

# Man as His Own Maker

A Response to Leon R. Kass's "Keeping Life Human," *AZURE* 32, Spring 2008

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The nature of all other beings is limited and constrained within the bounds of laws prescribed by Us. Thou, constrained by no limits, in accordance with thine own free will, in whose hand We have placed thee, shalt ordain for thyself the limits of thy nature.

—Giovanni Pico della Mirandola<sup>1</sup>

Both common sense and philosophical metaphysics distinguish between entities associated with "natural kinds" and entities that are artificially categorized. This categorization of natural entities is not a product of the mind or of man's interests, but is rather rooted in the structure of reality itself. In contrast, the categorization of non-natural entities is a matter of convention and functionality, which is dictated by tradition, self-interest, effective communication, etc. As a result, elements in chemistry such as gold, or species in biology such as "cat," are considered natural kinds; whereas tables, countries, or theories are not. Aristotle believed that biological species are not only natural, but also eternal, i.e., cypress trees were always cypress

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trees and will forever remain so. Or, in regard to mankind, “man breeds man.” In other words, the humanity of man is an essential part of his nature and the reason it cannot change. Although Aristotle’s considerations were metaphysical and scientific, the perception of particular species as eternal is customary in theology as well. The division of flora and fauna into species was performed at the very moment of their creation by God, who determined the overall structure and order of reality. Furthermore, the creation of man in the image of God determines his eternal and unchanging nature. Unlike other biological species, man as “lord of creation” was endowed with a soul as well as a spiritual or mental essence, as Aristotle also maintained, and this essence constitutes the source of humanity’s eternal and immutable nature.

This traditional view of the world, and especially of man’s status within it, was cast into doubt during the modern era as a result of at least two scientific revolutions: the theory of evolution in the nineteenth century, and the emergence of biotechnology in the twentieth. The evolutionary approach challenged the notion that species are eternal by reasoning that all biological species—including man—evolve and change their forms over time. In fact, when one looks at the progression of the human species over millions of years, it becomes starkly apparent that man does not breed man. The more recent innovations in genetic science and its accompanying technologies have far more challenging implications: that humans do not change so much as they modify themselves, controlling evolution itself and doing so in a very short period, perhaps even from one generation to the next. For example, on May 19 of this year, the English parliament voted down two attempts to ban the creation of hybrid embryos, which combine genetic material from human and non-human organisms. Although it is still illegal to transplant such embryos into the womb of a human or animal female, many believe the vote undermined both the metaphysical concept and the normative principle according to which “man breeds man.”<sup>2</sup>

As the above quotation by Giovanni Pico della Mirandola demonstrates, however, the modern crisis of the Aristotelian and biblical world-views occurred long before the appearance of biotechnology and the theory

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of evolution; the crisis is, in fact, connected to an acute, even subversive revision that took place in the tradition of religious thought. Today we refer to this dramatic shift—which occurred as early as the fifteenth century—as “humanism,” of which Pico is considered a founder. In a deeper sense, the transformation in man’s view of himself—so dreaded and opposed by Prof. Leon Kass—is far from a late-twentieth-century development. It is, in fact, ironic that although this conceptual transformation is the root of the late-modern perspective that Prof. Kass sees as a threat to the foundations of humanity, it is customary to think of it as the essence of humanism. The detachment of man from a natural, eternal, and constant essence is manifest in Pico’s choice of wording, and although the content may seem shocking in light of the hubris that it contains, it is nonetheless presented as if it were the words of God himself: “We have made thee neither of heaven nor of earth, neither mortal nor immortal, so that with freedom of choice and with honor, as though the maker and molder of thyself, thou mayest fashion thyself in whatever shape thou shalt prefer.”<sup>3</sup>

There is, of course, no telling what Pico would have made of cloning or genetic-engineering practices. They are undoubtedly ethically problematic and require careful and levelheaded consideration. Yet Pico clearly voices a change in man’s metaphysical perspective on himself and his place in the world, while emphasizing the radical freedom that is an essential part of man’s self-fashioning. As a result of this change, all that remains of man’s essential nature is his ability to fashion his own form. Because of this, the nature of man ceases to be a constant and eternal truth and becomes fluid. The freedom given to man does not manifest itself in a need to fulfill a certain role in the world, as is required of other creatures, but rather in the ability to construct himself according to his own choices. To use Prof. Kass’s image, man can choose to be himself or to live as a buffalo. This is a radical understanding of humanism and anthropocentrism. Man is not the lord of creation in the sense that he occupies the highest position among the other creatures. Man, who is not tied down to an essential nature or a specified role in the cosmic alignment, is in a league of his own as he takes

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responsibility for his own destiny. Instead of the Aristotelian aspiration to realize his already existent nature, the modern man must instead define its characterizing features. Thus, to use Prof. Kass's imagery, man designs not only the engine of the train, but also the engineer, and he knows not where he is headed, at least in the sense that he indeed has no predetermined destination or destiny.

