Saint Vincent College

Facing Biotechnology Today with the Perspectives and Unexpected Theology of Leon R. Kass

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By

Katherine Palko

Latrobe, Pennsylvania

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Michael Krom, Ph.D., Director

Br. Albert Gahr, Ph.D., Reader
I. INTRODUCTION: THE 2018 CRISPR-Cas9 SCANDAL AND THE REALITIES OF MODERN BIOTECHNOLOGY

In 2018, Chinese scientist He Jiankui of Southern University of Science and Technology in Shenzhen, China, claimed to have edited the CCR5 gene in two twin human embryos using the CRISPR/Cas9 system. The twin embryos and now seemingly healthy children named Lulu and Nana were created in vitro from their parents. Because their father was HIV-positive, Jiankui went on to perform “gene surgery” on them to protect them from HIV/AIDS. Jiankui claims that by editing the CCR5 gene, he “removed the doorway through which HIV enter[s] to infect people.” This seemingly-groundbreaking event was at first carried out in secrecy, and was not published by a scientific journal or reviewed by other scientists. Once Jiankui’s claim was made public, medical experts called into question its necessity and safety. Anyone who read of this event surely questioned the morality of genetically modifying human beings at one of the most basic stages of developmental life – the embryonic level.

While in vitro fertilization has been widely practiced since the 1970s, what is especially startling about this situation is the genome-editing process performed on the embryos subsequent to their creation. This was regarded to be the first case of human genome editing. Not only can we genetically engineer our crops, various microorganisms and other animals, but now, we have opened up the possibility for human genome editing. What are we to make of this new technology? Does it represent just another stage in the ongoing battle against genetic deformities, or rather a fateful step in the direction of seeing the human person as just another object of conquest in our mad desire to become the lords and possessors of nature?

1 Rob Stein.
2 Ibid.
In the 1990s and early 2000s, we completed the Human Genome Project, gaining access to the physical “stuff” that makes us human. The following development of CRISPR technology in the late 2010s thus gave rise to the possibility of modifying the human genome, an idea that can easily cause concern and worry as we ruminate on its possibilities, that is, if we assume the inevitable. Co-CRISPR engineer Feng Zhang was the first to adapt the CRISPR-Cas9 system in order to successfully modify the genomes in eukaryotic cells, and arguably the first to put the system into practice when he demonstrated a successful genome cleavage in human and mouse cells. This was the crucial step in the technology’s development that allowed its eventual use for modifying human embryos. Jiankui’s claim of successfully editing two embryo’s genomes thus made human genome modification a more sudden reality.

After the claim was leaked out from the press, responses from the medical and scientific communities were immediate. A council called The Second International Summit on Human Gene Editing in Hong Kong was formed to address the ethical implications of this particular instance, with its intended further use as a platform in order to face the overall implications of human genome-editing. In response, the summit committee did reinforce the need to be more conservative in approaches that required using any use of gene-editing in germline cells and human embryos. One of the members of the summit proposed that we should only use this method “in settings where there’s a clear unmet medical need and where there’s not an alternative viable approach.”

Just one day after the scandal, Zhang called for a “global moratorium” on using this technology for the genetic modification of human embryos. While acknowledging the potential use of CRISPR technology for the eradication of HIV in individuals, he argued that

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4 Ibid.
at this stage, the risks of [removing the CCR5 gene in a human embryo] seem to outweigh the potential benefits, not to mention that [this] will likely make a person much more susceptible for the West Nile Virus…there are already common and highly-effective methods to prevent transmission of HIV from a parent to unborn child.5

Zhang shared the consensus of the Summit, saying “it would be irresponsible to proceed with any germline editing without ‘broad societal consensus about the appropriateness of the proposed application.’”6 Overall, Zhang finds discomfort in the event and does suggest a temporary suspension of the use of this technology on human genome-editing. His statement below is a reflection on this case:

Not only do I see this as risky, but I am also deeply concerned about the lack of transparency surrounding this trial. All medical advances, gene editing or otherwise and particularly those that impact vulnerable populations, should be cautiously and thoughtfully tested, discussed openly with patients, physicians, scientists, and other community members, and implemented in an equitable way.7

This CRISPR scandal presents challenges that we must consider today. From it springs forth a number of questions such as the status of the human embryo and the freedoms of parents and doctors when considering genetic results of their unborn child. The idea of “designer-babies” even became a theoretical possibility. The possibilities of this technology, and yet also the prospects of its abuse, seem endless. There seems to be a general consensus that establishing clear policies will ensure the proper and responsible use of this technology. But is this enough? Will policies and stricter rules in the medical manuals satisfy our concerns for this technology and others like it? Or do they merely delay what seems inevitable, namely the widespread use of technologies that allow us to alter human genetics and produce human persons at will?

5 Antonio Regalado.  
6 “CRISPR timeline,” Broad Institute.  
7 Regalado.
These questions consider the political and practical sides of the issues surrounding biotechnology, the progress of society, and human dignity. Further, the questions raised by CRISPR technology are simply one aspect of our larger concern about the growing role of biotechnology in daily life. Technology is in our lives everywhere we look; it is hard to live in this society without it, even if we make it minimal in our everyday life. Biotechnology in particular is becoming a growing concern in American society: cloning, nanobots, pharmaceuticals, embryos out of the womb, and now, the genetic intervention in human embryos possible as we saw in the 2018 CRISPR case. The list goes on.

The products of human creativity and invention are astounding in this realm. Technology, especially in medicine, has powers to cure illnesses and modify our bodies and our lifestyles more precisely and easily than ever before. Biotechnology is the utilization of biological materials in an innovative way and it is not enough to simply institute policies in response to the practical questions raised by each emerging technique. Profound moral and philosophical questions begin to arise within us when we hear about these technological marvels, like the CRISPR case mentioned above. These include and are certainly not limited to: when does human life begin? What are the limits of manipulating the human person? What does our fervor about technological progress say about our society? And perhaps it all renders down to one of the deepest questions: what does it mean to be human, and how do we preserve who we fundamentally are as human beings?

To consider fundamental questions raised by situations such as this one, I will introduce the philosophical reflections of Leon R. Kass, M.D. in his work titled *Life, Liberty, and the Defense of Dignity: The Challenge for Bioethics*. Kass is not considered a traditional

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10 *Life, Liberty, and Defense of Dignity: The Challenges for Bioethics* from here on will be referred simply as *Life, Liberty and Defense of Dignity.*
philosopher; rather, he is esteemed as a medical doctor and public intellectual today. He is a living example of “an outsider” who has taken up philosophical approaches in his life, career, and responses to pressing ethical questions in today’s society, especially in modern medicine. In the course of his medical and professional career, Kass has taken the question of human dignity to heart. He experienced an intellectual conversion during his years in practice particularly when he began to pick up famous literary works such as Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World* and C.S. Lewis’ *The Abolition of Man*, as well as philosophical works such as Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* and Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*. By bolstering his medical background with literature and philosophy, he became keenly aware of the implications of the overall scientific project and its problematic pursuit of mastery over nature. Kass eventually shifted his entire practice of medicine and research into a search for human meaning and dignity; as a professor, he even supported his courses with the works of Aristotle, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Charles Darwin and books from the Old Testament. One of Kass’ most renowned roles was as chair of the President’s Council on Bioethics in 2001 when the embryonic stem cell research controversy arose during George W. Bush’s presidency.

Another dimension in Kass’ life is his foundation in Jewish Faith. Both Kass and his family were brought up in the Jewish faith; however, once he and his siblings grew older, his mother decided to make the household non-religious and instead have a focus on the “religion of morality.” His early life proves to be foundational to who he is today and how he expresses his moral philosophy. While Kass does not write as an observant Jew, he often refers to scripture as he continues his pursuit of bioethics and other intellectual endeavors today, advocating generally

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12 The term “scientific project” refers to the continuous progress of biological and other scientific innovation in the 21st century.
13 Harvey Flaumenhaft, 3.
for faiths that support the cultivation of moral reason, character, and a deep respect for the dignity of the human person. With his rich educational background, faithful outlook and reflective conscience, Kass shows us a deeper and very credible perspective on the sciences and our American society. Overall, in *Life, Liberty and Defense of Dignity*, Kass provides a compelling account of the dimensions of human dignity with which we can address our concerns about biotechnology. Although this book was published in the early 2000s, the questions that Kass asks and addresses are just as relevant today; they are fundamental questions we must face if we are concerned about our human identity and value at the hands of modern medicine.

Kass’ reflective approaches to the issues of modern science, politics, society, are all grounded by the question of human dignity. Additionally, while Kass is not a Christian writer, I will be arguing that his work supports Christian theological commitments. With Kass’ philosophical anthropology, we can be reasonably led into a theological realm when considering the question of human dignity and modern medicine and technology. While Kass does refer to biblical texts and Christian thought, he does not himself profess any faith in the biblical God, and instead utilizes scriptural passages to support his own argumentation, rather than basing reason on a particular faith. Yet, as Stephen F. Torraco puts it, “if these are in any way liabilities, in this case, they turn out to be his advantage.”

