Chesterton wanted destroyed.

In this context, the pursuit of the human good shifted from a moral endeavor to a medical and genetic one and then to a psychological and political one. In theological terms, what was once considered “original sin” now was to be met with efforts to change and improve the whole human race through gene manipulation and body reconfiguration. The architect of this change is not God but the speculative scientist, himself usually guided by some ideological vision of what man ought to be or can be. Indeed, the principle became that if we can do something, we ought to do it, exactly the reverse of the classical view.

Thinkers, scientists, and technicians still work and experiment, as they maintain, for the most noble of causes; namely, the “improvement of the human estate”, as Francis Bacon called it. They will, we are assured, finally eliminate the physical and moral defects of human beings, even the blight of death. We have scientists working to extend the span of our lives to one, two, or more centuries. Too few ask just why they want to do this and what it would mean if they

were to succeed.⁶

II. Autonomy and the Flight from Human Nature

Some years ago, I heard a lecture at the Catholic University of America by the late Dr. Edmund Pellegrino, the founder of the bioethics program at Georgetown University. Today, he said, doctors no longer have a defined concept of what that is on which they exercise the art of medicine.⁷ We go to a doctor. He does not tell us what is wrong with us. Rather, we tell him what we want done to us. Some government policy or agency will pay the bill for us to exercise our “right” to be what we want to be. We “plan” our own reconstruction. We implicitly assume something is wrong or missing in the original design from nature. The doctor has become a construction manager hired to carry out our self-designed blueprints for the remaking of ourselves. We no longer have to carry the burden of sin, disease, and even accident. Our bodies are the raw material of our mental projections about what we choose to look like.

“Human nature”, as it once was called, no longer limits our thinking. We are freed of it. It implied an existing order in nature over which we had no control. We have, or think we have, “progressed” beyond nature. The doctor now obliges us. He does not first consult any set standard of what-it-is- to-be-human. He need not, indeed cannot, ask whether we “ought” to do what it is that his patients seek to have done to them. He tries to make it “work”. The doctor, like the state, is at the service of our own concept of what we are or what we think that we want to be. Usually, considerations of cost, order, or democratic theory eventually will see to it that our diverse individual wills themselves become subordinate to the control of the state.

Our bodies are not looked upon as limits or insights into what we ought to be at our best. They are composed of malleable matter waiting to be reshaped in conformity with our ideas of what man wants be. Medical schools become more like art or engineering schools wherein their truth is whether what they do conforms to what the designer wants, not to what ought to be done with given human nature. All “oughts” have ceased. They lack, so it is said, any unchangeable “grounding”.

Historically, this latter approach was broadly known as Gnosticism.⁸ It held that the human body is either intrinsically evil because it is composed of matter or an impediment to our good because it is ill-designed. We have no choice but to abandon it. We strive to replace the natural body with what Strauss called “the rational Ought”. That is, with our conception of what we would look like if we were all-powerful gods. We have become, to repeat, artists of ourselves. We become selves who willingly deviate from the order that is given in nature. We do not acknowledge how well we were designed and put together in the first place.

This present lecture is entitled precisely “Political Philosophy and Bioethics.” In classical thought, politics is considered to be the highest of the practical sciences, of the things that can be otherwise, of things not determined by necessity or instinct. It was the arena wherein mortal men

worked out, by their free choices under heaven and before their peers, how they finally defined themselves as good or bad men.

In that sense, political things, for their ends, were subject to the theoretical or contemplative sciences, to things that could not be otherwise. Human nature as such did not change. The world was made for man wherein he strove to achieve his own transcendent and temporal purposes, both of which properly belonged to him. The great drama of the universe was centered on how men with immortal souls lived their passing lives. The universe existed that this drama could exist.

As Aristotle put it, politics did not make man to be man, but taking him from nature as already man, sought to guide him through his own choices to be good man. It made a difference both to him and to the universe how he turned out. This hypothesis recognized, of course, that man could, by his own choosing and doings, make himself to be bad man, unworthy of anything but himself. That is, man, by his own choices, could fail to become what he ought to be, what he was intended to be by the initial cause of his being *what he is*. Beginning with Plato, the classical discussions of heaven and hell were premised on this hypothesis of moral knowledge, voluntary responsibility, justice, and final judgment. What was mostly wrong in the world arose from the human will, not from the human body, environment, mind, or forces of chance.

