
CHRISTIAN BIOETHICS

Making Rational Choices in Complex Life-Death Issues

Jack W. Provonsha

In October of 1984, a Loma Linda medical team headed by Dr. Leonard Bailey replaced the malformed heart of a twelve-day old girl with the heart of a baboon. This unprecedented operation—the first heart xenotransplant performed in a newborn—extended her life for 20 days and popularized the name of Baby Fae around the world.

A number of interesting letters dealing with ethical issues came to us as a result of that extraordinary operation. "How dare you commingle the blood of a baboon with that of a human?" one writer asked, and she quoted the Bible: "All flesh is not the same flesh: there is flesh of men, flesh of beasts, of birds, and of fishes—all different" (1 Corinthians 15:39, NEB). With such unequivocal biblical guidance, we were told, the baboon heart transplant was doomed to fail from the start. Another correspondent referred to Ellen White's problematic statement about "the amalgamation of man and beast,"¹ as though the xenograft had turned Baby Fae into a baboon-human hybrid!

On the other side of the argument are modern secularists who reject the authority of Scripture. "The Bible merely reflects the morality of the people who wrote it," they say. "We do not accept those ancient religious authorities. We will base our ethical decisions on rational principles." It is true that the Bible writers never thought about in-vitro fertilization, surrogate motherhood,

genetic engineering, and pulling the plug on a terminally ill patient. Nowhere do they address these specific issues. Is reason, then, the only guide on which we can base our modern bioethical decisions? If we do use the Bible, what is the relation between its authority and what we know rationally from science?

These are the questions that I would like to address in this article.

Ethical Decisions Based on Nature

Three methods of reasoning, all based on nature, dominated much of ethical decision making during the past several hundred years.

Natural Law. St. Thomas Aquinas (1224-1274) was without a doubt one of the great thinkers in Christian history. While he recognized that humans needed divine revelation to be aware of some moral truths, he believed that "certain axioms or propositions are universally self-evident to all." He referred to these "natural laws" as "those things to which man is inclined naturally; and among these it is proper for man to be inclined to act according to reason."²

Practically all of today's Roman Catholic thinking on ethical matters has been conditioned by St.

Thomas's views on "natural law," including attitudes about contraception and other reproductive issues. Though based on reason and the observation of nature, Thomas's ethics carried with it the weight of church authority.

Utilitarianism. With the advent of the Enlightenment—whose influence has been felt through the past three centuries—came a morality fitting the mood of the times—inductive, "scientific," rational, and opposed to religious authority. Utilitarianism was conceived in this spirit. It was a "scientific" attempt to establish moral principles on rational observations, to discover what "ought to be" by observing what "is."

Its reasoning went like this: When we observe what humans do in life, we discover that above all else they seek happiness and avoid unhappiness and pain. That should be our ethical premise.

The utilitarians were prominent during the 18th and early 19th centuries. As science seemed to fill in the gaps in our understanding, God came to be considered unnecessary. All that remained was for someone to describe how nature could be self-operating, and naturalism in ethics, as elsewhere, would come fully into its own.

Survival of the Fittest. Charles Darwin's *Origin of Species* provided that description, and became the basis for a rationalistic, humanistic materialism. The result was the most inclusive of all the moral "naturalisms" to date—and

certainly the one with the most awesome consequences. Right was defined as anything that furthered survival and served the interests of those "fit" to survive. Scientists could know what ought to be by observing the natural world around them!

Marx and Engels—who were at the time developing their economic theories—were delighted. They asked Darwin to let them use his name in the foreword of *Das Kapital*, but to his credit he politely declined.

Nietzsche's Devastating Concepts

Friedrich Nietzsche—one of the most influential thinkers in the West—took Darwin very seriously in matters moral. This is very clear from his book, *The Antichrist*, a title that reflects his belief that Judaism and Christianity were responsible for most of the world's ills, especially its social ills. Here are Nietzsche's own chilling words:

What is good? Everything that heightens the feeling of power in man, the will to power, the power itself. What is bad? Everything that is born of weakness. What is happiness? The feeling that power is growing, that resistance is overcome. Not contentedness but more power; not peace but war; not virtue but fitness. . . . What is more harmful than any vice? Active pity for all the failures and all the weak: Christianity. . . .

What type of man shall be bred, shall be willed, for being higher in value, worthier of life, more certain of a future? Even in the past this higher type has appeared often—but as a fortunate accident, as an

exception, never as something willed. In fact, this has been the type most dreaded—almost the dreadful—and from dread the opposite type was willed, bred, and attained: the domestic animal, the herd animal, the sick human animal—the Christian. . . .

Christianity has sided with all that is weak and base, with all failures; it has made an ideal of whatever contradicts the instinct of the strong life to preserve itself; it has corrupted the reason even of those strongest in spirit by teaching men to consider the supreme values of the spirit as something sinful, something that leads into error—as temptation.

Christianity is called the religion of pity. Pity stands opposed to the tonic emotions which heighten our vitality: it has a depressing effect. Pity crosses the law of development, which is the law of selection. It preserves what is ripe for destruction; it defends those who have been disinherited and condemned by life; and by the abundance of the failures of all kinds which it keeps alive, it gives life a gloomy and questionable aspect.

