

BIOETHICS IN THE LIGHT OF ORTHODOX ANTHROPOLOGY

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1. Some Preliminary Remarks.

Progress in medicine over the past few years, not only in medical science itself, but also in genetics and biology, has been impressive and often has exceeded the limits of our original endeavours. Beyond all this, however, it presents a challenge to theology and seems, as it were, to urge us to reinterpret and reconsider the traditional views of theology. Nevertheless, in theological circles and elsewhere one constantly meets this question: Does theology have the necessary attributes to answer those questions regularly posed by contemporary scientific research? Are the ethics of theology perhaps old-fashioned and ineffective, incapable of facing all this new information and the great leaps of development that concern biological existence and the existential needs of the human person? Is its message perhaps confined exclusively to the spiritual sphere of existence and is it therefore incompatible with the reality of development, or more precisely the revolution, that is taking place in biology and medicine? Has the doctrine, the faith of the Church, perhaps imposed a typified and narrow way of thinking and living, which is noted for intransigence, inflexibility and the inability to adapt to new scientific discoveries?

These are many-sided questions with many seeds for discussion. It is well-known that bioethics only appeared in recent years, first in America and then in Europe. What is clear, therefore, is that it is a product of the new material presented by medical advances and research in the field of biology. The term Bioethics was first used in English in 1970 by Potter in relation to environmental ethics, and the Hellegers in the medical ethics movement.¹ Bioethics came about as a consequence of these scientific developments. It attempts to critically appraise the dilemmas raised by, and to evaluate the consequences of, this new knowledge. Thus bioethics arose from the need to face ethical dilemmas linked to

¹ D.R.J. Macer (1994), *Bioethics for People by People*, Eubios Ethics Institute, Christchurch.

progress in medical science, as well as the questions that followed from experiments in the field of human biology.

Bioethics has appeared today as a new branch in the study of ethics, or even as an academic subject in its own right, yet correspondent with ethics. The study of Bioethics aims at approaching the moral and ethical dilemmas that accompany progress made in the fields of biology and medicine.² Whatever the case may be, Bioethics is called to face the new ethical issues that were and are created by research in these fields. Its subject matter is completely new and in the main unexplored. The discoveries relating to the biological existence of the human person frequently break the bounds even of our boldest imaginings. Consequently, Bioethics is called to evaluate this progress and to see if, and to what degree, it is compatible with those generally-accepted values that govern human life. That is to say, there are ethical consequences that follow on from our, in principle, noble attempt to extend our knowledge, to make life easier and to carry out research within the field of biological inquiry.

2. Human Creativity and Scientific Research as Gifts of God.

The societies that are confronted by these seemingly unbelievable scientific achievements often react with astonishment or mutually invalidating suggestions. Many are those who would argue that research and science cannot have barriers, while others consider the determination of some legal or moral framework to be absolutely necessary, since, they stress, if the need for controls on biological experiments and medical research is not recognized, the human person is reduced to a "laboratory rat", to an object of experimentation.

At this point it is essential to make it clear that research in general, and specifically scientific investigation into new methods and new practices concerned with improving human life, falls within our ability to enquire and create, an ability given to us by God Himself. Technology, and by extension biotechnology, find their theological justification in

² J. Bernard, *Bioethics* (Greek translation by Eleni Spanou), Athens 1996, p. 9.

the capability that God himself gave to the first-formed, to Adam and Eve, to tend and keep paradise (Gen 2:15). Creativity is woven into the nature of the human person, who, as an image of God (Gen 1:27) and as a free person has been given something unique within the created order. "And the Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul" (Gen 2:7).

The human person as a "living soul" is a creative spirit, that is to say we have something of divine creativity within our nature. This is truly a blessing, the importance of which is, of course, recognized by theology. Nevertheless, the human being, as a free person, is obliged to function with discernment. If one's creativity remains unchecked and without being examined, then one ceases to be authentic and whole. It is necessary for "discernment of the spirits" (1 Cor 12:10) to accompany creativity. Within the Orthodox tradition creativity finds its perfect consummation in preserving its divine origin. The human person is not an automaton, an autonomous and free-moving machine, but we can create precisely because we are a living image of God. In essence the ability of the human person to enquire and to discover has a divine origin, as we have already noted. This means that our natural calling to create, to enquire, to discover, does not lose, under any circumstances whatsoever, its divine derivation and worth. The Fathers of the Church used the concept of "synergy" to demonstrate that the human person, as a creative being, can be a fellow labourer with God.