Much of Kass’ philosophical reflections and conclusions about this era of modern medicine and American culture either reflect notions found in Catholic moral theology, or pave the way in that direction. Thus, I argue that we should seriously consider Kass’ approach in conjunction with Christian thought as we confront issues in modern medicine. This will show how the approach to the Christian faith with and beyond

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14 Stephen F. Torraco.
reason is more preferable than mere reason alone when considering the issues of modern medicine and human dignity.

In this paper, I argue that joining Leon Kass’ philosophical anthropology with a Christian theological anthropology provides a compelling framework for addressing the questions raised by biotechnology. I will first provide a summary and analysis of his book and a defense of his approach. Then I will join his approach to Catholic theology, arguing that Kass is an ally in its endeavor. Finally, I will provide concluding thoughts on the need for the complementarity of faith and reason, especially for matters in biotechnology and ethics. It will be in the final section of this thesis that I will provide a few examples of Christian writers that take up a thoughtful, reflective approach to the sciences and contemporary bioethics.

II. THE PHILOSOPHICAL ANALYSIS OF LEON KASS

*Life, Liberty and the Defense of Dignity* is divided into three sections. In the first section, titled “Nature and Purposes of Technology and Ethics,” Kass presents us with the current state and culture of the liberal democracy of America and its relation to the current secular practices of bioethics. In the second section, “Ethical Challenges from Biotechnology,” he dedicates several chapters to particular medical technologies that we see today and are foreseeable in the future. Their ethical implications are also discussed here. In the final section titled, “Nature and Purposes of Biology,” Kass reflects on the fundamental problem of modern biology: physical reductionism. This philosophy is largely found in the sciences that manipulate matter, and in

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18 Medical technologies that Kass discusses include: embryonic research, *in vitro* fertilization, cloning and genetics, organ sales, and end-of-life procedures such as euthanasia. These issues are just as controversial today. While this book was written in the early 2000s, any other technologies not mentioned in Kass’ book still rest on the fundamental questions and concerns of human dignity that Kass grapples with in this book.

19 Physical reductionism and materialism refer to the philosophical perspective that all things are reducible to their parts, and in this case, the human body being reduced to “mechanized stuff [and] not interiorly striving towards any good” (See Hurley). Kass combats these two philosophical perspectives with Aristotle’s notion of the Good.
this case, human biology. It is a philosophy that Kass demands be changed if we are to recover and defend an authentic understanding of an “embodied” human dignity.\textsuperscript{20} Our biological sciences and even some notions of bioethics are largely decoupled from notions of basic human dignity.

[the] underlying scientific thought…modern biology reconceived the nature of the organic body, representing it not as something animated, purposive and striving, but as dead matter-in-motion. This reductive science has given us enormous power, but it offers us no standards to guide its use. Worse, it challenges our self-understanding as creatures of dignity, rendering us incapable of recognizing dangers to our humanity that arise from the very triumphs biology has made.\textsuperscript{21}

To change this, Kass suggests alternatives\textsuperscript{22} to the modern biology that dominates medicine.

Before working through an analysis of the book, a particular note about his writing is necessary. Kass has an interesting writing style that is worth recognizing because it emulates his reflective philosophical approach to modern medicine and bioethics. As mentioned earlier, this series of reflections is highly accessible to the everyday reader as well as the physician and scientist. His language is contemplative and thought-provoking. In order to introduce complex topics like human dignity, he begins with a series of either short statements or existential questions that draw the reader into a philosophical endeavor. Take, for example, his very first line in the foreword: “Stem cells. Cloning. The Human Genome Project. If the year 2001 was any indication, issues of bioethics will be a dominant concern of the new century…”\textsuperscript{23} A complex question or issue is then broken down into series of smaller sub-questions that clarify the original one, with heavy reflection to gain a deeper understanding of it, which, as no coincidence, is the

\textsuperscript{20} Thomas Hurley.
\textsuperscript{21} Ibid., 20.
\textsuperscript{22} Kass, \textit{Life, Liberty and Defense of Dignity: The Challenge for Bioethics}, 293.
\textsuperscript{23} Ibid., 1.
kind of approach that Kass argues for in regards to the fundamental questions that arise from issues in modern medicine, biology, and bioethics.

After a brief, broad introduction to the topic of modern medicine and biotechnology, Kass starts his philosophical inquiry with basic questions like “what exactly is technology?” Before we discuss a complex issue like the problems and ethical questions involved in modern medicine, it is best to know our terms. What is technology? Why do we think technology is a problem? And in what ways are we as American citizens contributing to the development of technology?

It is in his first section, “Nature and the Purposes of Technology and Ethics” that Kass addresses the three variables that contribute to concerns about biotechnology: American liberal democracy, our perceptions of the problem of technology itself, and the state of secular bioethics. Kass observes that the principles of our American society and our embrace of technology go hand-in-hand; we cannot isolate technology on its own. I will first start with Kass’ reflections on America’s liberal democracy; it will help to know these when I then discuss how Kass deconstructs our notions of modern technology.

America is a liberal democracy: a representative democracy which takes protection of individual liberties and properties as the purpose of government. While many of us today share the “rationalists’ dream of human perfectibility,” Kass notices that our Founding Founders were “hardly utopians” themselves,24 but they certainly embraced and encouraged both scientific and technological progress for the public good. Kass cites Article one, section eight of the U.S. Constitution:

\[\text{Ibid.},\ 49.\]
The Congress shall have power…to promote the progress of Science and useful Arts, by securing for limited Times to Authors and Inventors the exclusive Right to their respective Writings and Discoveries.25

Our Founders did not seem to encourage scientific and technological progress just for progress’ sake. Instead, Kass speculates that they encouraged scientific progress for the sake of the people, to “provide for the common defense, promote the general welfare, and, above all, secure the blessings of liberty to ourselves and our posterity.”26 Kass asks his readers: are we still making scientific progress for the sake of the people? Are we still committing our scientific projects to these principles as stated in this line of the Constitution? And even if we claim that we are, do we know what is good for us and what isn’t? Since, Kass argues, that our scientific and innovative endeavors are undermining qualities of our own humanity, we can see that we have strayed away from what our own Founding Fathers envisioned for scientific progress. If we do not pay attention to what it is that we are doing with our freedoms and liberties, especially as innovators and scientists, we increase the possibility of a dystopian society, with characteristics that we see in Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World.*

Throughout his reflections, Kass often references Huxley’s *Brave New World,* a story about biotechnology taken to the extreme in a society set in the future called the World State. *Brave New World* presents us with images such as the Central London Hatching and Conditioning Centre, where human embryos are manufactured in factories and psychologically conditioned to remove complex emotions and desires, and are predestined to a particular social class to serve a particular purpose to serve in society. Procreation has been outlawed, because to procreate means to leave human genetics to chance. Moreover, children are conditioned to
dislike things such as books and flowers, and to suppress any desires for authentic human relationships. With embryo factories, the society has complete control of the humans they manufacture. Genetic manipulation, and certain amounts of hormones, chemicals, and even oxygen deprivation determine the embryos’ fate. For example, those destined to be Alphas, the highest social class, are the least stunned in their embryonic gestation period. As humans live out their predestined lives, life is simple; they carry out their tasks in proportion to their predestined purpose in society, and without complex human emotions, live without complex human problems. The World State runs like clockwork because the complexities of human life are removed. The arts, natural sciences, and religion are sacrificed in order to properly run society. Getting rid of God is essential; the notion of a God is associated with societies that experience suffering. The World State claims to have taken control of human flourishing by eliminating suffering. The use of “soma,” a recreational drug that was used to tame or reduce any unhappiness within individuals, was used in efforts to sustain a society of social harmony. Indulging the senses became a necessitated hobby for the society to flourish because it drove consumerism, and consumerism was the success of the society. The World State runs like a well-oiled machine. It is only when characters Bernard Marx and Helmholtz Watson become increasingly dissatisfied with their jobs that order becomes disrupted and authentic qualities of humanity come to fruition, albeit in a gruesome way. Through this storyline, Huxley shows us the consequences we could face if we embrace of biotechnology to the extreme.27 It may come as a surprise that this novel was written in the 1930s; however, just as Kass points out, this novel is ever more relevant today. Kass uses the images in Brave New World as a consistent reference

27 See Aldous Huxley’s novel Brave New World. Published by the Harper Brothers in New York, 1932.
point regarding dangers of embracing modern medicine and the fervent pursuits in
biotechnology.

According to Kass, talking about concerns we have with biotechnology and human
dignity requires us to look at a bigger picture: our society and its inner dimensions. Our
American ideals and ideals of the modern sciences are intertwined when we seek to understand
matters pertaining to biotechnology. I will continue Kass’ reflections on our liberal democracy,
bring in its relationship with technology, and then discuss today’s practices of bioethics.

