

Biotechnology and Human Dignity in the Thought
of Germain Grisez

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I. Introduction

In the past month, it has often been remarked that the events of September 11 have changed everything and that nothing will be the same. Our nation is focused, almost fixated, by the daily reports of our military response, warnings of further attacks and of the danger of receiving anthrax in the mail. Given that September 11 was one of the worst attacks our nation has ever suffered, it would be implausible to argue that the attention it is receiving is undeserved; however, I fear that it may be distracting us from a greater threat to human dignity – a threat not **to** our way of life and freedom, but a threat that arises **from** our misunderstanding of freedom and our society's lack of respect for life. In facing this threat, I believe the recent reflections of Germain Grisez on this subject are of great assistance.

Prior to September 11, the top news story was President Bush's decision to allow limited federal funding for human stem cell research. He made the announcement, live, in his first televised address to the nation and it came after months of public debate. Many saw it as a defining moment of his presidency and an indication of what the pro-life movement might hope for from this administration. The President's decision, and the debate over the relevant moral issues, received widespread attention from the public and serious treatment from the popular media. This gives us reason for hope that our democracy is still functioning and that the serious and most important issues of the day will be treated as such by the American people.

In spite of the events of “9-11,” this debate merits continued front-page coverage, least in our concern over terrorism we fail to address the most critical issue of our day: the threat to human dignity from advanced reproductive technologies. Politically and culturally we are poised at a critical juncture and as Catholic Social Scientists we have a duty not to let this opportunity pass. Compare the debate over abortion in the United States and Canada. In Canada, abortion is a far less visible and controversial national political issue than it is in America. As a consequence, the Canadian pro-life movement lacks the political clout of the same movement in our nation. This is undoubtedly attributable to many factors, but I believe among the most important differences is the way the abortion license came to be. In Canada it was a slow, incremental process while in America the U.S. Supreme Court shocked the nation by striking down the laws of all fifty states.

A shocked body politic is an engaged one and, at least potentially, one open to the truth. As every teacher knows, it is easier to teach even hostile students than the bored and disinterested. Shock, however, has a way of wearing off. As a society, we can become accustomed to even grave offenses to human dignity. Therefore, if a shocked body politic presents an opportunity, a teachable moment, it is a fleeting moment and one that we must be diligent not to squander.

II. Germain Grisez’s “Bioethics and Christian Anthropology”

As social scientists who aspire to engage the culture with truth, we will be well rewarded by paying particular attention to Germain Grisez’s analysis of the fundamental issues behind the current medical ethics debate. Professor Grisez’s article, in the Spring 2001 issue of the *National Catholic Bioethics Quarterly*¹, entitled, “Bioethics and Christian Anthropology,” is

divided into four sections, each of which he describes as “deserving of book-length treatment.”² This has become something of a custom of his in recent years, sketching outlines, almost schema really, on important issues and, having done the intellectually most difficult portion of the task, leaving it to others to flesh out and apply his analysis. The first section of his article, and the only one my paper discusses, is designated, “Biomedical Technology and the Gospel of Life.” Therein, Grisez notes the increasing rapid progress of the biomedical sciences and the power these technological developments have given us over biology.

Technology is power and can be used for good or ill. We are surrounded by the benefits – and also the abuses – of our biotechnological prowess. The advanced reproductive-related medical technologies developed over the past century, such as in vitro fertilization, cloning, genetic testing, stem cell treatments and gene therapy, are being harnessed in an attempt to cure married couples of infertility, enable same-sex couples to fulfill their desire to be parents, prevent birth defects, cure children of diabetes, cure the elderly of Parkinson’s disease and others of leukemia and hemophilia.³ Less “flashy” and more common examples of the use and abuse of medical technology relate to the so-called “end of life” issues. Many persons at some point face the decision, for either themselves or another, to continue or begin advanced medical treatment in the hopes of prolonging life.

As biomedical technology creates options for choice and is a form of power, a descriptive study of its abuse is largely a subset of the analysis of, in the first place, why people make unreasonable choices, and secondarily, the particular susceptibility of medical power to abuse. Grisez mentions some of the more common factors that provide the context in which bad choices are frequently made, including defects in the person choosing and in the moral ecology. Still,

bad choices are not reducible to any of the circumstances in which they are made. The misuse of our ability to make free choices is a moral evil that arises in the heart of the actor.⁴

In regard to choices to use biotechnology immorally and the threat to human dignity that such choices present, Grisez offers the following insight,

The extent of the abuses of biomedical technologies suggests that the wrongful options are very appealing. Why is that? Human beings exist in a fallen condition. With profound anxiety we face inevitable death. Moreover, our human relationships are distorted by sin.... In this fallen situation, choosing uprightly often seems impractical. Lacking hope for any happiness beyond death, people go after what they imagine might make them happy during this life.⁵

The threat of immoral applications of biotechnology and the attractiveness of such options for choice, has not come upon us without warning. The rapid development of the life sciences since the dawn of the twentieth century, coupled with the dechristianization of western civilization, made the current state of affairs predictable. Aldous Huxley and C. S. Lewis, in particular, warned us. Many competent scholars have carried out detailed applications to our current situation of both Huxley's *Brave New World* and Lewis' *The Abolition of Man*.⁶ It would serve no purpose to retread that ground within the present paper, but it may be helpful to recall the central features of their work.

Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* insightfully focused on genetic and biochemical technologies as far more powerful and socially transforming than, say, nuclear power. The dystopia he sketched perfectly illustrates a society that exults freedom-as-personal-gratification with the necessary concomitant loss in authentic human freedom and dignity. In *Brave New World Revisited*, his sequel to *Brave New World*, Huxley makes the following chilling remark,

“In 1931, when *Brave New World* was being written, I was convinced that there was still plenty of time.... twenty-seven years later, in this third quarter of the twentieth century A.D. [1958] ... I feel a good deal less optimistic. The prophecies made in 1931 are coming true much sooner than I thought they would.”⁷

In the dystopia genre, C. S. Lewis' *The Abolition of Man*, published in 1944, holds a special place. Like Huxley, he viewed contraception and the advanced reproductive technologies of his day with grave concern, he wrote:

As regards contraceptives, there is a paradoxical, negative sense in which all possible future generations are the patients or subjects of a power wielded by those already alive. By contraception simply, they are denied existence; by contraception used as a means of selective breeding, they are, without their concurring voice, made to be what one generation, for its own reasons, may choose to prefer. From this point of view, what we call Man's power over Nature turns out to be a power exercised by some men over other men with Nature as its instrument.⁸

Lewis correctly foresaw that the ultimate exercise of humanity's power over nature is not to be found in the conquest of space and its exploration or in the development of nuclear power but in the conquest and domination of human nature by "eugenics, pre-natal conditioning, and by education and propaganda."⁹ This power of the biological and social sciences over nature itself is, in each and every instance of its application, the exercise of power by some persons over others. There are, of course, reasonable and legitimate applications of such power. A pregnant woman who takes prenatal vitamins is exercising such power, as are parents when they attempt to control harmful moral influences on their children. However, as already mentioned, wrongful biomedical options involving the abuse of technological power are very appealing, especially when the person choosing is faced with death or suffering.

Grisez goes on to state that, even when persons without faith "recognize certain kinds of acts as always wrong, many ... have no compelling motive to endure burdens and sufferings that can be avoided only by" choosing immorally.¹⁰ For example, women dying of kidney failure and whose body is in the advanced stages of rejecting a kidney donated by her mother stated, "I do not bank on cloning to save me, but I see no other way to save myself."¹¹ The parents of a daughter afflicted with Fanconi anemia, choose to utilize in vitro fertilization techniques,

combined with pre-implantation embryo testing, to assure the birth of a child with the right tissue type. The second child, a son, will be used as a source of stem cells for transplant into their daughter. Without treatment, children with Fanconi anemia typically do not live past their seventh birthday.¹² Another example is the case of Nicole Masteron who died at age three of severe burns. She was the youngest of five children, and her parents' only daughter. Her parents, British citizens, subsequent to her death, traveled to Italy to utilize IVF techniques and embryo testing in an attempt to replace their daughter with another daughter. When testing revealed that the embryo was male rather than female, they donated it. As they do not have the funds for another trip to Italy, they intend to file suit against Great Britain in the European Court of Human Rights on the grounds that the British government is violating their rights by not permitting such techniques to be used in England.¹³

No one can doubt that the situations just described give very strong reasons for acting. Preserving one's own life or choosing a course of action that is likely to save the life of one's sick child are grave moral duties. If, however, the only options for choice with a reasonable likelihood of success are morally evil choices, then the parents should forgo that choice and endure the sufferings that would result. Making a morally upright decision in such circumstances is the reasonable thing to do, however, the parents will obviously have strong emotional motivations to choose otherwise. While aware that it is unreasonable to undergo medical procedures, like in vitro fertilization, that will surely result in the death of many of their children at the embryonic stage of development and that will compromise the couple's human dignity by invading their marital intimacy and instrumentalising their bodies, such choices can be rationalized by the couple and considered their "only choice." Persons who lack the hope of

Christians may describe the situation to others in terms like, “I had no choice,” or “I really didn’t have any other option,” or “we couldn’t just stand by and do nothing.”

