

Comments for Panel Discussion Genetics, ART, Ethics, and the Sanctity of Human Life.

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During the summer preceding the terrorist attacks of 2001, world news was quite slow. In fact, many were openly reflective and optimistic about the fact that the world seemed largely at peace. Nonetheless, there was one pressing issue that dominated news headlines that summer—an issue which has retreated into the background since 9/11. The issue was biomedical ethics, focused specifically on stem cell research and cloning. Just a few short years ago, the very idea of such research was relegated to science fiction. But I am sure many of you have seen the recent reports claiming that the first cloned human being is to be born shortly in Italy. Like it or not, the science fiction of the past has become our present reality.

The rapid advance of technology in the areas of genetics and artificial reproductive techniques often leaves critical moral reflection about them in the dust. This means, of course, that public policy is set more by the realities of the technological marketplace rather than on careful, cautious reflection on how these technologies stand to change human beings, their value, and their relationships.

These issues are important for Christian academics because they have wide ranging public policy implications. But they are also important because Christian scientists who are involved in research in these areas are faced with serious questions concerning moral boundaries in their own work. And they are important because Christian academics of all stripes are forced to think hard about exactly what it means to

be a human person and what it means to merit distinctively moral respect as a moral person

In my remarks this afternoon, rather than focus on particular genetic and reproductive technologies and their moral implications, I want to address two fairly broad issues that Christians need to come to grips with before they can begin to draw moral conclusions concerning these matters. The first is the nature of personhood, and the second is something rarely discussed in Protestant circles, the nature of reproductive dignity. Let me speak to each in turn.

Whether we are talking about abortion, abortifacient birth control methods, *in vitro* fertilization, or cloning, the moral status of the conceptus, embryo, and fetus is an issue we cannot avoid. Let me say quickly that the relevant question here is not "When does life begin?" nor "When do we become human?" Those are easy and irrelevant questions. And notice, those are the questions which empirical science can answer directly for us. The relevant question is, "When does personhood begin?" *Persons* are those things that are worthy of intrinsic moral respect. As such, persons cannot be used merely as means to secure the goods of increased medical knowledge or technology. Nor can they be used as instruments to secure the well-being of others. This question—the question of personhood—is not an empirical question, but rather one that involves empirical, philosophical, and theological elements.

Some Christians believe that the Bible itself teaches that a fertilized egg (or anything which contains the full human genetic complement and which is configured so that it is aiming to become a full-fledged human being) is a person. I have serious doubts about this. Biblical passages which describe God forming us or knowing us prior to birth

fail to establish this conclusion. Concerning the first: if God was forming us in the womb, then one might conclude that we *weren't yet actually formed*. Concerning the second: while God may have known us in our mother's womb, he also knew us from the creation of the world; yet none of us believes we were around at the Big Bang.

So what should the Christian scientist or philosopher say about personhood? The common political answers of birth and viability cannot possibly be right. Concerning birth: there just are no intrinsic differences between the just-born and the about-to-be-born to establish the distinction. Concerning viability: there is no such thing. In principle the fertilized egg can live and develop outside of the womb. Technology has simply not caught up yet. But whether or not I am a person simply cannot depend on what sort of technology we have invented.

Many other more sophisticated criteria have been offered. But *all* of them seem either to be too strong or too weak, either ruling out large numbers of already-born humans or ruling *in* hosts of non-human animals. For folks like Peter Singer, that's no problem. He is happy to regard some humans as non-persons, and many animals as genuine persons. However, this sort of view runs afoul both of our practice of safeguarding the welfare of unfortunate humans, and of, for example, not offering Medicaid to apes, and of our theological tradition which contends that persons merit moral respect *because* they are made in the image of God, something true only of only humans.

Still, this does not tell us what is a person and what isn't. My contention is that Christians must take up this question in earnest and that this reflection must begin in hard thinking about what it means for us to be created in the divine image. That is more than

we can undertake in this session. But what do we do in the meantime? It seems to me that whether we are Christian or not, the only proper stance is this: in the absence of a reasonable account of how to define personhood, we must give the benefit of the doubt to any living thing with the human genetic complement which is aimed at becoming a full-fledged adult human organism. This is, after all, the policy we adopt when it comes to other borderline cases of personhood (persistent vegetative states, severe Alzheimer's, etc). If we are in doubt about whether a human is a person, we assume it is until we are compelled to say otherwise.

The second issues I would like to address concerns reproductive dignity. Is there such a thing? And if so, how would it bear on the following questions: Is reproduction something that properly results only from intercourse between husband and wife? Does every fertilized egg have a moral claim to be able to be born from its mother's womb? Are contraception and abortion permissible? Catholic moral thinkers have pursued this line of inquiry more than any others. And there is something that they are pointing to that we need to think hard about. Let me develop this point briefly.

The Catholic tradition leans hard on the notion of proper function in moral theorizing. On this view, God has created the natural order and stamped onto it a goal-directedness. Acorns aim to become oak trees, tomato seeds to become tomatoes, etc. This goal-directedness in nature tells us when an organism is functioning properly. In strictly biological terms, organismic proper function allows us to distinguish sickness from health. We might say that it establishes "norms of health." We can tell a sick horse from a healthy horse, or a sick oak tree from healthy one, because we can see that they have deviated from their norms of health.

In human beings, this proper function goes beyond biology and is involved in establishing *moral* norms as well. So, on this view, it is wrong to eat and purge (as bulimics do), or to pluck out your eyes, because doing so violates the proper function, stamped into your very being by God. Some are suspicious of these arguments because they appear to make moral trouble for all interventions in nature. But in fact they do not. Intervention which serves to *enhance* proper function is OK. So taking antibiotics or getting CPR, for example, are morally OK. Gluttony, on the other hand, is not.

Are any moral norms concerning reproduction established in this way? Perhaps. Just as it is morally improper to thwart human proper function by eating and purging, it is likewise wrong to abort a baby. Can we go further? Maybe. Perhaps this sort of reasoning would rule out, say, vasectomies, or the use of contraceptives. Do *these things* violate human proper function the way eating and purging does? If not, what are the relevant differences?

And perhaps we can go further still. But rather than pursue that, let me point out that this provides us with a recipe for moral reflection that is important and intrinsically Christian. If we take our createdness seriously, it seems we must be willing to think in this way, to determine permissible limits for a variety of human activities, including reproduction.

As you can see, and as you already knew, the issues here are deep and difficult, even for the Christian. But the Christian scholar is obliged to think hard on these matters—to help grasp the moral boundaries relevant to one's own work, to help establish just public policy, to be salt and light in a world that desperately needs a greater measure of respect for human worth.