Kass observes that the ideals of a liberal democracy lay a perfect foundation for
technological progress and growth. We, the American nation, are rich in liberties and freedoms:
economic freedom, personal freedom, intellectual freedom, and enterprise. On the other hand,
our nation is a mass society, with mass culture, big government, and multinational corporations,
all of which thrive because of the promises of technology – faster and more efficient
communication, social media, and so on, are incorporated in our daily lives and in our work
places. It is very difficult to escape completely from technology in American society.

We also thrive on materialism and consumerism. We have blurred the line that
distinguishes needs from wants. We are a culture driven by the acquisition of things. Having
things, like money, exquisite housing and appliances, immediately satisfy what we think we
desire. We are consumers of technology, too; we live immersed in it, needing or wanting it for
one reason or another, anywhere from work requirements to the simple pleasure of having an
iPad at our convenience.

As rational and creative beings, our exercise of reason and creativity opens up countless
possibilities; with our intelligence, we can create almost anything we put our minds to – touch-
screens, Alexa, tesla cars… all we need is the materials to make our inventive dreams a reality.
Our own biology and the study of life has been a driving pursuit of the human mind for centuries. It is the study of the material that makes us who we are, and of the fundamental building blocks of the planet earth. When modern biology meets the human passion for invention, then, suddenly, we have nature at our disposal like never before. From the latest in human genetics (like we saw in the 2018 CRISPR scandal) to the pharmaceuticals that keep our dying patients comfortable, to the buying and selling of human organs, biotechnology is at its peak. And we have the liberties and the freedoms to continue our march towards progress.

Kass observes that our American society has a rather “mixed” relationship with “the technological project.”28 The American people thrive on the liberties and freedoms given to them in our liberal democracy, and as mentioned before, this includes the freedom to invent, the freedom to make progress. Our liberal democracy therefore is very hospitable to technological growth, economic and personal freedom, the constant striving for improvement, personal creativity and invention. Kass reminds us that he is simply cautious when it comes to modern science and technology and all its promises. They would only become problematic if we “embrac[e] [their] visions wholeheartedly.”29

It seems like a rather monumental task for one person to try to convince and educate a majority of the American population on both the meaning of liberal democracy and how to reshape our minds to understand our current embrace of technology and modern medicine. Nevertheless, it is what Kass intends do. He remarks that it is worth the effort, and its better than going the route of ignorance or complacency. It would be a shame to do nothing at all.

28 Kass, 50.
29 Ibid.
So far, I have discussed a few of Kass’ reflections on liberal democracy and technology. The third variable that complicates the equation is today’s practices of bioethics, of which Kass largely disapproves. Kass observes that in secular bioethics practices, the field is by and large “talk” and theory. Bioethicists theorize about constructed scenarios to which we can apply particular theories that may help us determine what to do. Bioethics in this sense is very systematic: “it seeks to analyze and clarify moral argumentation; to establish…ground rules for justifying our decisions; to lay down rules and guidelines, principles and procedures, for addressing ethical dilemmas.”\(^{30}\) Kass notices how rationalized the field of bioethics has become, and yet we are trying to impose them on real human beings with real life-experiences: “it spends little time on what genuinely moves people to act – their motives and passions: that is, loves and hates, hopes and fears, pride and prejudice, matters that are sometimes dismissed as nonethical or irrational because they are not simply reducible to logos.”\(^{31}\) In summary: bioethics today focuses on matters that are “conceptual” and “logical,”\(^{32}\) and not on the human being in his/her authentic form, an “embodied soul,” who is needy and aspiring, “enmeshed in formative relations with other human beings.”\(^{33}\) Kass determines that not only is modern science diminishing the dignity of the human being, but our modern-day approaches to bioethics is also just as at fault. Neither are contributing to any sense of real human dignity; they are only making the problem worse.

While one might think that focus on “personhood” is a way to address these broader issues, Kass warns against the shortcomings of this term: when one is said to have personhood,

\(^{30}\) Kass, 57.
\(^{31}\) Ibid., 61.
\(^{32}\) Ibid.
\(^{33}\) Ibid.
one has the capability of an “independent rational will or [is] the conscious subject.” The danger in using the term personhood in this way lies in a the very narrow approach to defining the human being: a rational being that can will certain things of their choosing. This notion of personhood lays the foundations for the notion of autonomy, the right of patients to choose their medical care without the influence from their provider.

In medical ethics classes, we are often taught how to isolate problems from particular scenarios. But when we experience or face complicated situations such as end-of-life care and issues of physician-assisted suicide, our relationships and real human feelings are pushed to the wayside, and ultimately reduced to “ethical questions” such as when to “pull the plug” or who pulls the plug.

In his reflections on ethics today, Kass makes the attempt to unearth the shortcomings and faults of modern approaches in bioethics. He observes seven general characteristics:

1. Ethics is seen as a field of theorizing and speculation; much of our ethics is theory-based.
2. Not only is our ethics theory-based, but it is based in the academic field of philosophical ethics.
3. The philosophical ethics that we often favor is heavily rationalist.
4. By using rationalist thinking, we isolate scenarios for problem-solving.
5. Because our ethics is centered on problem-solving, it further abstracts from “the rich context of our moral life,” isolating only extreme cases.
6. Rational problem-solving results in rational ideals or rules that are made to govern conduct.

34 Ibid.
35 “Code of Medical Ethics” by the American Medical Association.
36 Kass, 62.
37 Ibid.
7. By embracing this rationalist approach, our moral thought leads into the direction of moral ideology, which is several steps removed from our moral life as lived.\(^\text{38}\)

For Kass, ethics as theory with application does not respond adequately to the complexities, emotions, desires, and aspirations associated with the authentic human experience. Kass urges that we embrace this reality and work \textit{with} it, not against it. We can develop good ethics based on our real lives, not by abstracting from them.

So far, I have discussed Kass’ reflections on American liberal democracy, modern science and technology, and today’s practices of bioethics. I will now show how Kass explains how we may respond to these current challenges. One of the major elements to pay attention to is that Kass’ suggestions for a shift in our bioethics are based on his commitment to Aristotelian thought. Aristotle’s anthropology largely centered on concrete human experience. He is in stark contrast to Platonian philosophy, who had an idealistic notion of the Forms and that ultimately things that were beyond our concrete reality. In short, Aristotle centered his discourse on human nature in his \textit{Nicomachean Ethics} on the cultivation of reasonable and good virtues for a life well-lived. Kass’ “ethics as practice with reflection” is a modern demonstration of these notions.

There is an obvious contrast between ethics as theory with application and ethics as practice with reflection. The notion of ethics as practice with reflection isn’t new; Kass refers to English philosopher Michael Oakeshott’s “Tower of Babel,”\(^\text{39}\) which also supports this kind of moral life. Oakeshott prefers this moral life, called one of “habit of affection and behavior”\(^\text{40}\) over the moral life of “self-conscious application of moral criterion,” arguing that society

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\(^{38}\) \textit{Ibid.}, 63.
\(^{39}\) Michael Oakeshott.
\(^{40}\) Kass, 69.
constantly finds disadvantages with and suffers from the latter, just like Kass argues against
rationalist ethics that we use in bioethics today. 41 The moral life of habits of affection and
behavior is strongly Aristotelian. Both Kass and Oakeshott advocate for this kind of moral life;
living through the concrete good habits of character as if they were second nature.

How do we acquire moral ways and learn this moral life Kass suggests? We must begin
to form our character in a conscious effort, and surround ourselves with others who “habitually
live in a certain manner…the same [way] we acquire our native language.”42 When we learn our
native language, including its particular nuances and slang, we learn it naturally through
experience, in our homes and from others around us. Of course, we learn the rules of our
language in a couple of classes, but our main source of language is from immersion; we are born
into a place that speaks it. We hardly communicate by “applying” the rules of English in our
everyday conversation. Speech simply becomes habit, no longer requiring even second thought.
We just speak it.

Kass agrees with Oakeshott and advocates for this moral life of habit and behavior. We
can begin by educating ourselves through the careful imitation of good behavior, gradually
integrating it into our own practices in our lives. Habits turn into customs, and customs carry on
through generations. This is moral education in practice. As Oakeshott says,

…a man may be said to have acquired most thoroughly what this kind of moral education
can teach him when his moral dispositions are inseverably connected with his amour-
propre43, when the spring of his conduct is not an attachment to an ideal or a felt duty to
obey a rule, but his [own] self-esteem, and when to act wrongly is felt as diminution of
his self-esteem.44

41 Ibid.
42 Ibid., 70.
43 “amour-propre” is a term used by philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau, meaning love of self, and having a need to
be recognized by others as having value and therefore to be treated with respect.
44 Oakeshott, Rationalism in Politics, see Kass, p. 71.
Habitual practice “informs its source:”45 by repeated immersion in practices of daily living, our hearts and consciences are continually formed by them. The cultivation of moral content in our sense of self-esteem is practical to Kass because practicing ethics is “nothing less than a full self-expression.”46 The practice of ethics comes from within us, and therefore, we need ways to form the moral character of the individuals in our communities.