There is no doubt that the humanistic revolution, Pico being only one of its exponents, left a metaphysical and ethical gap in its wake. Science—or scientism, to be precise—has attempted to fill this gap. Prof. Kass's essay is essentially a frontal assault on this same “soulless scientism” which threatens to sterilize humanity and “eliminate all mystery” from our lives. The scathing pretentiousness of science undermines man's dignity and destabilizes the foundations of his freedom. It erodes man's understanding of himself as a noble and valued being and, even worse, nurtures the view of man as “raw material for manipulation and homogenization.” Prof. Kass presents us with a nightmare scenario in which the proliferation of the scientific approach leads to the “creation of a post-human society,” dehumanization, and moral bankruptcy. Against this threat, he employs a “human defense of the human,” which is on the one hand philosophical and on the other hand religious.

Before examining the nature and validity of Prof. Kass's defense of our human image, we must determine whether the threat does indeed exist. It is difficult to ignore the science-fictional nature of a large part of his description of our scientific culture. Apocalyptic visions reminiscent of Aldous Huxley, mentioned by Prof. Kass, have great literary power and constitute an important intellectual exercise, but they are far from being an argument against science. Then again, Prof. Kass presents modern-day science in a biased and misguided manner. He sets up a straw man that is effortlessly knocked down. In fact, none of the biomedical technologies he cites

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are conceptually able to lead, whether intentionally or in their predicted outcomes, to Huxley's dystopian world. Birth control pills assist couples in preventing unwanted pregnancies; in-vitro fertilization enables couples who suffer from infertility to become parents. The same goes for surrogacy, for although it complicates the traditional concept of family, and it is vital to avoid the exploitation of surrogate mothers, it would be quite odd to claim that such a practice poses a threat to "human nature." Similarly, while a debate is currently raging over whether and how Ritalin should be prescribed to children, it is hard to see how this medication will produce any type of "brave new world." Furthermore, Viagra and Prozac have profoundly changed people's ability to cope with sexual dysfunction and depression, respectively, and while such changes, from a normative perspective, may seem unwelcome to some—though it remains unclear why this should be so—one surely cannot claim that they are dehumanizing. To be sure, cloning and genetic engineering are the most challenging cases Prof. Kass presents us with, and their development and implementation undoubtedly require caution and severe restrictions. But even if they eventually allow us to tailor some of our children's characteristics (instead of leaving them up to genetic good fortune), it remains unclear whether anything will be detracted from our humanity. On the contrary, humans will simply extend their ability to control nature—one of humanity's defining characteristics.<sup>4</sup>

The scientism that Prof. Kass so harshly condemns is in many ways a caricature of science. He himself states that science is morally neutral in and of itself and that investigating the purpose of man, the validity of his principles, and the meaning of life are not within his purview. And as he admits, the theory of evolution does not in any way question ethical perceptions of what is good or just—a claim most scientists would unanimously support. Even ambitious genetics experts who are uninhibited in their research would refrain from stating that a gene exists for free will or self-awareness. It would, of course, be absurd for them to claim that their ability to distinguish between true and false—for instance, in their scientific research—is

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a purely “genetic” matter. In other words, Prof. Kass is bursting through an already open door with his criticism of materialistic reductionism. As he himself claims, the existence of a mental world does not necessarily assume the existence of a “soul” in the sense of a separate entity that was granted to us by God. Today, every student of philosophy knows that the mental world can be explained as supervening the physical world—that is, not as separate or independent from the material, but also not as something we can simply reduce to the physical body. As a result, all respectable scientists agree that while an MRI test—widely examined by researchers of cognitive psychology and moral behavior—does indeed, and intriguingly so, chart the relevant areas in the brain that are associated with mental activity, the displayed image does not in any way describe the experience of feeling revenge or love, and it most certainly cannot determine whether these experiences are justified or authentic. The debate regarding determinism is exclusively a philosophical one. Science contributes nothing to either side of the argument. Even prior to the appearance of contemporary biological science, there were thinkers who believed in metaphysical determinism, while today there are philosophers who reject it, even after becoming acquainted with current scientific theories. And it is safe to say that those who believe in a deterministic viewpoint are in no way less humane or humanistic than their peers.

