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Christian Anthropology Versus the New Anthropology and the Quest for Human Perfection

ABSTRACT

In the current debate, we witness a conflict between the Christian concept of man vs. concepts that justify in vitro fertilization (IVF), genetic enhancement, or the reassignment of sexuality. Modern concepts cannot disregard the historic perspective of the consistent doctrines that the Catholic Church has maintained throughout her 2000-year history and which constitute the precursors of contemporary bioethics. Although she has adjusted specifics occasionally to address new developments, she has always based doctrine on immutable core principles. The current conflict lies neither in the novelty of the new proposals, nor in a conflict between religious and lay worldviews, but rather in concepts of man and human perfection. Some human traits may be regarded as disordered and incompatible with a particular concept of human perfection. The *new* proposals tend to involve physical changes based on technological manipulation, with a goal of developing a superior being, while Christian proposals do not seek to manipulate man's being, but to develop his existing potential within criteria of acceptable reason. The *new* proposals rely on a Cartesian view which constitutes a human as his mind (*cogito ergo sum*), which has dominion over his body including authority to reengineer it according to any project that mind conceives. In contrast, the Christian concept views the human subject as a unity of mind and body, which may not be reshaped to meet a questionable goal of human perfection. The technological tools within the new concepts are in no way superior to the more personal attributes like virtues, perfection of the human will, prayer, and asceticism within the Christian concept.

KEYWORDS

human perfection, Christian personalism, modern science, modern philosophy, dualism, technique, spiritual effort, virtue

INTRODUCTION

In the current era, we are witnessing rapid and astonishing developments in science and technology. Among others things, these developments concern medical sciences and biotechnology, which are the human activities that constitute the subject of bioethics. They have become possible in the wake of the scientific advances, which have taken place since archaic scholastic and medieval thinking about the material world were abandoned. This new approach relies notably on modern philosophy and particularly on Descartes and Francis Bacon. However, there is still a large population that contends that medieval philosophy and anthropology may tell us something important about mankind. These are not only Christian believers who follow certain patterns of thinking about mankind in obedience to faith, but they are also philosophers and theologians ready to defend those statements through the application of contemporary psychological observations. Discussion with the proponents of new anthropology can be difficult because they tend to acknowledge as scientifically valid only that reasoning which is based on or refers to the methodology proper to empirical science. Thus, any other argumentation or reasoning is dismissed “with the back of the hand” as too abstract, too theoretical, or too loosely linked to the easily verifiable experience. However, when we consider some of the statements of the empirical sciences, we notice that they cannot exist without certain philosophical assumptions (although not always expressed in an explicit way) which are theoretical and “abstract” and not necessarily obvious or easily verifiable. This observation helps us to understand that any methodological gap between empirical science and medieval philosophical statements, which also refer to some empirical observations, is not as significant as they might contend. Nevertheless, each philosophical statement (whether it belongs to Christian, or medieval, or new, or any anthropology) must refer to common human experience, which remains the ultimate criterion of its validity.¹ Thus, reference to the common human experience remains the main criterion of the epistemological value of any anthropological statement. This observation should in particular be considered by the people who advocate projects of perfecting certain human traits. It should also concern

¹ C. Huber, *Limiti della validità del sapere scientifico*, in: A. C. Spagnolo, E. Sgreccia (eds.) *Lineamenti di etica della sperimentazione clinica*, Milano 1994, p. 29–38.

members of the medical and legal professions who feel challenged by such proposals.