This moral philosophy seems to require a good environment, stable relationships and accessible education. This assumption is a bold reminder that not everyone has these experiences and opportunities, which means we must to turn to our current institutions that do cultivate this kind of moral life and strengthen their efforts in whatever ways we can. Kass calls us to participate in our communities, giving of ourselves for the betterment of them. Family life, schools, churches, synagogues, public services and the like “all have roles to play in such moral education,”47 and we must give our time and attention to these institutions for the sake of the strengthening of our moral character.

Taking up a life centered on moral education and the education of others is a task we must all participate in for the sake of retaining human dignity in our culture. Moral education has the capacity to address the fears and concerns associated with biotechnology because it prioritizes the formation of good human character. One’s moral character is reflected in our deliberated actions, including the ways in which we are responding to the age of biotechnology today, and forming better consciences for the future.

One of the major human feelings brought forth from issues in biotechnology is fear; fear of the unknown, fear of death. Our increasing fears of aging and death manifest themselves in the

45 Kass, 71.
46 On Oakeshott’s notions of moral education, see Kass, 71.
47 Ibid.
continual invention of new biotechnologies that attempt to quell these fears with the promises of longevity and even immortality. Conquering death, relieving man’s estate, and mastering nature are all vivid examples of ends that we are attempting to achieve as these endeavors continue. We are clearly addressing human fears and desires in the wrong way. We need to realize that we have the wrong ends. The time to realize this is now; otherwise, we risk becoming more submissive to the technologies that serve us and to their promises like immortality. Slowly but surely, we risk dehumanizing ourselves and leading ourselves down the path of a dystopian society. Kass calls this the “tragic embrace” of technology:

Technology has done, and will likely continue to do, wonders for our health and longevity, for the defense of our freedom and for our prosperity…yet, it 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 midges. Our embrace of technology is would thus turn out to be tragic, unless we redeem ourselves by nontechnological ideas and practices, today both increasingly beleaguered.48

Keep in mind that Kass is not an absolute enemy to science and technology. He is a doctor, himself, after all, keenly aware of the dangers of completely and blindly embracing technology. Kass’ education outside of his medical profession largely contributed to his transformed outlook; taking up literature and philosophy on issues surround humanity and society proved to be incredibly fruitful for him. Like Kass, we can do the same. It is important to pay attention to what we are doing, and change our outlook, so that we do not lose who we fundamentally are and what we fundamentally have – human dignity. One way to start this endeavor is to begin to form – or reform – our consciences and our lifestyle, through studies in the liberal arts and learning the ways of reflective living. Kass advocates for the increase in moral education – a suggestion that is practical, not far out of reach. All too often we may think that big problems

48 Ibid., 22.
require large-scale solutions that are just too difficult to tackle, like the issue of “human dignity.” Kass shows us that recovering and reforming our views on human dignity and human flourishing is much more accessible than we think. It starts with what we can do right now to form the next generation.

To face the new challenges in bioethics today, we must work together as a human community, not leave these challenges to the elite or the professionals alone. For Kass, ethics is less about formulating rules and regulations, and instead about character formation of ourselves and others, requiring us all to consider taking up responsibilities associated with the moral education and formation of the people around us and of the next generation.

Returning to Kass’ reflections on caring for the “the moral health of our community,” this largely involves making efforts to strengthen the goods that we already have, namely, the institutions and structures that cultivate good habits of moral affection and conduct – the family, our religious institutions, public-service associations, just to name a few. Strengthening these places of good fruit, in ways we deem fit, can result in the promotion of the formation of behaviors and habits in our citizens. Kass provides an example of how this approach may manifest in our communities: “It may turn out, for instance, the changes in divorce law or child care practices are ethically far more deserving of our attention than arguments about the status of the in vitro embryo or the rights of its biological progenitors.”

Realizing the multitude of issues in communities, Kass takes the approach of prioritization. In this example, family relationships and the way in which children are cared for are prioritized over the attempt to settle an on-going debate about the status of an embryo.

49 Ibid., 73.
50 Ibid.
Concrete relationship is prioritized over theoretical speculation in this particular example. This is not to disregard the importance of such topics like the status of lab embryos altogether; it is just logically more important to Kass to devote more immediate attention to what is right in front of us first.

But how does this relate to issues of biotechnology, ones that are often times theoretical, because they speculate about tremendously concerning consequences? Questions like “what do we make of the possibility of ‘designer babies?’” or “what is the status of the in vitro embryo?” We can indeed bridge this apparent gap between immediate concern and concerns of the future. Kass successfully bridges this gap, calling to mind our medical institutions and the education of our future medical professionals.

It is imperative that we give attention to our medical institutions that are shaping medical practice and the attitudes and habits of the medical professionals within it. Medical professionals of all kinds are still moral agents, still capable of being formed as people. There are many routes to take here: give attention to how medical administrators are recruited and educated. Change the way that they are educated so that their consciences are deepened. Encourage them to deepen their understanding of the meaning of humanity. Teach inner reflection and the continual habit of practice with reflection. This is the way we take action; and these efforts can have lasting effects.

Recall the 2018 CRISPR scandal described at the beginning of this paper. Jiankui claimed to have successfully edited two twin embryos in attempt to “cure” them from the genetically-passed down HIV from their father. It was the first time that the CRISPR technology was claimed to have been used on human beings. Imagine the sense of power that Jiankui may

51 Ibid., 74.
have felt by accomplishing this. Take into consideration the reaction of the scientific community when they found out after the claim was made, and the general public’s reaction to the new reality of embryonic genome-editing. As we rethink this situation, if we take the approach like Kass is suggesting, our perspective may radically shift. A new formation of human character and a reformed education of our medical personnel and ourselves is needed if we are to change how we deliberate our actions.

Not only are we in need of a new ethics, but we also need to alter our views in modern biology. Modern biology, known to have characteristics of reductionism as mentioned in the beginning of this thesis, is almost totally decoupled from the lived experiences of authentic human life. Instead, biology has become an isolated discipline whose work remains consistent with the scientific method, abstracting itself from all the other dimensions of human life. The study of life in the medical field has become the study of mechanisms, parts, and other isolated features of a whole living entity. According to Kass, modern biology has largely lost an understanding of wholeness, being more concerned with how things work rather than what things are. Kass reminds us that it didn’t always used to be this way. It is in the last section of his book, “Nature and Purposes of Biology,” that Kass discusses the shortcomings of modern biology and proposes alternative ideas and routes for consideration. Everything in this section centers around this question by Kass: “Does biology today, defined as the science of life, do justice to the beings that live?”

Ancient biology, Kass reminds us, is radically different from the discipline today. It sought knowledge of what things were, a thing “to be contemplated as an end itself.” Kass

52 Ibid., 277.
53 Ibid., 278.
54 Ibid.
explains that the pivotal transition from ancient biology to modern biology was when Descartes made sciences “practical,” a means to an end. The sciences were viewed materially, to be used in an effort to “yield power and ultimately lead to human mastery and ownership of nature.” Evidently, then, we can see that modern biology and technology are “a means for relief and comfort of all humanity…” The philosophies of reductionism and materialism are now dominating views in the biological sciences, as wholes are reduced to their parts for further investigation and exploitation. While Kass does not deny the importance of the scientific method in leading to the incredible advances in our understanding of how the human body works, he is concerned about the problematic philosophy associated with it.

Reductionism and materialism are “prejudices that seek to explain the structure and activity of organized bodies solely in terms of their materials.” Kass rejects them; we cannot attribute our knowledge of particular parts to the truth of the whole. Animals and human beings have capacities to do things – in Aristotelian terms, powers – which in themselves are not material. They may reside in the material parts, or seem inseparable, but that does not mean that these capacities are the material parts. Kass uses the example of the power of sight, or the activity of seeing. Aristotle says that we know that an organ (the eye) takes up space – it has extension; we could hold it in our hand. The power of sight, or the capacity to see, does not itself take up space. Kass explains that a blind neuroscientist could provide all quantitative details about how sight works, from the stimulus of light to the responses of the brain, but he cannot adequately know sight, for he cannot actually see: “Sight can be known only by one who sees.”

We simply cannot equate the wholeness of sight to the description of all of its working

55 Ibid., 279.
56 Ibid.
57 Ibid., 284.
58 Ibid., 284.
mechanisms and parts. It is not true to life, then, to “identify it with its material substratum.”

Thus, reductionism and materialism simply cannot be adequate approaches for the study of life. Modern biology, therefore, by this example, does not do justice to the being that lives.

