

## John Paul II and the Ethics of the Body

*John Paul II's legacy reaches across many domains of human life. He was a religious shepherd for Catholic believers, a moral leader during the Cold War and after, and a truly modern philosopher who did not accept all the assumptions of modernity. His writings are significant not just for Catholics but for everyone, and not just in the theological realm but in the ethical realm. The New Atlantis asked two leading thinkers—Eastern Orthodox theologian David B. Hart and Lutheran theologian Robert W. Jenson—to consider the significance of John Paul II's Theology of the Body for bioethics and beyond.*

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### The Anti-Theology of the Body

*David B. Hart*

To ask what the legacy of John Paul II's *Theology of the Body* might be for future debates in bioethics is implicitly to ask what relevance it has for current debates in bioethics. And this creates something of a problem, because there is a real sense in which it has none at all—at least, if by “relevance” one means discrete logical propositions or policy recommendations that might be extracted from the larger context of John Paul's teachings so as to “advance the conversation” or “suggest a middle course” or “clarify ethical ambiguities.” Simply said, the book does not offer arguments, or propositions, or (thank God) “suggestions.” Rather, it enunciates with extraordinary fullness a complete vision of the spiritual and corporeal life of the human being; that vision is a self-sufficient totality, which one is free to embrace or reject as a whole. To one who holds to John Paul's Christian understanding of the body, and so believes that each human being, from the very first moment of existence, emerges from and is called towards eternity, there are no negotiable or even very perplexing issues regarding our moral obligations before the mystery of life. Not only is *every* abortion performed an act of murder, but so is the destruction of every “superfluous” embryo created in fertility

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clinics or every embryo produced for the purposes of embryonic stem cell research. The fabrication of clones, the invention of “chimeras” through the miscegenation of human and animal DNA, and of course the termination of supernumerary, dispensable, or defective specimens that such experimentation inevitably entails are in every case irredeemably evil. Even if, say, research on embryonic stem cells could produce therapies that would heal the lame, or reverse senility, or repair a damaged brain, or prolong life, this would in no measure alter the moral calculus of the situation: human life is an infinite good, never an instrumental resource; human life is possessed of an absolute sanctity, and no benefit (real or supposed) can justify its destruction.

In a wider sense, though, I would want to argue that it is precisely this “irrelevance” that makes John Paul’s theology truly relevant (in another sense) to contemporary bioethics. I must say that what I, as an Eastern Orthodox Christian, find most exhilarating about the *Theology of the Body* is not simply that it is perfectly consonant with the Orthodox understanding of the origins and ends of human nature (as indeed it is), but that from beginning to end it is a text awash in the clear bright light of uncompromising conviction. There is about it something of that sublime indifference to the banal pieties and prejudices of modernity that characterizes Eastern Orthodoxy at its best. It simply restates the ancient Christian understanding of man, albeit in the somewhat phenomenological idiom for which John Paul had so marked a penchant, and invites the reader to enter into the world it describes. And at the heart of its anthropology is a complete rejection—or, one might almost say, ignorance—of any dualism between flesh and spirit.

It is something of a modern habit of thought (strange to say) to conceive of the soul—whether we believe in the soul or not—as a kind of magical essence or ethereal intelligence indwelling a body like a ghost in a machine. That is to say, we tend to imagine the relation between the soul and the body as an utter discontinuity somehow subsumed within a miraculous unity: a view capable of yielding such absurdities as the Cartesian postulate that the soul resides in the pituitary gland or the utterly superstitious speculation advanced by some religious ethicists that the soul may “enter” the fetus some time in the second trimester. But the “living soul” of whom scripture speaks, as John Paul makes clear in his treatment of the creation account in Genesis, is a single corporeal and spiritual whole, a person whom the breath of God has awakened from nothingness. The soul is life itself, of the flesh and of the mind; it is what Thomas Aquinas called the

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“form of the body”: a vital power that animates, pervades, and shapes each of us from the moment of conception, holding all our native energies in a living unity, gathering all the multiplicity of our experience into a single, continuous, developing identity. It encompasses every dimension of human existence, from animal instinct to abstract reason: sensation and intellect, passion and reflection, imagination and curiosity, sorrow and delight, natural aptitude and supernatural longing, flesh and spirit. John Paul is quite insistent that the body must be regarded not as the vessel or vehicle of the soul, but simply as its material manifestation, expression, and occasion. This means that even if one should trace the life of the body back to its most primordial principles, one would still never arrive at that point where the properly human vanishes and leaves a “mere” physical organism or aggregation of inchoate tissues or ferment of spontaneous chemical reactions behind. All of man’s bodily life is also the life of the soul, possessed of a supernatural dignity and a vocation to union with God.