THE PHILOSOPHICAL BASIS FOR MODERN SCIENCE

“Francis Bacon introduced a new idea to science. Until then pure knowledge (*theoria*) had been the principal goal and ultimate end of scientific activity. [...] After the work of Bacon the value of science has been expressed in terms of its practical utility: science should contribute to increasing the comfort of life. This was the beginning of a new era, namely the era of technology. ‘Technological advances represent the only actual possessions held in common by man; they condition all other changes that take place on the world and verify the mastery of man over nature – his supreme earthly goal.’”² The novelty introduced by Bacon consisted in “the passage from discovery to invention (which, however, presupposed knowledge of the primary data). It stressed methodology as crucial in promoting new findings which science then invented, constructing them and then submitting them to verification. To resolve problems ultimately meant to find new (i.e. technological) solutions for them. The ‘methodological’ changes were accompanied by a new understanding of nature. It is no longer a given ‘whole’ which is to be investigated without penetration of its very depth: ‘rather, nature now represents something alterable and irreducible, which can receive different formations, which underlies them as their base and remains itself unchanged throughout.’ The notion of *intellect*, which aimed at the understanding of essence was replaced by discursive *reason*, which aimed at seeking out what is the same in all. The uniformity and equality of human reasoning were assumed to be the fundamental conditions for the transmission of information and accumulation of knowledge and ultimately the effective cause of scientific progress.”³

² T. Kraj, *Scientific Progress as a Moral Problem. Implications in Modern Genetics*, doctorate prepared in the Pontifical John Paul II Institute for Study on Marriage and Family at the Lateran University, Rome 1999. Unpublished. Manuscript, p. 29. Author quotes: P. Henrici, *From Progress to Development: A History of Ideas*, in: *Theology Meets Progress*, P. Land, Rome 1971, p. 48.

³ T. Kraj, *Scientific Progress as a Moral Problem*, p. 29–30. The text quoted: P. Henrici, *From Progress to Development...*, p. 48.

This premise also permits us to witness the remarkable results of the development of contemporary science. These achievements resulted in human self confidence in what concerns man's influence in the world that surrounds him. The result of this confidence is the new areas man enters into in order to better recognize them and submit them to himself. Thus, we already have numerous fields where the efforts of scientists help to free people from the tyranny of nature and its disadvantageous conditions. If something does not work as we wish it to, we try to change it with more and more efficient technological tools.

THE CHRISTIAN ATTITUDE TOWARDS MODERN SCIENCE

Christians also note the changes in the world brought about through scientific progress. What is more, Christians have participated in that progress themselves. Also the Roman Catholic Church accepts it and its achievements. "Homo technicus', as a leading standard – bearer for progress theory, does not represent either a non-Christian or a positively anti-Christian figure."⁴ The possible opposition does not result from an inner logic of the idea of progress. It is usually a result of personal convictions of the proponents of progress (very often postulating unlimited manipulations with man) who perceive the Church as the institution that impedes progress through its insistence on maintaining the existing social order.

If the Church does not oppose the new projects of science, does it mean that there are no limits to the application of science? What if it tends to improve the human being? These questions were noticed a long time ago. For instance they were present in Pope Paul VI's famous Encyclical Letter *Humanae vitae*. Proclaimed in 1968, it tells us: "But the most remarkable development of all is to be seen in man's stupendous progress in the domination and rational organization of the forces of nature to the point that he is endeavoring to extend this control over every aspect of his own life – over his body, over his mind and emotions, over his social life" (HV 2). If we find that it would be a useful solution to link the sides of a river, we build a bridge; if we

⁴ T. Kraj, *Scientific Progress as a Moral Problem*, p. 70.

desire a better crop of wheat or cotton, we use some fertilizers which could increase that crop; if we want to have biological “factories” of rare proteins we use some techniques of genetic engineering to create transgenic animals. Hence, if we have a technical solution that improves the human being are we allowed in the same vein to proceed with the scientific manipulation of our own species? Do any limits need to come into play when we consider mankind instead of the external world? Which application of scientific and technological tools may be permitted in man, and which should be restricted? The answer to this question requires some clarifications.

THE CLARIFICATION OF KEY NOTIONS

In order to answer the main question, which is: “Christian anthropology versus the new anthropology and the quest for human perfection,” we need to define Christian anthropology, new anthropology, and human perfection, and we further need to come to terms with the issue of: who is man.