Kass boldly concludes that much of modern biology is dehumanizing, because of its embrace of rationalistic, reductionistic, and materialistic philosophies that simply do not do justice to the life it claims to study. One may respond, how can the modern sciences and biology be “dehumanizing” if modern scientific activities are themselves expressions of our “highest humanity,” – intellect, curiosity, dexterity, rationality, and perfectibility?

Kass refutes by responding plainly, “man does not live by rationality alone.” He asks us to remember the “foundations of our humanity,” or what makes us human: “our sentiments, loves, attitudes, mores and character, as well as the familial, social, religious and political institutions that nourish and are nourished by them – are not laid by scientific reason or rational technique, and may in truth be undermined by them…”

The use of scientific rationality alone is utterly unreasonable to Kass, and much of modern biology unfortunately has embraced that route. In this sense, it does not do justice to the beings that live. It does not do justice to the human life as lived, either. Human experiences, like the power of sight as discussed earlier, are not utterly equivalent to the sum of the mechanisms that allow us to see, or “experience” seeing.

Modern biology then, this so-called study of life, is contradicting itself. If the discipline isn’t doing justice to the life it studies, how can it say that it even is the study of life? Kass reminds us that “life” is about wholeness; modern studies in biology are studying parts,

59 Ibid.
60 Ibid., 281.
61 Ibid.
62 Ibid.
mechanisms – how things work – and attributing its conclusions to the whole entity that contains them. Kass shows us that said disconnect, as he further refutes reductionism:

Whole organisms are confusing; it is easier to study their parts. Even the visible parts are too confusing. For greater precision, one works with cells…or isolated and purified molecules. Organisms are explained in terms of genes; vital functions are explained by the motions and interactions of non-living molecules. This is, up to a point, a perfectly reasonable strategy; but we must not forget that we are getting a partial – both biased and incomplete – view. The functions of the parts…often differ from what they are normally…when they are, indeed, parts of the whole. Further, the wholes have powers and activities not found in the parts alone…even the existence of the whole, as a whole, is inexplicable on reductionist grounds. What accounts for the special unity and active wholeness of each living being, and the effort it makes, instinctively, to preserve its integrity? Analysis will never be able to say.63

Kass does not entirely attribute his qualms about modern biology to all modern biologists; he recognizes that many “unorthodox” ones reject reductionism and other similar philosophies. Kass lists a number of contemporary and ancient biologists whose approaches are truly an alternative from mainstream orthodox biology.64 He goes all the way back to the ever-relevant Aristotle, the “first biologist of nature-in-its-ordinary-course.”65 Aristotle pondered questions of “being over becoming, form over matter, purposiveness over moving causes, and wholes over parts,” whose idea of the soul was an “immanent and embodied principle of all vital activity,”66 and whose scientific endeavors were “an ever-deepening reflection on the natures and the causes of the beings manifest to us in ordinary experience.”67 Kass praises Aristotle, the original biologist, whose study of life should influence the way we study it today.

63 Ibid., 283.
64 See Kass’ summaries on various unorthodox views of biologists, including Adolf Portmann, Erwin Straus, Oliver Sacks, and Hans Jonas, p. 294.
65 Ibid.
66 Rejecting the ghost-in-the-machine notion of a soul.
67 Ibid.
III. A DEFENSE OF KASS’ PHILOSOPHICAL APPROACH

In *Life, Liberty and the Defense of Dignity*, Kass examines and combines political and philosophical theories, new and old, in various ways in order assess contemporary bioethical and other ethical and existential questions. He outlines an approach that integrates multiple perspectives, invites readers into reflection, and as I will argue later, even opens the door to theological discussion. It is the opposite of a rigid or outlined theory, because, as he discusses, this approach does not give due respect to the lived human experience. If we are talking about an issue like human dignity, rigid theory is not going to get us very far.

It may be a bold claim, but Kass’ accessible philosophical approach is not difficult to grasp. It has many implications and many angles that one can discuss, and his message is rich in reflection and is considerably some good food for thought. At the same time, his endeavor can be shared by everybody: to re-cultivate our human dignity amidst a society immersed in technology and modern science. We may not be satisfied with American society, but that doesn’t mean we cannot make efforts to change it for the better. Kass warns us against complacency, and rather promotes urgency; human dignity has been put off to the wayside for too long. It is evident in the endeavors of modern biology and in the field of modern bioethics. Let us not push the renewal of human dignity over to the next generation for them to handle. Let us start now, so that future generations are already on the path to human flourishing. Overtime, this puts us in the direction toward a flourishing human society rather than down the path of a dystopian nightmare.

Perhaps a rebuttal to the aforementioned statements is this: why care about the fate of humanity at all; why does all of this talk about human dignity matter? Kass says in the very
beginning of his book: if we believe that our individual selves have any sort of dignity, or value whatsoever, then surely, we can attribute this quality to the rest of our human neighbors. If we recognize human dignity, then we illuminate the effects society has on it. Both recognizing human dignity and cultivating moral education in support of it forces us to get out of ourselves and recognize the value of others and the whole of society. More on this will be discussed in the section titled, “Kass and the Door to Christian Theology.” For now, this next section will discuss critiques of Kass’ approaches to modernity, ethics, and biotechnology, in a joint article written by three authors, titled, “Brave New Worlds: Philosophy, Politics, and Science in Human Biotechnology.” In this article, authors Morgan, Shanahan, and Welsh make five major claims against Kass’ approach: he distorts the sciences in order to assist his argument, has an unachievable notion of public policy, has too idealistic of an overall vision of human dignity, is too biased towards the revival of ancient thought and neglects to incorporate modern perspectives, and exploits public fear by claiming that any steps in the wrong direction only leads us one step closer to the society of Brave New World.

In Life, Liberty and the Defense of Dignity, Kass advises us to reject the world of temptations of technology and choose the world of virtue, but these authors find his perspectives on the social sciences and the hard sciences to be largely misconstrued for the sake of making his point. To them, Kass’ presentation of the sciences is all too negative, allowing for him to impose his remedy that includes virtue theory in philosophy. For example, these authors find that Kass makes bold claims that by-and-large assume biotechnology is a direct attack on human dignity, distorting the actual reality of the biotechnological enterprise and giving it a negative name. Furthermore, he assumes that the overall scientific project is “driven by a kind of scientific or

technological determinism that is beyond the control of scientists themselves,” and simultaneously attacks scientists for being “unselfconscious;” suggesting that the work of ethicists control scientific enterprise instead of them.70

Next, these authors also address Kass’ take on public policy for the sciences. They reject Kass’ suggestive notion of scientific policy be “guided by a wisdom of moral repugnance.”71 Since Kass declares us to be so uneasy with biotechnology, he seems to view this as our consciences telling us that its plainly wrong. And, if this is the same “conscience” that would dictate policy, this causes for alarm, because it causes ambiguity in the way policy-making would operate. It seems that his approach negatively affects the process of public policy if taken word for word. They note obstacles such as “how are we supposed to know what ‘conscience’ is,” or how it could operate in one person or another? How many of us must be “morally repelled”72 before we make the motions to alter particular policies? What if others do not share the same qualities of this esteemed “conscience,” are they considered “morally blind,” having a faulty conscience? It appears to these authors that Kass’ view of moral conscience is not accessible to everyone, and that it is only accessible to esteemed intellectuals. Morgan, Shanahan and Welsh speculate that if we did run policy by this notion of unease within our consciences, with something like genetic cloning, and if this “unease” would be sufficient reason to ban it, this only implies that other policy would be directed by this same logic, putting other social policies in danger.73

70 S. Philip Morgan, Suzanne Shanahan, and Whitey Welsh.
71 Ibid., 129.
72 Ibid.
73 Ibid.
A third criticism of these authors is that Kass appears too idealistic in his effort to revive human dignity by attempting to convince everyone to board the train of living a life based on virtue ethics. Kass seems to be providing political framework that can only be guided by moral absolutes, leaving no room for further debate; an unattainable ideal in our American society.74

Fourthly, Kass is trying to make ancient arguments relevant to modern discussion, but with bias in favor of ancient thought, which is perfectly acceptable in itself; all academics try to make their work relevant. However, these authors conclude that the problem with Kass’ bias toward ancient thought is that he presents such an ideological perspective that it appears unattainable for people today, and it disregards other options that are potentially more pertinent than his own, not allowing for the incorporation of modern perspectives.75

Finally, these authors sense an air of arrogance in his idealized method for confronting issues in biotechnology and politics, which causes him to . They conclude that Kass “offers a vigorous expression” of one particular perspective in his writings, but distorts other perspectives or ignores others in the process.76 Using this “arrogant,” self-imposed moral authority, he exploits public fear by claiming that any step considered to be “morally bad” is just one more step toward the Brave New World. He also exploits “self-ordained moral authority,” by his suggestions of moral conscience that imply a certain inaccessibility of it, and that public policy could only be properly driven by it. Kass is a critic of modernity and its underlying principles, ultimately concluding that the “modern project is misguided,”77 a claim that is too bold for these critics.