Wherever the theologian's instinct extends, value judgments have been stood on their heads and the concepts of "true" and "false" are of necessity reversed: whatever is most harmful to life is called "true"; whatever elevates it, enhances, affirms, justifies it, and makes it

triumphant, is called "false."³

And where did Friedrich Nietzsche get this? The key words tell us: "will to power," "self-preservation," "law of selection." These all came straight out of *Origin of Species*: the big fishes eat the little fishes and the little fishes eat the littler fishes. The fit survive nature's competitive struggle for existence because they possess more wits, stronger muscles, and longer claws. According to this view, the name of the survival game is *power*—power over the weak, and the will to use it. That's the way it is in nature, and humans, as a part of nature, when they are true to themselves, behave like the rest of nature.

Ideas have consequences. While it would be naive to give Nietzsche's concepts more credit than they deserve, there is strong evidence that Nietzsche furnished much of the philosophic undergirding of two world wars. It is said that Hitler slept with Nietzsche under his pillow. Surely the similarity between Nietzsche's superior human that "shall be bred, shall be willed, for being higher in value, worthier of life, more certain of a future," and Hitler's Aryan super-race is no accident. Similar attitudes were at the center of the Kaiser's war.

Are Nature and Reason Adequate Guides?

Reason works out its solutions to ethical dilemmas by observing nature at work. St. Thomas said that at least some solutions were "self-evident to unaided reason."⁴ Nietzsche and Hitler force us to reevaluate that conclusion. But if human reason alone cannot handle human problems, the only alternative is supernatural guidance.

However, God has chosen not to give us explicit guidance in

most of the perplexing issues that technology has thrust upon us. Where, for example, does Scripture come to grips with the issues raised by artificial insemination, in-vitro fertilization, and surrogate parenting? What chapter and verse shall we consult to guide us in the morals of genetic engineering? Where does the Bible tell us anything about when to initiate life-prolonging procedures, when to stop them, and under what circumstances?

Reason and Revelation

I would like to suggest that there is only one way to reach satisfactory answers to these difficult questions: observation and reason. But how are we to avoid the dangers inherent in the employment of human reason alone in doing ethics?

The answer to that question lies, I believe, in identifying the source of Nietzsche's error: his facts. Even if the rational process itself is flawless, one's conclusions are only as good as the facts on which they are based.

The naturalists were essentially correct in deriving the "ought" from the "is." Their mistake was a failure to correctly identify the "is." Christian bioethics, particularly in those areas that the Bible does not discuss, must be based primarily on God's creation rather than on specific moral pronouncements from revelation.

Keep in mind, however, that it takes revelation to acquaint us with creation. What "is" today may not be the same as the "is" of creation. The original pattern of creation is no longer available to us, however assiduously we may search for it in the field or in the laboratory. Fallen nature formed the basis for Nietzsche's rational moral system. Because he rejected any other kind of nature, his con-

clusions were inevitably wrong.

Christian ethics must be based on creation before the fall. The pristine "is" forms the true basis for the present "ought." However, that primeval creation is available to us only through revelation. Only the inspired picture of Eden, of Eden restored, and of the Creator and his character as revealed in Christ, can provide a sufficient base for knowing what "ought" to be.

In answer to our initial question, then, only a Christian can dare to do rational bioethics, for only the Christian acquainted with revelation possesses the facts that can lead reason to its proper conclusions.

A rational Christian bioethic, then, will stress the restoration and fulfillment of the Creator's original intentions to the extent that these may be ascertained from the inspired sources. Thus, any biological engineering that restores the original creation is to be supported, while anything that leads in Nietzsche's direction is to be deplored. Those fertility and reproductive innovations that contribute to what God had in mind in creating the first family are to be welcomed. Those that place the family in jeopardy are to be opposed. Any action whose total effect is to diminish the creation in any significant way is immoral.

The creation is made known to humans by revelation. The Creator has also given them a mind capable of perceiving the true nature of that creation, provided they apply themselves with persistence and dedication, and do not reject out of hand a major source of truth, the Bible. Inspiration and dedicated reason, persistently applied and under the

guidance of the Holy Spirit, can arrive at moral truth.

Before the fall, reason alone would probably have sufficed. The "is" was good, perfect, and undistorted. Ethics could have been a scientific enterprise. One could have discovered truth about behavior as we today discover truth about atoms, plants, and the stars. Nature's laws were God's laws, and there was no special compartment for ethics apart from natural truth. In such an ideal world, the answer to the question, "Can Christian bioethics be done on the basis of reason alone?" would have been, "Yes, of course!"

A Christian bioethic today must be based on creation. Christians can discover this bioethic through the use of reason, not apart from revelation, but informed by revelation, for in this world people need help with the premises, even as they reason their way to proper conclusions.

NOTES

1. Ellen G. White, *Spiritual Gifts*, (Washington D.C.: Review and Herald, 1945), vol. 3, pp. 64, 75.
2. Anton C. Pegis, ed., *Basic Writings of St. Thomas Aquinas* (New York: Random House), vol. 2, pp. 774, 775, 777.
3. Friederich Nietzsche, *Der Antichrist*, in Walter Kaufman, ed., *The Portable Nietzsche* (New York: The Viking Press, 1954), pp. 570-572, 576.
4. *Ibid.*

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