"Synergy" is a fundamental and important category in Orthodox anthropology. Synergy, i.e. co-operation, with God, particularly in the service and function of medicine, is pointed out in the Holy Scriptures. The Wisdom of Sirach records: "Honour a physician with the honour due unto him for the use which you may have of him: for the Lord has created him. For healing comes from the most High, and he shall receive the honour of the king. The skill of the physician shall lift up his head: and in the sight of great men he shall be in admiration. The Lord has created medicines out of the earth; and he that is wise will not abhor them" (38:1-4). What is more, within the tradition of the Orthodox Church there is a whole host of saintly doctors, who are especially revered by believers, while the establishment of hospitals and medical centres falls within the Church's mission. Therefore, the Church recognizes the importance of medicine, for it considers it to be a sacred undertaking: it understands that the human body has in itself a form of sanctity as an

inseparable part of the human person. The body is the temple of the soul. Throughout the life of each one of us the body has to fulfill a unique task; it is the locus where life is sanctified and our future immortality is prepared. It is unthinkable to speak of a human person who does not have a body. Thus, medicine and biology, sciences whose subject matter is human life itself, and more particularly the workings of the body, are seen to be effecting a divine task. This, of course, is to the degree that they do not violate the freedom of the person nor treat the human being as an exclusively biological “machine”. The point is that the sacred function of the medical profession presupposes that the human personality is recognized as a unique psychosomatic whole.

The question of the vocation of medicine and of research concerning biological existence is a delicate one, and it should always be examined in relation to the reality of the human person. Medicine and biology are not concerned with soulless objects or beings, that is to say they do not correspond to botany or even to zoology. Their subject matter is the unique actuality of human life, which is inseparably bound to the human person, which, since created in the image of God, has the unique calling to immortality. This means that medical science and biology must work in order to serve humankind, and not in an authoritarian or domineering way.

Absolute respect for the human person, not as a form of fleeting biological existence, but as an eternal and immortal being, is a presupposition for a kind of medicine that contributes to life in a beneficial and helpful way. For example, according to Orthodox thinking, and not only, medical intervention to halt pregnancy militates against the right of the embryo or foetus to life, which is equally alive and valid as any mature human being whatsoever. Indeed, the embryo or foetus, as a living being, which already has the characteristics of a new human life, has even more need of medical protection. The embryo, the new-born baby, the young, the mature, and the old man or woman are stations in the same human life. The responsibility of medicine and biology lies in protecting this priceless gift of life, through new discoveries and progress, at whatever stage that gift is found. From the viewpoint of theology this protection does not relate to a biological existence that will die, but to a human person who is destined *not* to die and who has the opportunity and greatest responsibility to create a unique and unrepeatable personal “history” throughout his biological journey, i.e. his journey through this earthly life.

3. Developments in the Field of Biotechnology and some Resulting Dilemmas.

Some biologists, doctors, legal experts, and even theologians suppose that Bioethics can solve all the problems created by research and discoveries in the field of Biotechnology. They see Bioethics as the *deus ex machina* of ancient tragedy. We know that in classical theatre when the tragedy reached a dead-end, a "god" would suddenly appear, supported by some mechanical means. This "god" gave the solution to the insurmountable problem and was called the *deus ex machina*. Some people imagine that the role of Bioethics is something like this. This is obviously a vain hope simply because biotechnological developments are in the main uncontrolled and cannot be confronted with moral decrees and exhortations. We should give a few examples to make it clear that the problems and dilemmas that emerge with the progress of science are complicated and immense. Confronting them demands a radically new attitude and a philosophy of life that is not limited simply to a set of rules and regulations.

There are some proposals of Biotechnology that common opinion finds abhorrent and the conscience, quite independently of its moral convictions, reacts against. The debate about male pregnancy, for example, is a subject that causes natural repulsion in any normal person. Moreover, the announcement, some years ago, by the British embryologist Jonathan Slack, of Bath University, that through the manipulation of certain genes he had managed to create headless frog embryos, and that through the same method he could create something similar in humans, using cloning, in order to produce human organs for transplantation,³ is something that causes revulsion in the common man. The prospect of the creation of headless humans for the production of body parts to order, conceals the degradation of human existence and of the function of the body, and, it seems to me, a form of cynical contempt. This contrived creation of beings, or rather, more precisely monsters, whose only purpose would be to give their tissue and organs to some human master, even if it seems like a prospect that will work for man's "good", is provocative beyond measure and without a doubt is disturbing for any ordinary person. The now infamous debate about cloning also, one would hope, causes a negative reaction, in general terms, to the common mind. Cloning

³ T. Karaiskaki, "Mikroi Theoi Megala dilimmata", *Kathimerini*, 26 October 1997, p. 22.

could procure the production of a limitless number of completely identical beings, human clones, while through genetic intervention the copies of the original could be improved. The question is: Why copies of humans, and who will judge genetic manipulation and its aims? Finally, who is to say that the improvement of cells is indeed an “improvement”?