74 Ibid., 130.
75 Ibid., 136.
76 Ibid., 142.
77 Ibid., 136.
These authors clarify that their intention was not to provide solutions to the difficult issues raised by biotechnology nor to their critiques of Kass, but instead, they wanted to “level the playing field” for further bioethics debate by “blunting” Kass’ self-proclaimed moral authority as chair of the President’s Commission on Bioethics. Kass is seen to be more narrow-minded in his efforts because his views neglect to recognize the potential for different arguments to offer a wider range of solutions. Morgan, Shanahan and Welsh suggest instead that we pair Kass’ views beside other perspectives so that we widen the debate in bioethics and the means and ends of American society, rather than assess his work alone. They applaud Kass’ efforts to reject “laissez-fair science” and societal complacency, but disapprove of the way he uses moral ideology nor his dramatic dystopian claims about biotechnology backed by his allusions to Huxley’s *Brave New World* to make his moral claims.78

These particular critiques of Leon Kass remind us that Kass’ work is far from a perfect answer to the difficulties we face in our American society of modern medicine and technology. However, these authors regard Kass to be a lower source of moral authority than he assumes and than we should recognize him for.

It was my own understanding in my analysis of *Life, Liberty and the Defense of Dignity* that Kass makes the attempt to accurately voice concerns from the general public on new biotechnology and the practices of modern medicine and ethics. He esteems the general public for having considerable knowledge of human life as lived, “taking [their] bearings from lived experience.”79 By shifting his attention to the people, their concerns and how lives are lived, he appears to be focusing on building up the human community, not arrogantly looking down upon

78 Ibid., 144.
79 Kass, 75.
The reason he advocates for the approaches of virtue ethics and moral education largely has to do with the fact that they seem most fitting for addressing the collective of the American people. These practices are accessible to us; reflecting on our actions and learning ways to live well are important if we want to enact positive change in society. This speaks to the physician, the scientist, and the ethicist as well. Kass advocates for caring for the “the moral health of our community,” suggesting efforts such as strengthening the good thing we already have namely, the institutions and structures that cultivate good habits of moral affection and conduct – the family, our religious institutions, public-service associations, just to name a few. Strengthening these places help us to strengthen the people within them. This increases our “moral capitol,” allowing us to continually seek ways to promote moral wisdom in our local communities. Furthermore, we must give our attention to the medical institutions and schools that form our physicians and scientists. We must think about the kinds of people we are producing; this claim isn’t made on the basis of a moral philosophy; it’s common sense.

I would not say that Kass’ notions of moral conscience are unrealistic and inaccessible; rather I see them as quite the opposite; he suggests a practical approach in which we as a human community can better ourselves and others so as not to lose sight of our human dignity, which requires some humility on our part and the willingness to reflect on and improve our moral character. It requires us to exercise our human conscience, which affect our actions, which in turn, inform our conscience. This is Kass’ ethics as practice with reflection in motion – the continual exercise of moral conscience and improvement of moral character. This does not

80 Ibid., 73.
81 Ibid., 74.
appear to be an inaccessible task, nor an overly-idealized notion of “conscience.” In fact, by all of us making the effort, a sense of unity among us in our efforts can emerge.

Morgan, Shanahan, and Welsh also criticize Kass’ idealistic and inaccessible endeavor to understand human nature and morality. To Kass, however, discerning human goods and what constitutes human flourishing in society is a responsibility that we must take up as ordinary human beings. Reaching for these “ideals” is a “noble aspiration – one that is not utterly fruitless.” Recognizing the inevitable difficulties this endeavor implies, these supposed ideals are nonetheless worth striving towards in our lifetimes. It gives us a direction, an aim, a goal.

While Morgan, Shanahan, and Welsh see a disconnect between Kass’ so-called philosophical idealism and the practicality of public policy, it appears to me that Kass seems aware of the relationship his philosophical approaches have with the reality of policy-making. He states his idealistic vision here: “the task of harmonizing competing goods, both for any individual and especially among individuals who seek them [will] always remain the work of a largely autonomous ethical and political science, helped, where possible, with insights mysteriously received from source not under strict human command.” Instead of interpreting this to be an unrealistic and unachievable ideal for political bodies, I interpret this as a vision to be in continuous action towards a goal. Paying careful attention to the words “will always remain the work,” shows us that Kass recognizes the limitations of ourselves and our institutions, and that because of this, we should always work towards these kinds of ends in as unified a way as possible, while humbly accepting that we cannot do it all. He then finally points to a source beyond ourselves that will aid us in our endeavors. Here serves as my first point of evidence that

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82 Ibid., 297.
83 Ibid.
Kass’ insights have unrecognized theological underpinnings, showing that his use of reason appears to ultimately lead him to something beyond it. It is in this next section that I will discuss the way Kass actually opens the door to theological insights, specifically, those of Christian theology.

IV. KASS AND THE DOOR TO CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY

Kass’ philosophical, reflective approach often incorporates scriptural references and advocates for the strengthening of religious institutions because they support and cultivate notions of human dignity. In this sense, Kass shows that faith traditions and institutions lend support to morality and reason. This suggests that Kass sees faith and faith traditions as only means to an end, being valuable to the extent that they serve as instruments for the development of reason and public morality. In Christian theology, however, reason supports faith, and the faith goes beyond reason when it expresses truth in the revelation of Christ. Interestingly, as I will show, Kass’ philosophical reflections and approaches in Life, Liberty and Defense of Dignity tend to reflect much of those in Christian theology. In fact, in an article titled, “Listening to Nature: The Significance of Leon Kass for Catholic Moral Theology,” Stephen F. Torraco comes to this conclusion. Admiring Kass’ insights and methods, he finds them to be significant for Catholic moral theology on the order of creation and for the field of biomedical ethics. This is evidence that Kass’ philosophy has been shown to correlate to Christian theological principles and that Christian theological principles are in turn able to be shown in a new light by Kass’ language. In this next section, I will provide an analysis of Torraco’s support for Leon Kass and the significance of his insights for Catholic moral theology and bioethics. Torraco shows us that

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84 Reverend Stephen F. Torraco, Ph.D. was an associate professor of theology at Assumption College, MA.
Catholic theology’s approach to ecological and biomedical issues can be supported with an enriched “outsider’s” perspective, i.e., Kass’, which in turn is evidence that Kass’ philosophical anthropology just might hint towards a Christian theological approach.

Torraco finds the adoption of Kass’ principles to be enriching to Catholic theology, further providing evidence towards my argument in favor of Kass’ philosophical anthropology and its infusion with Christian theology when addressing questions in bioethics. In addition to Torraco’s insights, I will be analyzing those of contemporary theologian Celia Deane-Drummond in her work *Genetics and Christian Ethics*. I will now show how Kass’ insights are commensurate with Catholic theology and therefore that Catholics can see him as an ally in their commitment to promote human dignity in the public sphere using these two theologians’ perspectives. After this, I will discuss how Kass’ project needs to move beyond reason to faith and reason in order to bring about his goal of promoting human flourishing in my concluding thoughts to this thesis.

In Torraco’s Listening to Nature article, an adoption of Kass’ thoughtful approach to nature is shown to assist Catholic theology as it continues to recover insightful wisdom regarding the order of creation, and that together, they shed light on modern medicine and bioethics. Torraco advocates for the approach he calls “listening to nature,” where one learns to receive and contemplate nature rather than see only its utilitarian value. In his article, Torraco integrates Kass’ reflective philosophical biology with the Christian approach to creation to show that “listening” to nature has positive effects in our moral lives. As he puts it, “We are further away from ‘listening’ to nature than ever before…but we do not necessarily have to resign
ourselves to the …path of least resistance…there is an alternative path, a steeper, slower-going but not impossible pathway to the recovery of the human ability to ‘listen’ to nature’s design.”

Torraco explains that human beings have largely adapted to modern science and technology and their conveniences so much that they have become “unconscious of the impact of modern science and technology on the very meaning of living humanly.” We have become so complacent towards modern science and technology that we find it difficult to imagine how exactly people before us lived without it. The same applies to modern medicine. Surely, our newest medical technologies show that we are more advanced than any other time period, able to target illness and disease better than ever before. We may be more advanced than any other time in history; but we may be losing sight of the wisdom that came from the past, too. Both Torraco and Kass encourage us to retrieve that wisdom so that it can become an integral part of our moral education and practices, be it philosophical, theological, or political notions that originated in those times. We can look back and find deep significance of them for our practices today, so that we can relearn the way of listening to others and to nature, rather than continually exploit these gifts without a second thought.