**T**he far antipodes of John Paul’s vision of the human, I suppose, are to be found at the lunatic fringe of bioethics, in that fanatically “neo-Darwinist” movement that has crystallized around the name of “transhumanism.” A satirist with a genius for the morbid could scarcely have invented a faction more depressingly sickly, and yet—in certain reaches of the scientific community—it is a movement that enjoys some real degree of respectability. Its principal tenet is that it is now incumbent upon humanity to take control of its own evolution, which on account of the modern world’s technological advances and social policies has tragically stalled at the level of the merely anthropine; as we come to master the mysteries of the genome, we must choose what we are to be, so as to progress beyond *Homo sapiens*, perhaps one day to become beings—in the words of the Princeton biologist Lee Silver—“as different from humans as humans are from . . . primitive worms” (which are, I suppose, to be distinguished from sophisticated worms). We must seek, that is to say, to become gods. Many of the more deliriously visionary of the transhumanists envisage a day when we will be free to alter and enhance ourselves at will, unconstrained by law or shame or anything resembling good taste: by willfully transgressing the genetic boundaries between species (something that we are already learning how to do), we may be able to design new strains of hybrid life, or even to produce an endlessly proliferating variety of new breeds of the post-human that may no longer even have the capacity to reproduce one with the other. (For those whose

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curiosity runs to the macabre, Wesley Smith's recent *Consumer's Guide to a Brave New World* provides a good synopsis of the transhumanist creed.)

Obviously one is dealing here with a sensibility formed more by comic books than by serious thought. Ludicrous as it seems, though, transhumanism is merely one logical consequence (if a particularly childish one) of the surprising reviviscence of eugenic ideology in the academic, scientific, and medical worlds. Most of the new eugenists, admittedly, see their solicitude for the greater wellbeing of the species as suffering from none of the distasteful authoritarianism of the old racist eugenics, since all they advocate (they say) is a kind of elective genetic engineering—a bit of planned parenthood here, the odd reluctant act of infanticide there, a *soupeçon* of judicious genetic tinkering everywhere, and a great deal of prudent reflection upon the suitability of certain kinds of embryos—but clearly they are deluding themselves or trying to deceive us. Far more intellectually honest are those—like the late, almost comically vile Joseph Fletcher of Harvard—who openly acknowledge that any earnest attempt to improve the human stock must necessarily involve some measures of legal coercion. Fletcher, of course, was infamously unabashed in castigating modern medicine for “polluting” our gene pool with inferior specimens and in rhapsodizing upon the benefits the race would reap from instituting a regime of genetic invigilation that would allow society to eliminate “idiots” and “cripples” and other genetic defectives before they could burden us with their worthless lives. It was he who famously declared that reproduction is a privilege, not a right, and suggested that perhaps mothers should be forced by the state to abort “diseased” babies if they refused to do so of their own free will. Needless to say, state-imposed sterilization struck him as a reasonable policy; and he agreed with Linus Pauling that it might be wise to consider segregating genetic inferiors into a recognizable caste, marked out by indelible brands impressed upon their brows. And, striking a few minor transhumanist chords of his own, he even advocated—in a deranged and hideous passage from his book *The Ethics of Genetic Control*—the creation of “chimeras or parahumans . . . to do dangerous or demeaning jobs” of the sort that are now “shoved off on moronic or retarded individuals”—which, apparently, was how he viewed janitors, construction workers, firefighters, miners, and persons of that ilk.

Of course, there was always a certain oafish audacity in Fletcher's degenerate driveling about “morons” and “defectives,” given that there is

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good cause to suspect, from a purely utilitarian vantage, that academic ethicists—especially those like Fletcher, who are notoriously mediocre thinkers, possessed of small culture, no discernible speculative gifts, no records of substantive philosophical achievement, and execrable prose styles—constitute perhaps the single most useless element in society. If reproduction is not a right but a social function, should any woman be allowed to bring such men into the world? And should those men be permitted, in their turn, to sire offspring? I ask this question entirely in earnest, because I think it helps to identify the one indubitable truth about all social movements towards eugenics: namely, that the values that will determine which lives are worth living, and which not, will always be the province of persons of vicious temperament. If I were asked to decide what qualities to suppress or encourage in the human species, I might first attempt to discover if there is such a thing as a genetic predisposition to moral idiocy and then, if there is, to eliminate it; then there would be no more Joseph Fletchers (or Peter Singers, or Linus Paulings, or James Rachels), and I might think all is well. But, of course, the very idea is a contradiction in terms. Decisions regarding who should or should not live can, by definition, be made only by those who believe such decisions *should* be made; and therein lies the horror that nothing can ever exorcise from the ideology behind human bioengineering.