There are many other topics in the biological revolution about which ordinary people express various views and, frequently, contradictory opinions. Common opinion is, in general, much more sympathetic towards reproductive technology than it is towards other Biotechnological matters. The reason is clear. Reproductive technology, it is said, uses scientific means so that a new human being can come into the world. However, the matter extends beyond this very simple position and has its own social side-effects. The preservation of sperm is a complex issue. In certain cases the treatment for certain illnesses in men can result in them becoming sterile. In this case the preservation of sperm is the only way that fertility treatment can occur. On the other hand, something that is certainly morally unacceptable is when sperm is preserved for "gain". Someone has written that some young people “deposit their sperm in a sperm bank and then undergo sterilisation. Thus they have "easy" sexual relationships, and when they want to have children they refer to their bank.” There are cases where the sperm remained in the bank for years after the death of the husband who donated it, and years later the widow requested her husband's sperm in order to have IVF treatment. Thus, the child who was born was an orphan of necessity, the child of a "father" who had died years before. Even more complicated is the resort to donor sperm. Some parents in their desperation and natural need to have a child resort to this morally problematic solution. Frequently the donors who deposit their sperm are motivated by financial gain. The intervention of the Ministries of Health in many countries is mainly to regulate legal and judicial problems⁴. This begs the crucial question as to whether resorting to donor sperm is the proven and morally acceptable solution.

Another related issue is that, usually in the case of infertility treatment, an attempt is made to guard the donor's anonymity in order to assure that the family that was obliged to resort to this solution can remain self-contained and coherent. However, this creates other

⁴ Bernard, H., *op.cit.*, p. 39-40.

problems concerning the health of the child about to enter the world. When the origin of the sperm is unknown and any inherited conditions are unknown, the result is that the protection of the health of the child is not assured.

These examples do nothing more than record the crucial problems created by scientific developments, and especially the discoveries made in the field of infertility treatment. Similar problems also exist with other questions that have arisen with the progress of biology and medicine, progress that covers the whole spectrum of life, from conception or from pre-conceptual procedures, until death. However, the critical question is, can these problems be confronted by a "renewed" ethical teaching adapted to these new demands? Many sociologists, doctors, legal experts and even theologians believe that, yes, they can. In their opinion answers can be found if we renew our ethics, if we adapt our moral views to the latest demands of the time. Yet a fundamental question still remains: Is ethics a system of values that can be modified according to the different situations and "needs" that appear at different periods, or perhaps does it have an importance and value that is timeless and interpersonal?

4. The Eschatological Attitude to Life, or the Proposal of Orthodox Anthropology.

Christian anthropology, and more particularly Orthodox patristic anthropology and tradition, has much to say on this point. Patristic anthropology is realistic, but at the same time intensely ascetic and eschatological. What determines human life is not biological behaviour or existence, but rather it is that which the human person can attain through ascetic practice and the fruits of that ascetic practice within Christian society. In the Orthodox tradition the whole existence of the human person is illumined by what is *going* to happen. Thus, future life bears more weight than this present life. In the conscience of the Church what we are certainly counts, since in the Eastern tradition the future, the eschaton, is present here and now; however what we are called to be has immeasurable importance. "For we know that if our earthly house, this tent, is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. For in this we groan, earnestly desiring to be clothed with our habitation which is from heaven."(2 Cor. 5:1-2).

Within this eschatological attitude to life bioethical problems can be seen in a different light. The major problem of bioethics today is that it tries to give answers to questions relating to the present, for a human person who will die, enclosed within the human dimension and within the limits of worldly material reality. Biotechnology and accordingly Bioethics to a greater degree serve the material, and therefore the corrupt, needs of the human being. They endeavour to serve the needs of biological existence, frequently ignoring the spiritual dimension of the human person. It seems that contemporary bioethics often ignores the eternal, i.e. the divine potentiality of the human person. Consequently, we can talk about secularised bioethics that serves the needs of a secularised world.