Torraco, like Kass, favors the wisdom that we can learn from virtue ethics in opposition of the rational ethics approach, what Kass, as we saw earlier, called “ethics as theory with application,” and what he calls “tool box ethics.” Torraco observes that tool box ethics “requires no moral investment” from the health care professional, because it is done simply by applying theories to the situations they fit. He agrees that tool box ethics fails to address “the

85 Stephen Torraco.
86 Ibid.
87 Ibid., 42.
88 Ibid.
direct but unreflective education of our loves and hates, our pleasures and pains…”\textsuperscript{89} Instead, tool box ethics “becomes simply a way of justifying what has already been willed; and if one finds the method that can justify what one has already willed, then one can be ‘comfortable’ with it.”\textsuperscript{90} This is mere ideology and fail to address our conscience and our hearts. Thus, Torraco gives more reason to support Kass’ heavily Aristotelian approach to moral education, especially for our health care professionals:

This approach to ethics requires that one be, not only a knower of one’s practice, but also a knower of one’s soul. ‘Tool box ethics’ abstracts from both of these. Ethics as practice with reflection focuses precisely on where the action is, internally and externally… It is a matter of reflecting on one’s practice and then asking: what kind of a human being must I be to know and to do what is right, and to do it well?\textsuperscript{91}

Today, we are “mesmerized by new and sophisticated [technologies],”\textsuperscript{92} and yet noticeably unconscious of utopian ends. In his book, Kass calls this the unconscious embrace of technology. Without reflecting on where we are headed or what kind of people we are becoming, we put our futures (and human dignity) in danger. We must instead do some self-reflection and reevaluate our consciences and our actions. For Kass, this is the beginning of moral education for ourselves and others, including esteemed medical professionals and engineers.

Like Kass, Torraco agrees that the rapid pace of sophisticated developments in modern medicine have “knocked the moral breath out of us,” yielding unprecedented questions about life, death the meaning of health care, and the meaning of humanity itself.\textsuperscript{93} These fundamental questions cannot be adequately resolved with policy-making or the stricter rules in medical manuals; they simply do not measure up to the deep questions that stir within us. Both Kass and

\textsuperscript{89} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{90} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{91} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{92} Ibid., 41.
\textsuperscript{93} Ibid., 40.
Torraco understand that we eventually, at one point or another, are confronted with these 
fundamental questions of meaning; by facing these fundamental questions, we begin to rethink 
the goals that we may be striving for (or lack thereof), and learn to readjust our practices, 
directed toward better ends for society.

Torraco additionally argues that the writings of Leon Kass help the Catholic Church’s 
theology in its retrieval of wisdom about the order of creation. Both Kass’ thought and the 
Church’s theology coincide with their attempts to listen better to nature. When we begin to view 
nature as having divine quality and significance, we begin to remember its intrinsic goodness and 
value. We human beings must remember that we are part of nature, too. Torraco advises that we 
recover the human ability to listen to nature’s design, to what God created; seeing that Leon Kass 
has exemplified this reflective approach in his writings, Torraco suggests that we can look to him 
as a guide on this path. Kass may not be Christian, but his insights have great significance for 
Christian theology.

What is particularly of interest to Torraco in this article is that Kass has no religious 
authority, and yet, as he observes in a few of his works, he ultimately communicates very 
similar conclusions that the Catholic Church does in its moral theology. Even though the 
Catholic Magisterium has been “listening” to the Creator and nature for centuries, the documents 
of authoritative language may be more of a turn-off for readers. Thus, Torraco admires Kass’ 
unique position as a lay intellectual because he is free from these associations with theological 
texts, and may be in a better position to communicate these fundamental teachings and 
reflections that the Church also shares. Kass can both principally and practically enter into the

94 Ibid., 41-42.
95 See references to Kass in “‘Listening’ to Nature by Torraco. Published works by Kass include “Practicing Ethics: 
Where’s the Action,” Hastings Center Report and Toward a More Natural Science: Biology and Human Affairs.
minds of his readers, “awakening them” to this need to listen to nature. Taking the time to listen, or contemplate, invites us to listen to something outside of ourselves. Ultimately, we are called to “listen” to and collaborate with nature and with others, rather than “frustrating or engineering nature.”

One of the central notions in Christian anthropology is that humans are fundamentally social beings. Kass’ discussion on the moral life communicates the same, and as I have just discussed, Torraco’s argument supports that. In order for Kass’ moral education and practice with reflection to come to fruition, it is imperative that we come together as a human community in cooperation with one another. We must be proactive, strengthening our institutions that support notions of human dignity and formation of moral character. This requires us to cooperate and take up responsibility as individuals and as a community. Torraco expresses the same idea: we must revive our ability to “listen” to nature again, to its design and its order. Listening to nature and to others is Torraco’s understanding of cooperation with nature. “Frustrating and engineering nature” is not listening to it at all; it is working against it, and it is leading us further away from remembering our fundamental human dignity and the intrinsic value of nature.

This is a central point in Christian theology; to be human is to be in relation to others; we are called to be in communion with one another, not isolated and we are never truly alone. We are always in relation to something and someone other than ourselves. Christian theology recognizes that it is fundamental in our human nature to be social beings, and we are called to live our lives as such. We are called to live outward, “for others.” Being for others is really what living is all about. Turning inward and away from others is against the Christian notion of what it

96 Ibid., 49.  
98 Ibid., 50.
means to be human. Perhaps we “turn inward” when we forget to “listen” to nature, causing us to go down the dehumanizing path that Kass fears.

Listening to nature, cooperating with others, and learning to care about our communities all point toward one of the central themes in Christian anthropology: human beings are fundamentally social beings. Christian theology embraces this call to communion, because it is in our nature to do be in communion. Kass shares this vision, too, as I have shown above. Thus, we can see a way in which Kass’ approach has Christian theological undertones, pointing us toward the possibility to embrace a theological outlook rather than one of human reason alone.

An example of the work of theology in the sciences is apparent in the work of Celia Deane-Drummond. She has an educational background in the natural sciences, plant physiology, and theology, giving her a unique role at the university that focuses on the dialogue between theology and science. In one of her works, *Genetics and Christian Ethics*, Deane-Drummond argues for a Christian virtue ethic when approaching various questions concerning human genetics and technology.

In this particular book, Deane-Drummond focuses her attention on issues in modern genetics and the key questions raised in both the secular and religious communities, to which she largely responds with the notions of traditional virtue ethics. Though she shows that virtue ethics alone is still insufficient, when infused with Christian theology, it presents an ideal ethic that can be strived for in the ethical and scientific communities. The virtues of prudence, fortitude, and temperance are argued as specifically crucial to a Christian understanding of virtue ethics.  

Deane-Drummond additionally argues for the place of theological principles “as an important ingredient in discussions of the ethics of genetics,” and evident in her alternative ethic.

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100 See more in Celia Deane-Drummond’s *Genetics and Christian Ethics* (United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2006).
that is rooted in wisdom as the theological ground for an ethics of virtue. Finally, she provides exploration of what might come of taking up a Christian virtue ethic for the practices of genetics and all of its ramifications, arguing that “our future depends on a revaluing of science, not just in terms of its utilitarian benefits, but also in terms of a Christian virtue ethic… What kind of science can we expect if we focus more on humans as agents, and less on humans as producers of technology?” It is in this quote that we can see exactly what Kass advocates for, too: what will our sciences be like if we shift our focus on the “kinds of people we are producing,” i.e., human beings as moral agents?

It is also Deane-Drummonds hope that these insights are useful for theologians, ethicists, medical practitioners, and policy-makers all the same, as she too demands sufficient attention to our concerns surrounding biotechnology. Deane-Drummond exemplifies, to use Kass’ terms, an alternative biology, where she integrates both virtue ethics and Christian theology for a richer approach to both biology and bioethics, serving as an example of the vision for which Kass advocates.

V. CONCLUDING THOUGHTS: THE LIMITS OF KASS’ PROJECT AND THE NEED FOR THE COMPLEMENTARITY OF FAITH AND REASON

One of Kass’ most-quoted passages provides the setting and situation to which his work is addressed:

Human nature itself lies on the operating table, ready for alteration, for eugenic and psychic ‘enhancement,’ for wholesale redesign. In leading laboratories, academic and industrial, new creators are confidently amassing their powers and quietly honing their skills, while on the street their evangelists are zealously prophesying a posthuman-future.

101 Ibid., xx.
102 Ibid., xxxiii.
For anyone who cares about preserving our humanity, the time has come for paying attention.\textsuperscript{103}

In \textit{Life, Liberty, and Defense of Dignity}, Kass has recognized the degree of complexity of the situation he is confronting – our view of human dignity in a society incredibly transformed by scientific-technological thought. Some may be skeptical about how one person could tackle such a massive topic. Kass speaks to all those concerned or who should be concerned about the meaning of human dignity, from ambitious innovator to the everyday consumer and the aspiring bioethicist.

