CHRISTIAN BIOETHICS
Making Rational Choices in Complex Life-Death Issues
Jack W. Provonscha

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 contaminate 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," 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 fur­
thered survival and served the in­
terests 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 delight­
ed. 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
turmoil but fitness... What is
more harmful than any vice?
Active pity for all the fail­
ures and all the weak: Christi­
anity...

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 ani­
mal, 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
disenherited 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."

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, be­
have 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 under­
girding 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 han­
dle human problems, the only alter­
native 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 conclusions 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**


4. Ibid.

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