If one evaluates biological life solely on the basis of death, one will reach a completely different conclusion from that dictated by an evaluation founded on the belief that a human person exists in order not to die. This means that the biological existence of a human being has a value that is unique and priceless, not because it is brief and ends in death, but because it is a unique opportunity for immortality. If one sees biological life as a boundless gift from God for the preparation for the spiritual life to come, then one's evaluation of worldly things will be calculated differently. "For we who are in this tent groan being burdened, not because we want to be unclothed, but further clothed, that mortality may be swallowed up by life. Now He who has prepared us this very thing is God, who has also given us the Spirit as a guarantee. So we are always confident knowing that while we are at home in the body we are absent from the Lord. For we walk by faith not by sight. We are confident, yes, well pleased rather to be absent from the body and to be present with the Lord. Therefore we make it our aim, whether present or absent, to be well pleasing to Him." (2 Cor. 5:4-9)

5. The Mindset of the Church: a Foundation for Authentic Bioethics.

Bioethics can indeed work for the redemption of a person when it is established upon the Christian mind-set and the ethos of *theosis* [divinization]. It is a mistake to believe that bioethics, as a system of rules and moral commands, is able to free man from the dilemmas that he is presented with by Biotechnology. Each and every human being is a free and unique person, who comes to face situations within his own "history" that concern him exclusively. No codification of rules and moral dictates can solve the problems of any one

person. The point is that a person who lives within the spectrum of technology and progress might have the mind (*nous*) of Christ, so that he can approach matters of importance with discernment. If we conform and adapt to all that this present age renders without discernment, then our *nous* – our spiritual intellect – will lose its lucidity. St. Paul refers to the transfiguration of the mind, and we believe that his message is especially timely today: "And do not be conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewing of your mind that you may prove what *is* that good and acceptable and perfect will of God." (Rom. 12:2) In order to act as an authentic means of hope and to help solve the problems and to assist in the correct response to the dilemmas raised by scientific progress, Bioethics must not simply be the handmaid of prosperity. It must see the human person within what is his or her actual dimension and not exclusively and solely through his or her biological existence and material comforts. The human person is not just a material, a physical being. The most precious thing we have is not our body but our eternal soul, which makes us free persons, made in the image of God, who can evaluate all that pertains to every human person and all that surrounds him or her. St. Basil clarifies the matter in a very direct way: "Attend to yourself; that is, not to your own, not to that which is around you, but attend to yourself alone. We are one thing, our own is another, and that which is around us yet another. We are indeed soul and *nous*, since we were made in the image of the creator; the body and its senses are our own; and that which is around us is our money, skills and all the other accoutrements of life. What does the Word declare? Do not attend to the flesh, nor pursue all manner of its blessings: health and beauty and the enjoyment of pleasures, and long life; nor marvel at money and glory, and dynasty; nor marvel at all you fulfil within this fleeting life, thinking it to be great, and in pursuing it neglect the life that stands before you, but attend to yourself, that is, your soul. Adorn this, and take care of it"⁵.

Orthodox anthropology with its ascetic ethos and hesychastic tradition does not see the human person within the arid limits of his earthly life, but in his final glory. When we evaluate our biological existence through the criterion of our ecclesial existence, our whole conduct is illumined and our every action acquires a new meaning. The Orthodox tradition steadfastly promises that we have a greater value than what we are, for it promises what the

⁵ St. Basil the Great, *Homilia in illud, Attende tibi ipsum*, PG 31, 204B.

human person can become a god by grace. If we see the life of the person within this theological and Church-centred expanse, consideration of the dilemmas created by biomedical methods takes on a different significance. We can then understand that each new medical method and every advance in biology is blessed if it sees the whole human person, that is one who lives in the present age but who is journeying towards the age to come. Conversely, every discovery in the field of biotechnology that encloses the person within the dry limits of his biological life, however much it may make earthly life easier, conceals something tragic.

On the basis of what has been already said, one can conclude by saying that it is the mind of the Church that, I believe, can overcome any bioethical dilemma. I cannot overlook the relevance today of the Apostle Paul's words: "For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit, the things of the Spirit. For to be carnally minded is death, but to be spiritually minded is life and peace. Because the carnal mind is enmity against God; for it is not subject to the law of God, nor indeed can be. So then, those who are in the flesh cannot please God. But you who are not in the flesh but in the spirit if indeed the Spirit of God dwells in you. Now if anyone does not have the spirit of Christ, he is not His." (Rom.8: 5-9).