III. Purpose, Paths and Eugenics

In 1971, I published a book entitled *Human Dignity & Human Numbers*. The book was basically a defense of *what man is* in his given nature. Human beings and this planet were, contrary to much ecological thinking, compatible with each other. With the active engagement of their minds, talents, and numbers, the planet, because of man's mind and hand, had the given capacity to support in a civilized manner the billions of people who sequentially have come to live on this planet.

Indeed the purpose of the planet depended on the proper lives and intelligence of its human inhabitants. The world was given to them, as it were, to see what they would do with it. They were not initially given a perfect world that required nothing of them, as so many paradise stories assume to be the best way for them. This planet was not designed endlessly to circle the Sun unused. Evil and good lives, nonetheless, produced different effects on man's surroundings and especially on himself.

The physical world existed in order to support full human life. To accomplish this purpose man had to work and think about what was to be done in the light of what he was as being. The world itself was finite. It did not exist solely to keep the human race in existence down the ages with no end in sight. It existed as a place in which each of those billions born within it and within his respective city was to achieve his transcendent destiny.

But in the course of the discussion about the relation of man to planet, it was necessary to deal

with those proposals that wanted radically to refashion human beings in man's own, not God's, image. At the time, the most articulate proponent of these sundry proposals was the biological scientist, Joshua Lederberg. His thesis argued that the notion of what it is to be a good man is no longer, as the Greeks and their successors thought, through self-discipline, virtue, and knowledge. Rather, it was through genetics, through the reconstruction of man's body, especially through control of his begetting capacities.

The fundamental disorder in the universe was not rooted in what Christians called "original sin". Neither was it the ordinary run of human sins as such. These could be repented or ignored. What was once called "sin" could even come to be seen, as in abortion, not as a killing of one of our kind, but as a "virtue" and a "right". The real problem, as postulated, was the human physical configuration itself. "Ethics", as such, was obsolete. The good man, shades of proposals found in Book V of Plato's *Republic*, even in his physical corpus, could be bred or reconstructed more perfectly according to the designs of a human fabricator.

Religion and philosophy, once thought to discover and explain man's very purpose, would really have nothing to do with this modern endeavor. The elimination of religion and ethics was presupposed to the accomplishment of man's immediate end. This end became a part of what can only be called a replacing of Christian eschatological notions with an inner-worldly project designed to account for man's happiness.⁹

Here, political philosophy and bioethics are to be seen as related to each other in several unsettling ways. Ethics usually referred to what Aristotle called the "practical intellect," that is, to the same intellect when a person, through it, guides himself to the end he has chosen to embody as the purpose of his own happiness. He cannot not seek to be happy, as Aristotle put it.

The four traditional ends that could be chosen were wealth, honors, pleasure, or knowledge. All of these proposed ends had something good about them. That is why they could be chosen. But only a life devoted to the knowing of things, including divine things, could be defended absolutely. Hence, the moral life consisted in ruling our passions and properties in such a way that they could also contribute to the achievement of our natural end.

IV. Postmodern Choice and Bio-Ethics

The term "bio-ethics" came into view when, following Strauss' remark, man realized that he could, in the name of science, experiment on his own corporal and psychic being. Was he free to go beyond the normal and moral standards of medicine, which classically were to cure this particular patient of this illness or problem. Could we "reconstruct" our very physical being? If so, why not do so?

"Bio-ethics" at its best could simply mean new ways of curing and healing after the principles of traditional medicine. But in rapid succession these more perplexing questions followed the given newly proposed premises that man could experiment on himself:

- 1) Could we lengthen the normal time of life way beyond the four score years and ten?
- 2) Could we enable great grandmothers to conceive children?
- 3) Could we enable males to bear children?
- 4) Could two lesbians ladies arrange a conception that included them both plus some male donor, a three parent child
- 5) Could a woman become a man or a man become a woman with a few delicate operations?
- 6) Would it not be better, in the name of equality, if all children had exactly the same genetic parentage?
- 7) Can homosexuals “marry” to produce children?
- 8) Could we breed a race of worker/drones that were part human and part animal?
- 9) Could we separate begetting and sex in such a way that all begetting, gestation, and education was in the hands of state/scientists’ control, while all sex was rendered sterile with no relation to children?
- 10) Was choosing to inflict death on ourselves whenever we chose a “right” or an obligation?
- 11) Must we not limit the population of the earth to a few billion?
- 12) Ought we strive to place our race on some other planet in the solar system?
- 13) Does not every child have a right to have its own genetic father and mother as responsible for him in a proper home?