The picture Prof. Kass paints of modern-day scientific culture thus suffers from severe over-dramatization. It often seems that the purpose of his writing is to frighten his readers, recruit them to a counterattack, and help them come to their senses regarding not only a specific philosophical or religious stand, but one that also relates to human identity and, as he puts it, “the moral and spiritual health of our nation.” He is referring to the United States, but this could apply to all Western countries. The apocalyptic tone of Prof. Kass’s prophecy is no more rooted in reality than his estimation of our culture’s grandiose faith in scientism. Both are exaggerated. The fear that science will “eliminate all mystery” from our lives is unfounded. Not only is science incapable of doing so, but a substantial part of scientists’ determination to study the world stems precisely from this sense of mystery.<sup>5</sup> The

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attempt to *explain*—scientifically or otherwise—human phenomena such as love, creativity, faith in God, and moral judgment is not new, as one might think from Prof. Kass’s essay. It has also never been perceived as a threat to the significance or importance of these phenomena to our lives. While there are “aggressive” scientists who ask, in the name of scientific development, to remove certain moral restrictions that hinder their research, I have yet to meet a scientist who supports the elimination of all moral restrictions due to the fact that they are merely neuro-physiological processes.

Making a straw man out of scientism can be, as stated earlier, an interesting intellectual exercise, but it can also be a dangerous one. Prof. Kass’s hyperbolic style could cause the reader to adopt an anti-scientific position. If, for instance, “many biologists” exploit powerful ideas from the fields of genetics and neuroscience in order to contest the values of “human life and human dignity,” then perhaps their activity should be brought to an end before any serious trouble occurs. I do not believe that Prof. Kass truly wishes to stifle scientific research in general, but his inclusion of the practices of in-vitro fertilization, surrogacy, and the use of Ritalin and Prozac in his concept of “scientism” is a bad sign. For if this scarecrow is brought down, so will all of these practices be brought down with it. Again, I do not claim that all uses of genetic engineering and other alternate means of conception are morally proper. As at every technological turning point in history, there is a legitimate debate to be had over the significance of new technology, as well as over its appropriate normative restraints. Genetic engineering certainly presents us with new horizons for which our ethical tradition fails to provide adequate tools. Yet, if Pico della Mirandola is correct, our human uniqueness lies precisely in our ability to *fashion* such tools (no less than in our ability to create the technologies themselves) and to reestablish the concepts of family, life expectancy, health, and self-fulfillment. In this self-fashioning, man does not undermine his freedom and dignity. On the contrary, he manifests them in a most succinct manner. Man’s control over his own development—control that is in any case quite limited—allows him to free himself from being an accident on the stage

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of evolution. By way of genetic engineering, man can even overcome “the selfish gene.”

Prof. Kass, like many others, distinguishes between methods of medical intervention that are intended to cure disease and relieve suffering, and the use of biotechnology for the purpose of improving, advancing, and upgrading human functioning. Countless arguments have been made concerning the value of such enhancements as well as the distinction between healing and improving. Although this is not the place to discuss this debate, it is important to note that genetic improvements—of memory, life expectancy, and physical abilities—do not imply a loss of humanity, dignity, or freedom. To be sure, such practices exact a moral cost (for instance, concerning social justice and equality, the distribution of resources, or the possibility that they are altogether futile), but this cost does not include relinquishing the value of man. It will undoubtedly be necessary in the future to apply cautious judgment in determining whether to authorize the use of technologies of genetic enhancement, but Prof. Kass’s line of reasoning fails to convince us that there is cause to prohibit such technologies completely.