Transhumanism, as a moral philosophy, is so risibly fabulous in its prognostications, and so unrelated to anything that genomic research yet promises, that it can scarcely be regarded as anything more than a pathetic dream; but the *metaphysical* principles it presumes regarding the nature of the human are anything but eccentric. Joseph Fletcher was a man with a manifestly brutal mind, desperately anxious to believe himself superior to the common run of men, one who apparently received some sort of crypto-erotic thrill from his cruel fantasies of creating a slave race, and of literally branding others as his genetic inferiors, and of exercising power over the minds and bodies of the low-born. And yet his principles continue to win adherents in the academy and beyond it, and his basic presuppositions about the value and meaning of life are the common grammar of a shockingly large portion of bioethicists. If ever the day comes when we are willing to consider a program, however modest, of improving the species through genetic planning and manipulation, it will be exclusively those who hold such principles and embrace such presuppositions who will determine what the future of humanity will be. And

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men who are impatient of frailty and contemptuous of weakness are, at the end of the day, inevitably evil.

Why dwell on these things, though? After all, most of the more prominent debates in bioethics at the moment do not actually concern systematic eugenics or, certainly, “post-humanity,” but center upon issues of medical research and such matters as the disposition of embryos who will never mature into children. It is true that we have already begun to transgress the demarcations between species—often in pursuit of a medical or technological benefit—and cloning is no longer merely a matter of speculation. But even here issues of health and of new therapeutic techniques predominate, and surely these require some degree of moral subtlety from all of us. Am I not, then, simply skirting difficult questions of practical ethics so as to avoid allowing any ambiguity to invade my Christian absolutism? Perhaps. But it seems to me that the metaphysics, dogma, and mysticism of “transhumanism” or Fletcherite eugenics hide behind, and await us as the inevitable terminus of, every movement that subordinates or sacrifices the living soul—the life that is here before us, in the moment, in all its particularity and fragility—to the progress of science, of medicine, or of the species. That is to say, I dwell upon extremes because I believe it is in extremes that truth is most likely to be found. And this brings me back to John Paul II’s theology of the body.

**T**he difference between John Paul’s theological anthropology and the pitilessly consistent materialism of the transhumanists and their kith—and this is extremely important to grasp—is a difference not simply between two radically antagonistic visions of what it is to be a human being, but between two radically antagonistic visions of what it is to be a god. There is, as it happens, nothing inherently wicked in the desire to become a god, at least not from the perspective of Christian tradition; and I would even say that if there is one element of the transhumanist creed that is not wholly contemptible—one isolated moment of innocence, however fleeting and imperfect—it is the earnestness with which it gives expression to this perfectly natural longing. Theologically speaking, the proper destiny of human beings is to be “glorified”—or “divinized”—in Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit, to become “partakers of the divine nature” (II Peter 1:4), to be called “gods” (Psalm 82:6; John 10:34-36). This is the venerable doctrine of “*theosis*” or “deification,” the teaching that—to employ a lapidary formula of great antiquity—“God became man that man might become god”: that is to say, in assuming human nature in

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the incarnation, Christ opened the path to union with the divine nature for all persons. From the time of the Church Fathers through the high Middle Ages, this understanding of salvation was a commonplace of theology. Admittedly, until recently it had somewhat disappeared from most Western articulations of the faith, but in the East it has always enjoyed a somewhat greater prominence; and it stands at the very center of John Paul's theology of the body. As he writes in *Evangelium Vitae*:

Man is called to a fullness of life which far exceeds the dimensions of his earthly existence, because it consists in sharing the very life of God. The loftiness of this supernatural vocation reveals the greatness and the inestimable value of human life even in its temporal phase.