Looking back on these questions, we recall that human nature was initially considered to be unchangeable. Aside from Platonic eugenics, no means of more radical changes yet existed. What depended on human, responsible choice was whether each person would live a worthy human life according to the virtues and commandments. It was possible also to choose a life of vice. But vice did not involve a restructuring man’s basic physical configuration. Its consequences were understood as transcendently significant, not to be ultimately resolved in this life.

Thanks to science man was presented, in the course of what was called “progress”, with a more basic choice beyond the choice of virtue and vice. He had also to choose to remain what he was by nature. If he did not so choose, what-man-was could disappear from our midst. He could choose to reject this natural order by changing his parts and purposes. We live in a time when this choice against what we are is not a matter of vice but of biology, politics, and of a medicine, the function of which is to make possible the kind of corporeal life that we propose as an alternative. Once we accept and carry out these proposals, we then have to live with them. Indeed, that is what much of our public life is today, coping with these consequences.

V. First Principles, Bioethics and Political Responsibility

Political philosophy was originally considered to be the effort of the philosopher to teach the politician the value of what is for its own sake; of what is beyond politics, as it were. This theoretic order was the guarantee of a stability of ends not subject to the human will. The first principle of politics is not itself political. That is, it is given to man with his coming to be already man. Once man knows his ultimate end—the knowledge of the truth, the beatific vision—prudence, the intellectual virtue of the practical virtues, guides him to the proper means to achieve it. The account of these choices constituted the drama of the historic existence of each existing person.

The politician, the statesman, does not have time to be also a philosopher. He is a busy man. The closest he can come to philosophy is to sense a hint of transcendence in beauty, in the right order that is found in music, art, literature, and noble action.¹⁰ Yet, he must, at the same time, be aware of the corruption of the personal and social order by unworthy philosophers who themselves reject the order of things. The theme of the “betrayal” of the intellectuals is familiar in Western thought.

The statesman’s vocation is not only to protect his polity and its citizens from internal disorder or foreign enemies but also from ideas that can undermine what it is to be human. The really serious disorders in most actual historic societies originated in the souls of the intellectual and clerical dons. In other words, no polity can afford not to know what, in principle, its learned members are saying.

In his remarkable book, *Leading a Worthy Life*¹¹, Leon Kass, one time chairman of President George W. Bush’s Commission on Bioethics, was concerned with what he called the most dangerous of modern proposals. That is: “the use of biotechnical powers to pursue ‘perfection’ both of body and of mind. I do so partly because it is the most neglected topic of public bioethics, yet it is, I believe, the deepest source of public anxiety, represented in the concern about ‘men playing God,’ or a Brave New World or a ‘post-human’ future.”

Without forgetting the things of value in modern society, we may acknowledge the bleakness of these reflections on what happens when politics and science join to replace the given nature of

man with their own trans- human concepts. But I would point out that every proposed “improvement” is, at bottom, an attempt to reach goals of human living that was originally Christian teachings. Thus, efforts to prolong life indefinitely or to freeze dead bodies to resuscitate them after death witness to the hope of the resurrection of a particular body. Many earlier utopias concerned themselves with a distant future of a vague collectivity, a classless society. More recent proposals realize that if history means the happiness of someone down the ages, it leaves most actual people out. This realization is why we now have proposals to keep alive the same individual person, to avoid his death at all costs.

It has long been clear that Marxism was an eschatology that purported to be able to put its finger on the cause of evil in the world and eliminate it. For Marx the elimination of evil was not a moral problem or a medical one, but an economic one. He was not wrong in holding something was wrong with the human condition. He merely mis-located its center in freedom of the will to reject what man was.

When we look at the Christian understanding of sin, love, eternal life, marriage, brotherhood, and virtue, we soon become aware that modern bio- ethics itself is concerned with these things. In this sense, their secularized versions are not so much a rejection of Christianity but a claim that they can be achieved in a different way. The trouble is that in practice the results of these modern alternatives turn out to be much worse than any classically defined vice. They not only disorder the soul but our very bodies.

VI. Conclusion

The abidingness of the same revelation to be passed down over time means simply that it is not possible to find any more perfect way. The conclusion to be drawn from modern bioethics and political philosophy is that God and nature made our kind better than we can make ourselves. In rejecting nature, we do not find happiness, nor do we find God; indeed, we do not find ourselves either. The stability of the world was not put on the shoulders of Atlas. It was put on the minds and wills of individual human beings asked to accept the fact that they were better made from nature than from anything they might propose as an alternative.