Christian anthropology here is the anthropology supported by the Roman Catholic Church (but not only the Church). This is not a theological anthropology but a philosophical one, i.e. one which is based on human reason and not necessarily on some typically religious or theological assumptions. The new anthropology is the one that is rooted in the outlook initiated by the philosophy of Descartes, particularly with his famous assertion *cogito ergo sum* and the “division” of man into *res cogitans* and *res extensa*, which have some important anthropological consequences. Finally, our concept of human perfection does not refer to the situation of a disease or other kind of human disability where employment of technological tools is justified for the good of human health or even of human life. We refer to the situation of the normally healthy man who in his quest for the improvement of his human condition intends to use certain technical tools. The application of genetic enhancement projects provides a good example of such a situation.

The last two questions mentioned above concern man: who is man and what constitutes his perfection? Among various definitions of man, the ancient one which defines man as *animal rationale* i.e. the rational animal, seems to be the most adequate for the purpose of this paper, i.e.

to explain the difference between the two anthropologies mentioned above. Thus, there are two important elements in man: rational and corporeal. Our attitude toward man depends on how we define their mutual relationship. Which one is more important if any? Which decides that man is man? And finally what does *rational* mean? Since the answer to the latter influences the definition of human perfection it will be given below.

MODERN PHILOSOPHY AND ITS ANTHROPOLOGICAL CONSEQUENCES

Modern anthropology refers to the Cartesian “*cogito ergo sum*,” which suggests that the *rational* part of man is the one which decides that a being is a man. Even if we agree that Descartes did not settle the question in a radical way, his position does not exclude such a consequence. What constitutes me would be my reason and the body is subordinate to what reason determines. The human body would be of a lesser value than the spiritual and rational “part” of man, and it would be subjected to the dispositions dictated by reason. From this conclusion there are only a few steps to the claim that the corporeal aspect of the being is of no significant value and we can change its parameters practically at will. There are three well known contemporary ideologies which refer to this kind of thinking: eugenics, with its ideas of enhancing various human traits; transhumanism, with its projects to overcome human bodily limitations with the new construct of the posthuman being; and gender ideology, which rejects the value of the human body in questions of human sexual self-determination.

THE CHRISTIAN AND MODERN APPROACH TO MAN AND HIS PERFECTION

The common human experience says that the human body is an important part of who we are; it is a constitutive part of the human being, and it should not be treated as something unimportant. That is why we do not accept bodily damage: law forbids deliberately causing it and medicine undertakes various efforts to cure a damaged body. We also

are indignant if a dead human body is not treated with appropriate dignity. We recognize the value of the human body, its inclinations, and qualities, and we do so even in spite of its imperfections. Such recognition reminds us of the need for rational management of our body. However, *rational* does not only mean being governed by reason. There are recognized situations where somebody puts into practice ideas like self-mutilation, which, although they are governed by reason, hardly could be called *rational*. That is why rational governing also means governing according to the requirements of right reason, i.e. directed towards the good.

According to Christian anthropology, man is a rational animal. This purports that the body be governed by reason, which in turn should proceed towards good. This is the path to achieving human perfection. However, rational self-governing is very difficult because the human body has a resistance which should be overcome. Various human bodily inclinations, if not governed by right reason, contribute rather to human weaknesses than to perfection. These human shortcomings are well known not only to Christians. All people cope with them and all of them see the need to change them. Among the various measures for accomplishing this, there are two, which are the subject of this presentation. The first is virtue, which is compatible with Christian anthropology, and the second is the technological approach, which is based on modern anthropology. On the surface, they may seem to be very similar. Both include the idea of the rational governing of human bodily inclinations and both seem to pursue similar results. What, then, is the difference between them?

