

New College Lectures 2009

Lecture 3 – Bioethics and Future Hope

Materialist perspectives on the future

The Enlightenment Project: the goal of building a better world through a combination of human ingenuity, science and reason.

The quest for freedom is conceived as freedom *from* the restraints of nature. The natural world is seen as a straightjacket which confines, restricts and limits our human possibilities. The long-term goal of the Enlightenment Project is to use technology to overcome the limits of the natural order which constrain our possible futures.

'A new beginning in which we finally accept that we are our own creators, and that we alone have the power to make a better world.' The Times

Transhumanism – we can invent new ways of being human. The 'Lego-kit' view of humanity.

The applications of the new biotechnology always contains the possibility of manipulation and instrumentalisation of vulnerable human beings. *'Man's power over nature turns out to be power exerted by some men over other men.'* CS Lewis

The future is a human artefact, it is constructed block by block, frame by frame, from the choices we make here and now, in the present. This leads to a crushing sense of personal responsibility.

'Humanism is not science but religion – the post-Christian faith that humans can make a world better than any in which they have so far lived...Humanism is the transformation of this Christian doctrine of salvation into a project of universal human emancipation. The idea of progress is a secular version of the Christian belief in providence. That is why among the ancient pagans it was unknown.' John Gray

'If technical enhancement of our children will bring greater happiness into their lives, there is a moral duty on us to enhance our children. To choose not to enhance our children is morally equivalent to choosing an intervention to make them disabled. In both cases, the total happiness in the world is reduced.' John Harris

'If safe moral enhancements are ever developed, there are strong reasons to believe that their use should be obligatory, like education or fluoride in water, since those who should take them are least likely to be inclined to use them. That is, safe, effective moral enhancement would be compulsory.' I Perrson and J Savulescu

Conventional 'Spirituality'

'Do not stand at my grave and weep; I am not there. I do not sleep. I am a thousand winds that blow, I am the diamond glints on snow, I am the sunlight on ripened grain, I am the gentle autumn rain . . . Do not stand at my grave and cry. I am not there. I did not die.' Anon

'If it's all going to burn, why worry? Let's concentrate on the really important things – like saving souls.'

'If the promised final future is simply that immortal souls have left behind their mortal bodies, why then death still rules – since that is the description not of the *defeat* of death, but simply of death itself.' Tom Wright

A Christian understanding of future hope

The consistent biblical message is that the history of the physical universe does have a purpose, a meaning, a *telos*. But the future is not a construct of human activity, it is not an artefact of human ingenuity – rather it is a reflection of the loving purposes of God.

In the physical resurrection of Christ our humanity is both vindicated and transformed. In God's mysterious purpose, this is what human beings were always intended to become. This is the ultimate goal of the created order. Only by the redemption of our physical bodies can the physical creation, of which they are part, be ultimately liberated.

Christian medicine, in its concern and respect for the physical stuff of our bodies, provides a vital corrective to the over-spiritualizing Gnostic and neo-Platonic tendency which has repeatedly crept into the thinking of the church.

The 'flawed masterpiece' view of humanity. Medicine is more like art restoration than Lego-kit construction. We may use advanced technology to restore the masterpiece, but we are not at liberty to change the design. It is the original artist's intentions which are normative.

Defending the Christian perspective in the public square

1. The Christian perspective provides a holistic perspective of human identity and underpins the stability of our identity throughout the whole of life.
2. The Christian view of the dignity and interconnectedness and mutual dependence of all human life promotes social cohesion and mutual respect.
3. The Christian understanding of the sanctity of human life provides the basis for a consistent legal framework which protects all human beings from intentional destruction.
4. The Christian perspective fits with profound and widespread human intuitions about the value of human life, the centrality of human relationships and the need to protect the weak and vulnerable.
5. The Christian perspective provides a safeguard against the abusive and manipulative possibilities of the new biotechnology.
6. The Christian view motivates sacrificial and empathic caring by health professionals and lay carers.

When we love someone in the present, showing practical, empathic, respectful, sacrificial caring, we are also pointing them to the future, to the hope of the resurrection. We are treating someone now *in the light of what they are going to be*.

'Love always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails . . .'
(1 Corinthians 13:7)

John Wyatt

Further reading

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

Resurrection and Moral Order, Oliver O'Donovan, InterVarsity Press
Surprised by Hope, Tom Wright, SPCK