ENDNOTES

¹ Leo Strauss, *The City and Man* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1964), 7. Publisher’s note: *The City and Man* consists of provocative essays by the late Leo Strauss on Aristotle’s *Politics*, Plato’s *Republic*, and Thucydides’ *Peloponnesian Wars*. Together, the essays constitute a brilliant attempt to use classical political philosophy as a means of liberating modern political philosophy from the stranglehold of ideology. The essays are based on a long and intimate familiarity with the works, but the essay on Aristotle is

especially important as one of Strauss's few writings on the philosopher who largely shaped Strauss's conception of antiquity. The essay on Plato is a full-scale discussion of Platonic political philosophy, wide in scope yet compact in execution. When discussing Thucydides, Strauss succeeds not only in presenting the historian as a moral thinker of high rank, but in drawing his thought into the orbit of philosophy, and thus indicating a relation of history and philosophy that does not presuppose the absorption of philosophy by history.

² Ewa Thomson, Rice University, *The American Thinker*, April 3, 2018. Available at https://www.americanthinker.com/articles/2018/04/disenfranchising_god.html.

³ Editor's note: section headings appearing in Fr. Schall's lecture have been added by the editor.

⁴ G. K. Chesterton, *Eugenics and Other Evils* (London: Cassell 1922), 3. Available on *The Project Gutenberg* at <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/25308/25308-h/25308-h.htm>.

⁵ See Antonio Carlo Pereira-Minaut, "A Letter from Spain, 2050," *Crisis Magazine*, June 8, 2018, <https://www.crisismagazine.com/2018/letter-spain-year-2050>.

⁶ Benedict XVI's encyclical *Spe Salvi, n. 10-12*, treats these issues. Available at http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi_enc_20071130_spe-salvi.html.

⁷ See Robert Sokolowski, "The Art and Science of Medicine," *Christian Faith & Human Understanding* (Washington: The Catholic University of America Press 2006), 237-49.

⁸ See Thomas Weinandt, "Gnosticism Today," *The Catholic Thing*, June 7, 2018, <https://www.thecatholicthing.org/2018/06/07/gnosticism-today/>.

⁹ See James V. Schall, *The Modern Age* (South Bend: St. Augustine's Press 2011). Publisher's note: At its beginning, every age has been "modern." We speak of "pre-" and "post-" modern ages. We are likewise tempted to identify what is most up-to-date with what is true. But to be up-to-date is to be out-of-date. If we find what is really true in any age, it will be true in all ages. This proposition is central to this book. Moreover, what is true will appear in different guises, as will what is false. The "modern age" had often considered itself relativist, or secular, or skeptical. It strove to divest itself of its theological and

metaphysical backgrounds, only to find that the central themes from this tradition recur again and again, most often under political or even scientific forms. This book proposes to “see” these classical and revelational roots within their modern forms. But we also find the proposition that what exists is only what we make. We find no “truth” but that of our own confection. When we find only our own “truth,” however, we do not really find or know ourselves. We do not cause what it is to be ourselves in the first place. The central truth that the “modern age” does not acknowledge is that its own existence along with that of the world itself is first a gift. When we see the “modern age” in this light we can again rediscover what we really are. Hopefully, we can choose and rejoice in what we are intended to be in any age as the gift of being is something that transcends all ages even while dwelling within them.

¹⁰ See Carens Lord, *Education and Culture in the Thought of Aristotle* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press 1982).

¹¹ L. Kass, *Leading a Worthy Life: Finding Meaning in Modern Times* (Encounter Books 2017). Publisher’s note: Most American young people, like their ancestors, harbor desires for a worthy life: a life of meaning, a life that makes sense. But they are increasingly confused about what such a life might look like, and how they might, in the present age, be able to live one. With a once confident culture no longer offering authoritative guidance, the young are now at sea—regarding work, family, religion, and civic identity. The true, the good, and the beautiful have few defenders, and the higher cynicism mocks any innocent love of wisdom or love of country. We are super competent regarding efficiency and convenience; we are at a loss regarding what it’s all for. Yet because the old orthodoxies have crumbled, our “interesting time” paradoxically offers genuine opportunities for renewal and growth. The old Socratic question “How to live?” suddenly commands serious attention. Young Americans, if liberated from the prevailing cynicism, will readily embrace weighty questions and undertake serious quests for a flourishing life. All they (and we) need is encouragement. This book provides that necessary encouragement by illuminating crucial—and still available—aspects of a worthy life, and by defending them against their enemies. With chapters on love, family, and friendship; human excellence and human dignity; teaching, learning, and truth; and the great human aspirations of Western civilization, it offers help to both secular and religious readers, to people who are looking on their own for meaning and to people who are looking to deepen what they have been taught or to square it with the spirit of our times.