There are some outcomes that may be obtained exclusively with our personal effort. If we want to achieve human rational self-governance and to integrate some important human inclination into the wholeness of the human person, we need to integrate it with the human spiritual effort which refers to the perfecting of the human will, asceticism, and prayer. A good example is human sexuality. Although its personal integration is a difficult task, it is still possible through the perfecting of the human will by repeated good choices, behavioral norms that the individual chooses for himself, asceticism, and prayer. The personal integration of human sexuality is a necessary step towards responsible parenthood. It is obvious, the couple could also procreate and plan their family without any such effort, using technical tools or other devices or behaviors which make the spiritual effort unnecessary, however the

result will not be the same. There will not be personal integration of their sexuality, which manifests itself in the virtue of matrimonial chastity and rational self-governing which results in the good for their matrimony, family, and children.⁵

In another example: the vast and always more extensive application of drugs formerly used to treat children with ADHD, also seems to resolve the problem of naughty children. Instead of taking the trouble to educate their children, parents are tempted to use drugs. The resultant child is quiet and polite, but this optimistic picture changes when the drug effectiveness wears off. If one followed this proposal the child would grow without any personal effort to diminish his or her shortcomings. The resultant adult would be someone who would lack certain specific human abilities with which they would be able to resolve the problems they would meet in life.⁶

Sometimes it seems that the expected result may be obtained effortlessly, quickly, and painlessly. It is necessary only to find a proper technical tool to free us from the effort. There are some fields in human life where such a solution does not work. These are those areas where conscious rational human effort and spiritual willpower are necessary to resolve the problem effectively and in a human way. Rational – I would like to repeat – means not only directed by reason, but also based on the choice of truly humanistic values. This does not take place where personal human effort and virtue resulting from it are replaced with technical or other solutions. Although at first glance the results seem to be the same or at least similar, they are actually completely different.⁷ Rational, virtuous human self-governing which results from spiritual effort is not found where the personal is diminished and replaced with the technical, i.e. material. If we desire to progress in human perfection we cannot resign from what is human and personal (although sometimes it is difficult) and decide to replace what is purely human with what is technical. History has seen proposals of replacement of virtue with such substitutes as natural goodness (Rousseau, Emerson), social engineering (Fourier,

⁵ T. Kraj, *Granice genetycznego ulepszania człowieka [The Acceptable Limits of Genetic Enhancement in Humans]*, Kraków 2010, p. 112–117.

⁶ The President's Council on Bioethics, *A Report: Beyond Therapy. Biotechnology and the Pursuit of Happiness*, Washington D.C. 2003, p. 71–74, 118–119.

⁷ T. Kraj, *Granice...*, p. 264–279.

Marx), and psycho-technology (Freud).⁸ None of these proposals succeeded in bringing perfection to man. The same seems to happen if we follow the contemporary biotechnological proposals, namely that with the change of some biological parameters we are able to gain human perfection. Step by step it becomes our common conviction that what requires personal effort (sometimes ascesis) may not be replaced with an impersonal technical manipulation. The human life has its taste and value and it comes with a price, but it is the price of making an integral part of the very human existence, and it is worth the cost.

CONCLUSION

The most important difference between Christian anthropology and the new anthropology (i.e. rooted in the Cartesian “cogito ergo sum”) consists in the attitude towards the human body: whether it is an integral, constitutive part of the human person, or merely raw material to be formed and valued according to changing concepts born of the human mind. Christian anthropology says that some areas within man require personal human effort to master them according to the requirements of right human reason, while the new anthropology says that in such cases we may legitimately take a short cut, i.e. use the technical tools or devices, and resolve the problem without human effort. If the latter approach were still inefficient, it remains possible to change our bodily parameters. Both solutions, i.e. the one compatible with Christian anthropology and the other based on the modern anthropology, seem to bring about the same results. In fact they do not. Also the kinds of human perfection that results from both of them are completely different.⁹

⁸ Y. Simon, *The Definition of Moral Virtue*, New York 1986, p. 4-5, 10, 14-15.

⁹ Conference proclaimed November 19, 2013 during The United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) Chair in Bioethics 9th World Conference Bioethics, Medical Ethics & Health Law Towards the 21st Century, in the University of Naples Federico II, Italy, November 19-20-21, 2013. Abstract in www.isas.co.il/bioethics2013/ethic-book-website.pdf, p. 102.

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