Kass also recognizes that there is a laundry-list of obstacles that make confronting this issue incredibly difficult. For one, it is hard for an entire society of people to come to an overall consensus on what technologies should and should not be embraced. Our cultural pluralism and general moral relativism in American society make it hard to establish any sense of objective morality. Even more, the biomedical project is completely entangled in commerce, leveraging economic interest over thoughtful moral consideration. Further, political polarization prevents us from “gaining a consensus to direct our future,”\textsuperscript{104} and we have little to no political experience that could allow us to adequately slow down the speed of biotechnological development. These and many more factors make the topic of biotechnology, ethics, and human dignity a very complex one.

Modern society is often defined by technological and medical progress. Most of us have heard phrases such as “conquer nature, relieve man’s estate” and “alleviate pain and suffering.” These phrases have much more weight to them than we may think. Kass states:

Nearly all [contemporary societies] are wedded to the modern technological project; all march eagerly to the drums of progress and fly proudly the banner of modern science; all

\textsuperscript{103} Kass, 4.
\textsuperscript{104} Ibid.
sing loudly... ‘conquer nature, relieve man’s estate...modern medicine [is] daily becoming ever more powerful in its battle against disease, decay, and death, thanks especially to astonishing achievements in biomedical science and technology, achievements for which we must surely be grateful.105

One may agree with this depiction of our experiences in medicine and top-of-the-line research in America. As medicine and technology advance, improving our lives and satisfying our every need and every want. But if we take a step out of what seems to be this medical comfort zone, like Kass does, we see a very different picture. Advanced medicine and technology really call into question our fundamental human nature, and it is all too often that we do not even realize it. Kass warns us that if we don’t recognize fundamental questions about human life and the world we are creating, we may become blind to what modern medicine and technology is really doing to us as human beings. Kass asks deep, difficult questions and demands realistic answers. For a matter as serious as threats to our human identity amidst a medically-progressive society, questioning both our motives and our means is a good thing.

Yet at the same time, many believe that technological progress is “fatalistically inevitable,” and that philosophical inquiry is not worth our time. In this culture, speed and efficiency are favored. The freedoms and liberties associated with innovation and creativity define the American dreams of progress. Scientists are free to develop technologies, entrepreneurs are free to invest in them, and citizens are free to make use of these technologies to satisfy any of their desires;106 why try changing it all now? And how is one person, like Kass, going tackle it?

Of course, Kass has readily admitted that he is unable to completely resolve these pressing questions and concerns; the task to understand human dignity and create a framework

105 Ibid.
106 Ibid., 7.
that we could all follow is way too monumental of a task for one person, and highly unrealistic of a solution. This book is intended to be a series of authentic reflections on biology, technology, and modern American society, not a treatise that addresses and resolves problems in chronological order.

In these meditations, Kass wants to encourage all of us to participate in some reflective thinking on these issues. It is a much more realistic way of approaching such profound topics. It is all too easy for us to ignore the challenges we face in modern medicine and bioethics, or we may even be ignorant and unaware of these issues all together. It is time we change that. Kass challenges his readers to become a little more reflective, a little more informed, and a little more concerned for something so fundamental to all of us no matter who we are – our human dignity – because we are all human, and we need to care more about that basic notion. That is why Kass titles his book the “defense of dignity.” Kass calls his readers into deeper reflection as he contemplates the issues of biotechnology, modern society and modern medical ethics, provoking within us a deeper understanding of who we are when we look at what we are up against. Changing the ways we think can help us to change our actions, and the results could determine the direction in which humanity as a whole is headed.

Whether we are esteemed philosophers or admittedly inexperienced in philosophical and reflective thinking, we are bound to stumble upon it at some point in our lives. We have the opportunity to take part in conversations and reflections about important topics in our society today, which ultimately results in learning to do little bit of philosophizing. Participating in and thinking about contemporary issues that we face, such as ones in bioethics, modern science, or politics already puts us on the path in which we examine our lives and our world a little closer.
On the issue of human dignity, Kass writes in a way that we can understand its importance, inviting us into his philosophical inquiry which consists not only of reflection but action upon that reflection. We all in one way or another have a connection to issues pertaining to human dignity, simply based on the fact that we are all human. We are therefore united on the common ground of the fundamental experience of simply being human, which is something more profound than we might think. The human experience is rich and each of ours is unique, and Kass wants to make sure we hone in on it and don’t lose sight of it. We are called to embrace and defend these “foundations of our humanity,” our loves, sentiments, mores, our social structures like those of family and religion, and center our moral lives and scientific endeavors around them, allowing us to strive for a vision of human flourishing beyond where we are now.

As admirable as Kass’ project within the limits of reason is, Christianity shows us the fullness of these endeavors. As I have argued, Kass’ philosophical endeavors and reflections show some underlying principles found in Christian theology, giving us reason to consider its message. While Kass views religious institutions as a whole as places that lend support to his moral reason, he evidently keeps pointing toward something beyond his notions of human reason, especially in his concluding statement: “Biology may do some of its finest work when it is brought to acknowledge and affirm the mysteries of the soul and the mysterious source of life, truth, and goodness.” Christian theology addresses these “mysteries,” simultaneously appreciating the relationship between faith and reason, with an abundance of resources within the faith tradition itself and the academic discipline of theology, giving us reason, at the very least, to consider what Christianity has to offer and how it is richly relevant as we continue together in pursuits of bioethics, biology, philosophy and politics.

107 Ibid., 297.
I appreciate the effort of Kass to encourage and enact change in ourselves and society. I will show that his efforts open the door to a Christian theological view of our world, which is beyond what Kass’ original intent was in this book. Recall that Kass viewed religion as an institution that assists in the moral project that he had in mind.

I argue that Kass’ project needs the complementarity of faith and reason rather than taking the approach of a faith that “assists” reason, as Kass views it. My argument is that faith does matter. It is something beyond an institution for moral development. For those who are members of a faith community, it is a tradition that is filled with real truth, and not just something that makes us better people.

Christianity, Catholicism in particular, is a faith tradition centered on truth. It incorporates reason and faith in harmony in order to reveal core truths about our world and ourselves. It is only consequential that we are made better people. We are made better people because of Christ and his redemption. Without this foundational truth, our efforts would render meaningless – it requires a faith beyond reason alone. It is after this assertion that things fall into place, like living a fruitful and moral life.

As believers, when we are suffering, or challenged, we tend to reach out and look for something beyond ourselves to help us get through our experience. Digging in all of our life experiences, a perfect example being the 2019 COVID pandemic, a lot of people are faced with deep challenges and have the opportunity to recognize that our faith is what we still have, even when we may have nothing else to hold on to or are unable to provide for essential needs. Having faith gets us through these times. It goes beyond reason and present reality, and manifests in our hope for relief of suffering and our efforts to come together to help our neighbors.
It is for this reason that I ask Kass to go further than what he has proposed in his work. Assuredly, as a contemplative-minded doctor, his thoughts and reflections have merit in a society like ours. But in order to fully push or complete his argument, he must place faith in the Christian tradition. Thinking about who we are as a human people, who experience the joys, sorrows, and other tangibles of life, we are exactly what Kass envisions – embodied souls meant for something greater. The Christian faith tells us exactly what that something, or someone, greater is: God, who through Christ, we ultimately return to.

When Kass looks at our state of bioethics, he also is exactly right; what we have is toolbox ethics, an ideology, that we by-and-large use to reason what we have already willed in the sciences. What we’re doing in contemporary ethics is creating reasons for what we want to do. Kass recognizes that by using tool box ethics, we are bringing in reason to defend our own passions and to play God, especially in the field of biotechnology, like when we perfect genetic cloning, or when we invent CRISPR to edit our genetic makeup.

If Kass wants to bring about this kind of society that takes seriously these bigger issues like human dignity, he cannot simply instrumentalize faith. He must dig deep and come to believe, just like we are all called to do.

It appears that Kass is half in and half out of the realm of faith, and ultimately pulls out and concludes that he is simply a man of reason. But as he intrinsically suggests, when we look beyond our reason alone, we can uncover the truths we may not have realized otherwise. Why is it that people engage in faith traditions? It is because they participate in something that is true; and because it is about communicating with God. The human connection to the divine shows how the complementary relationship between faith and reason become one total reality.
In Christianity, being human means to be made in God’s image and likeness, and ultimately realizing our belonging to Him. When we take away the pride and triumph of humanism, we humbly realize that we must be dependent on a greater source than ourselves. For Christians, this is God. We come to know the intangible God in the tangible historical figure of Jesus Christ, who is God incarnate. By God taking on our human form, he showed us his love and his intimate connection with us in our lives. Many of us may ponder the question of who we are as human beings. To Christians, that’s just the half of it; in order to know who we are as human beings, we must come to know whose we are. Likewise, for Kass, in order to reach full contemplation of human dignity, that is, who we are, we must go beyond ourselves, take the leap of faith, and contemplate both our dimension and the divine dimension of human dignity.

108 Very Reverend Edward Mazich, O.S.B.
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