Prof. Kass considers “scientism” a threat to religion and to the religious worldview, and thus, in addition to his philosophical defense of humanity, he concludes his essay with an appeal to the Bible as a source for his “human defense of the human.” Philosophy alone, according to Prof. Kass, cannot satisfy man’s need for meaning or provide us with “spiritual food.” Such an argument likely sounds peculiar to philosophers, particularly so to atheists. Either way, I, too, would like to conclude my response with an interpretation, in the spirit of Pico della Mirandola, of the biblical story of the creation of man.<sup>6</sup> I intend to interpret the concept of the “image of God” according to the three verses describing the creation of man in the first chapter of Genesis:



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And God said, Let us make mankind in our image, after our likeness, and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth. So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. And God blessed them, and God said to them, Be fruitful and multiply, replenish the earth, and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.<sup>7</sup>

The image of God—or, to use non-religious terminology, the essential nature of man and the source of his unique value—is typically understood as the spiritual foundation of humanity. This concept further defines man as a creature with a soul (to use Prof. Kass's wording), who is free and enjoys free will; in secular terms, it is an intelligent creature who possesses consciousness and speech. These ideas, however, lack textual basis in the verses quoted above. The grouping of these verses together explicitly suggests only two aspects of the image of God: one, governing the natural world, i.e., conquering the land and subjugating the animals that inhabit it; and two, the ability to procreate. I would like to concentrate on the second component, which seems to me to be of greater importance and highly relevant to our matter at hand.

According to this idea, the image of God is none other than the joining of male and female; that is, the ability to produce offspring. Man is devoid of power to create in the full, divine sense of the word; he is unable to create an entire world out of nothing. Procreation is therefore the closest man can come to shaping a new reality from scratch. Although animals also possess the ability to reproduce, as many commentators have observed, only man is *commanded* to do so, meaning that man has both free will and the understanding of what it is to procreate, as opposed merely to the instinct to do so. According to my reading, birth is not simply biological perpetuation in which man is a passive vessel in the hands of nature, as

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the proponents of the “selfish gene” doctrine maintain. Birth is, rather, the expression of man’s control over his ability to shape himself. More boldly, one could claim that once God completes the act of creation, man—from *within* the world—is the one who picks up where God left off, utilizing his freedom for self-fashioning, just as he does to subjugate nature.

Furthermore, spreading the image of God worldwide through the commandment “Be fruitful and multiply” is interpreted in this reading of the text as a way of ensuring that the world has an ethical meaning—a meaning that is absent unless man introduces his values into the world. This is why it is only after the creation of man, on the sixth day, that God could see that “it was *very* good” as opposed to just “good.” Only after the creation of man does the world *in and of itself* have value, as opposed to holding a meaning known only to God. Only then does the world become meaningful for someone within it, and not just from a transcendent perspective.

Thus, while it would be absurd to claim that the Bible justifies the types of genetic engineering that Prof. Kass is so concerned about, it does offer a conceptual framework that is more flexible in terms of the notion of the “nature of man.” This framework allows for understanding the centrality of human decision to man’s ability to fashion himself and fellow mankind. Undoubtedly, this is an anthropocentric approach—even though the Bible justifies it on a theocentric basis—and, as such, it places man at the highest level of the cosmic hierarchy in a way that would certainly cause environmentalists to flinch. Yet this understanding of man as the “lord of creation” is a profound and deeply rooted aspect of Western culture. Man’s uniqueness and significance are fixed not in a stable and eternal essence, but rather in his ability to “fashion thyself,” as Pico della Mirandola put it.

Again, my intention here is not to deny the urgent need to deal carefully and directly with the unprecedented ethical challenges presented by new technologies of conception and genetic design. The limits of permitted and forbidden, desirable and dangerous, appropriate and offensive are unclear precisely because we lack the traditional tools to delineate them. But the

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attempt to deny their legitimacy and their value so extensively is both baseless and dangerous. For in the end, neither the philosophical argument nor the religious or moral view justifies such an attempt.

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## **Notes**

1. Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, "Oration on the Dignity of Man," in Ernst Cassirer, Paul Oskar Kristeller, and John Herman Randall, eds., *The Renaissance Philosophy of Man* (Chicago: Chicago, 1948), p. 225.

2. Mark Henderson and Francis Elliot, "MPs Back Creation of Human-Animal Embryos," *The Times*, May 20, 2008.

3. Pico della Mirandola, "Oration," p. 225.

4. Even if cloning becomes a commonly accepted practice that enables exact genetic replication of humans, it is unclear why cloned persons will be less "human," as they will possess the exact dignity and freedom that we enjoy. They will surely not be raw material for manipulation, as Prof. Kass's essay implies, at least no more than "normal" children who are arguably manipulated in part by their parents.

5. It is Prof. Kass who claims that "the reasons for doing science rest on a picture of human freedom and dignity that science itself cannot recognize." It is doubtful whether many scientists would deny this.

6. I presented this interpretation in the first chapter of my book *Genethics: Moral Issues in the Creation of People* (Berkeley: University of California, 1992).

7. Genesis 1:26-28.