

The Cutting Edge

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US BIOETHICS

In the last few months the US President's Council on Bioethics, established in late 2001, has published two very weighty reports of enormous implication to the ethical standards of biotechnological research. Back in October it issued a volume entitled 'Beyond Therapy: Biotechnology and the Pursuit of Happiness.' Then in January of this year it released another document, 'Monitoring Stem Cell Research.'

The first of these publications addresses some very fundamental questions for the Council, but not only "What is biotechnology for?" but also "What should it be for?" The title of the report, 'Beyond Therapy' indicates the particular area of concern for the Council, namely those uses of biotechnology that go "beyond the usual domain of medicine and the goals of healing, uses that range from the advantageous to the frivolous to the pernicious." As the Council chairman says in his letter of transmittal, "Biotechnology offers exciting and promising prospects for healing the sick and relieving the suffering. But exactly because of their impressive powers to alter the workings of body and mind, the 'dual uses' of the same technologies make them attractive also to people who are not sick but who would use them to look younger, perform better, feel happier, or become more 'perfect.'" The bulk of the document considers "how pursuing the goals of better children, superior performance, ageless bodies, or happy souls might be aided or hindered, elevated or degraded, by seeking them through a wide variety of technological means." The Council is keen to insist that, "in enjoying the benefits of biotechnology, we will need to hold fast to an account of the human being, seen not in material or mechanistic or medical terms but in psychic and moral and spiritual ones." And in the conclusion to the document, the Council is determined to reinforce a view of the human person "as a creature "in-between," neither god nor beast, neither dumb body nor disembodied soul, but as a puzzling, upward-pointing unity of psyche and soma whose precise limitations are the source of its — our — loftiest aspirations, whose weaknesses are the source of its — our — keenest attachments, and whose natural gifts may be, if we do not squander or destroy them, exactly what we need to flourish and perfect ourselves — as human beings."

The second of the documents, regarding stem-cell research, is also a sizeable submission from the Council to the US President. Whilst acknowledging that many questions remain unanswered in the debate between those who would advocate the use of stem cells taken from human embryos, and those experimenting on stem cells drawn from tissues of the adult human body, there is

a lengthy discussion of the moral status of the human embryo as being a crucial matter in this regard. Section IV of chapter 3 is taken up with a detailed analysis of this ethical problem, and of its parameters, and in particular, a thorough biological analysis of the continuity/discontinuity question is presented: “whether to claim that [biological findings] teach us about an embryo’s essential continuity with and similarity to human beings at other stages of life, or to argue that they reveal profound and morally meaningful discontinuities between embryos and live-born persons.” But the report acknowledges that human embryology does not of itself give the moral answers: “For example, a recognition of biological continuity might in some measure undermine the argument that embryo destruction is permissible when certain biological markers or states of development are absent. But it would not by itself show indisputably that embryos are to be treated as simply inviolable. ... A description of early embryonic development is necessary though not sufficient to an understanding of the nature and worth of an early embryo. It is not sufficient because any purely biological description requires some interpretation of its anthropological and moral significance before it can function as a guide to action.”

The full texts of the Council’s reports can be read on-line at their web-site, www.bioethics.gov.

RELIGIOUS FROM THE START

A recent discovery of carved-ivory artefacts in caves in south-western Germany have served to demonstrate more clearly than ever that early man had an innate spiritual dimension. A archaeological team led by Dr Nicholas Conard of the University of Tübingen found three new figurines, each less than 5cm in length, during excavations in the Hohle Fels cave, near Ulm , in the Swabian Jura mountains of Bavaria . These tiny but intricate carvings from mammoth-ivory are the work of early Homo sapiens, having been radiocarbon-dated to between 30,000 and 33,000 years old, and therefore represent some of the earliest known symbolic art. Together with some 17 other primitive carvings unearthed at three nearby sites over the past century, they make up the oldest body of figurative art in the world. Their significance lies in the representations they depict, namely of animals (a cormorant-like bird, and a horse-like head) and of a therianthrop (half-animal/half-human) figure with a humanoid body and a lion’s head. The latter, particularly, points to a religious or ritual function to these carvings, and indeed to the practice of a form of ‘shamanism’ — that is, an archaic magical or religious belief system which sought connections between the visible and spirit worlds, and which ascribes spiritual properties to animals and natural forces. These Bavarian finds constitute the earliest evidence of such religious beliefs, as well as showing the enormous speed at which sophistication developed in the artistry of such early man.

The scientific report of these discoveries can be read in the journal *Nature*, vol. 426, pp. 774 & 830–832.