John Paul's anthropology is what a certain sort of Orthodox theologian might call a "theandric" humanism. "Life in the Spirit," the most impressive of the texts collected in the *Theology of the Body*, is to a large extent an attempt to describe the true form of man by looking to the end towards which he is called, so that the glory of his eschatological horizon, so to speak, might cast its radiance back upon the life he lives *in via* here below. Thus, for John Paul, the earthly body in all its frailty and indigence and limitation is always already on the way to the glorious body of resurrection of which Paul speaks; the mortal body is already the seed of the divinized and immortal body of the Kingdom; the weakness of the flesh is already, potentially, the strength of "the body full of power"; the earthly Adam is already joined to the glory of the last Adam, the risen and living Christ. For the late pope, divine humanity is not something that in a simple sense lies beyond the human; it does not reside in some future, post-human race to which the good of the present must be offered up; it is instead a glory hidden in the depths of every person, even the least of us—even "defectives" and "morons" and "genetic inferiors," if you will—waiting to be revealed, a beauty and dignity and power of such magnificence and splendor that, could we see it now, it would move us either to worship or to terror.

Obviously none of this would interest or impress the doctrinaire materialist. The vision of the human that John Paul articulates and the vision of the "transhuman" to which the still nascent technology of genetic manipulation has given rise are divided not by a difference in practical or ethical philosophy, but by an irreconcilable hostility between two religions, two metaphysics, two worlds—at the last, two gods. And nothing

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less than the moral nature of society is at stake. If, as I have said, the metaphysics of transhumanism is inevitably implied within such things as embryonic stem cell research and human cloning, then to embark upon them is already to invoke and invite the advent of a god who will, I think, be a god of boundless horror, one with a limitless appetite for sacrifice. And it is by their gods that human beings are shaped and known. In some very real sense, “man” is always only the shadow of the god upon whom he calls: for in the manner by which we summon and propitiate that god, and in that ultimate value that he represents for us, who and what we are is determined.

The materialist who wishes to see modern humanity’s Baconian mastery over cosmic nature expanded to encompass human nature as well—granting us absolute power over the flesh and what is born from it, banishing all fortuity and uncertainty from the future of the race—is someone who seeks to reach the divine by ceasing to be human, by surpassing the human, by destroying the human. It is a desire both fantastic and depraved: a diseased titanism, the dream of an infinite passage through monstrosity, a perpetual and ruthless sacrifice of every present good to the featureless, abysmal, and insatiable god who is to come. For the Christian to whom John Paul speaks, however, one can truly aspire to the divine only through the charitable cultivation of glory in the flesh, the practice of holiness, the love of God and neighbor; and, in so doing, one seeks not to take leave of one’s humanity, but to fathom it in its ultimate depth, to be joined to the Godman who would remake us in himself, and so to become *simul divinus et creatura*. This is a pure antithesis. For those who, on the one hand, believe that life is merely an accidental economy of matter that should be weighed by a utilitarian calculus of means and ends and those who, on the other, believe that life is a supernatural gift oriented towards eternal glory, every moment of existence has a different significance and holds a different promise. To the one, a Down syndrome child (for instance) is a genetic scandal, one who should probably be destroyed in the womb as a kind of oblation offered up to the social good and, of course, to some immeasurably remote future; to the other, that same child is potentially (and thus far already) a being so resplendent in his majesty, so mighty, so beautiful that we could scarcely hope to look upon him with the sinful eyes of this life and not be consumed.

It may well be that the human is an epoch, in some sense. The idea of the infinite value of every particular life does not accord with instinct, as



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far as one can tell, but rather has a history. The ancient triumph of the religion of divine incarnation inaugurated a new vision of man, however fitfully and failingly that vision was obeyed in subsequent centuries. Perhaps this notion of an absolute dignity indwelling every person—this Christian invention or discovery or convention—is now slowly fading from our consciences and will finally be replaced by something more “realistic” (which is to say, something more nihilistic). Whatever the case, John Paul’s theology of the body will never, as I have said, be “relevant” to the understanding of the human that lies “beyond” Christian faith. Between these two orders of vision there can be no fruitful commerce, no modification of perspectives, no debate, indeed no “conversation.” All that can ever span the divide between them is the occasional miraculous movement of conversion or the occasional tragic movement of apostasy. Thus the legacy of that theology will be to remain, for Christians, a monument to the grandeur and fullness of their faith’s “total humanism,” so to speak, to remind them how vast the Christian understanding of humanity’s nature and destiny is, and to inspire them—whenever they are confronted by any philosophy, ethics, or science that would reduce any human life to an instrumental moment within some larger design—to a perfect and unremitting enmity.

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