

New College Lectures 2009

Lecture 1 – Bioethics and Creation

Materialism

The dominant worldview amongst opinion-formers in the world of modern healthcare. The cosmos consists of matter and energy and the scientific laws which govern their interaction. There is no underlying purpose or meaning to the universe. Human values, ethical commitments, and purposes are merely stories our brains have invented to give shape to our lives. 'If you want facts you have to ask, if you want values you have to choose'.

The Enlightenment project is one of ensuring human progress through the conquest of nature. The quest for freedom is conceived as freedom *from* the restraints of nature. The hope of the Enlightenment project is that scientific knowledge and technology will enable us firstly to understand ourselves – to understand how the machine works- and then secondly to improve on our fundamental humanity - to overcome the limits of nature which constrain and limit our possible futures.

The quest for self-transcendence – to understand and control ourselves through science.

Utilitarianism

Personal autonomy (the rule of self) is the ultimate good and the ethical goal is to maximise individual preferences and choices, which is the goal towards which all medical interventions should be orientated.

'People have the moral right and the moral responsibility to confront the most fundamental questions about the meaning and value of their own lives for themselves.. At the heart of liberty is the right to define one's own concept of existence, of meaning, of the universe, and of the mystery of human life... Freedom is the cardinal, absolute requirement of self-respect: no-one treats his life as having any intrinsic objective importance unless he insists on leading that life himself, not being ushered along it by others.' (Ronald Dworkin)

'The right of individuals to procreate must give place to a new paramount right: the right of every child to enter life with an adequate physical and mental endowment'. (Bentley Glass)

Children with genetic disorders or congenital abnormalities should no longer be born. We have a moral and social duty to ensure that sub-standard fetuses are identified and aborted.

The Christian understanding of reality

All creation is teleological, it is orientated towards the future plans and purposes of God. God has created both the physical stuff and the hidden moral order of the cosmos. We are called to live our lives in line with the hidden moral order, along the grain of the universe.

Biblical ethics (the way we should behave) is derived from biblical anthropology (the way we are made). Human beings are God-like beings. We are not self-explanatory. We derive our meaning from outside ourselves, from God, in whose image we are made.

Within the story of my life, I have a degree of independence, the dignity of genuine choice, the relative freedom of a creature. But it is not simply my life to do with as I please. The

ultimate meaning of my life can only be found within the Godhead.

'We are most ourselves not when we seek to direct and control our destiny, but when we recognize and admit that our life is grounded in and sustained by God' (Gilbert Meilaender)

To be a person is both to be a unique 'other' and to be in communion, in relation with other persons. Our creation in God's image is both a reflection of what we already are, in the stuff of our beings, and also a promise of what by God's grace we are to become.

Because we are made out of dust, out of the same stuff as everything else, we also share the frailty, the vulnerability, the contingency, of the rest of the living world. Dependence is not a terrible, degrading inhuman reality. It's part of the design. It is an integral part of the narrative of a person's life.

We are meant to be a burden to one another! To be called into a family is to be called to share the burdens of the life which God has given us, the burdens which come from our creation out of dust. The life of a family, including the Christian church family, should be one of 'mutual burdensomeness'. The human person is the place where freedom and utter dependence are united.

We do not make or produce babies we *beget* them. That which we *make* is a product of our will and is under our control. But that which we *beget* is a gift from our being, and is equal to us in dignity and status. We do not create our children, we accept and respect them as mysterious and wonderful others, equal to us in human dignity.

There are two aspects of parental love – accepting love and transforming love. Modern parents are in danger of being control freaks. Transforming love has overwhelmed acceptance. We want to control and design our children to fulfill our deepest desires. Although we have a responsibility to protect, nurture and educate, we must *respect* our children as mysterious others, those who are equal to ourselves at a fundamental level.

'We are very reluctant to let the mystery of personhood – equal in dignity to our own – unfold in the lives of our children'. 'We need the virtue of humility before the mystery of human personhood and the succession of generations. We need the realization that the children who come after us are not simply a product for us to mould.' (Gilbert Meilaender)

In the creation order making love and making babies belong together. A baby is a physical expression of the unseen and unique love between two people. DNA is the means by which a unique love between a man and a woman can be converted physically into a baby. Your DNA enshrines, embodies, makes physical, the unique loving combination of your father and mother.

Even a pathetic, vulnerable and potentially injured baby is still one of us, a unique and wonderful being with an individual narrative and a future purpose.

John Wyatt

Further reading

Matters of Life and Death, John Wyatt, InterVarsity Press (revised edition to be published Nov 2009)

A Primer in Bioethics, Gilbert Meilaender, Eerdmans

Resurrection and Moral Order, Oliver O'Donovan, InterVarsity Press