According to Grisez, persons who accept Jesus’ offer of salvation and who, therefore, possess Christian hope can “find it practical to choose uprightly despite their fallen human condition. When upright choices lead to suffering, even that suffering can be accepted joyfully....”¹⁴ On the other hand,

Unless others come to share this Christian hope, we cannot reasonably expect them to accept as realistic and to try to live by the moral truths that flow from the sanctity of human life and the dignity of human persons. No matter how clearly those truths are articulated or how firmly they are taught, they will seem unrealistic and impractical apart from their context in the gospel as a whole.¹⁵

At times, certain proponents of the Natural Law tradition have fallen into a way of speaking that suggests that if we only find an iron-clad argument or the right rhetoric and way of expressing ourselves, the logic of our arguments will carry all before them. Like the stereotypical American tourist in Paris who thinks that if he just speaks English loud enough he will be understood, we may be forgetting that there is a real and substantive disconnect in our conversation with those who know nothing of the hope that is in us. We may be speaking the same language but the discussion is taking place between two different worlds.

As evidence of the point Grisez is making here, I will offer two illustrations. First, public opinion data on abortion¹⁶ tends to consistently breakdown as follows:

Prohibited Abortion in all circumstances:	9%
Legal to save the life of the mother	11%
Legal in cases of rape, incest or to save the life of the mother	33%
Legal for any reason for the first three months	27%
Legal for any reason for the first six months	5%
Believe that abortion should be legal at any time	9%

The most plausible explanation for the plurality of persons who chose “legal in cases of rape, incest or to save the mother’s life” is their inability to bear, or ask others to bear, the suffering involved in carrying to term a child who was conceived in an act of violence. It is important to note that persons who chose this category do so precisely because it permits abortion in cases of rape and incest. Presumably this category includes persons who are formally pro-life, that is they believe that the unborn is a human person who has a right to protection by the state against private acts of violence. Yet on the so-called “hard cases,” the cases that demand Christian hope, they shift into the pro-choice camp. Is it realistic to think that we will win over the majority of Americans on this point based on reasoned arguments alone? Without hope, will not the pro-life position always seem unrealistic and impractical as applied to difficult cases? More importantly, are arguments any substitute for Christian hope in the lives of the women who are faced with making these choices?

A second way to consider Grisez’s argument is via introspection. A few years ago I asked a colleague for advice on a paper I wrote for the express purpose of explaining the Catholic understanding of marriage, as far as possible, to a secular audience. The paper, submitted to (and rejected by) the American Philosophical Association’s section on Sex & Love, draws on the work of Max Scheler and is devoid of any explicitly religious references. My colleague asked me, in effect, if I found the position of my own paper plausible. That is, if I were a non-believer, would my paper, or any set of arguments, cause me to change my sexual practices? Probably not. While arguments provide reasons for choice, choosing reasonably all-things-considered in “hard cases,” demands Christian hope.

III. Conclusion

It is not my intention to denigrate reason or reasoned argumentation. It has its place and is necessary. Also, my primary concern is not with abstract beliefs or positions but with the moral choices of moral actors. Reasoned argumentation has an important part to play in helping persons make morally upright choices, however it is not, and can never be thought of by Christians, as an adequate substitute for Christian hope. As Grisez says in concluding the first section of his paper,

There is no gospel of life except the integral gospel that Jesus preached. There is no culture of life other than the culture that is formed by the redemptive work of God in Christ and built up by those who carry on his mission. And the culture of life will always be challenged by the culture of death until Jesus comes again and hands over to the Father a kingdom of truth and life, of holiness and grace, of justice, love, and peace.”¹⁷

End Notes

¹ Germain Grisez, “Bioethics and Christian Anthropology,” *The National Catholic Bioethics Quarterly* (Vol.1, No.1, Spring 2001).

² *Ibid.*, 33.

³ These are among the diseases and treatments that I have seen discussed most prominently in the media, for example, “Gene Therapy Could Relieve Hemophilia, Scientists Say,” *The New York Times*, June 7, 2001 (www.nytimes.com/2001/06/07/health/07CLOT.html); “Embryonic Clones Tied to Medical Advances,” *The Chicago Tribune*, April 27, 2001 (www.chicagotribune.com/news/nationworld/sns-stemcells.story); “Gene Therapy – Promises, Problems and Prospects,” *Nature*, (Vol. 389:239, Sept. 18, 1997.)

⁴ Grisez, 33-4.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 34.

⁶ For example, in regard to Huxley, see: Steven Kellmeyer, “Little Lost Lambeth,” *ENVOY* (no date given), www.envoymagazine.com/samplearticles/sept_oct98/story2.html. Peter Kreeft’s *C. S. Lewis for the Third Millennium* (Ignatius Press: San Francisco, 1994) comes close to a definitive application of Lewis’ thought on this point.

⁷ Aldous Huxley, *Brave New World & Brave New World Revisited*, (Harper & Roe: New York, 1965), 1.

⁸ C. S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man*, (New York: Macmillan, 1955), 68-69.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 72.

¹⁰ Grisez, 34.

¹¹ Amanda Onion, ABCNEWS.COM, "Cloning's Two Sides: Could Legal Limits Curb the Chances for New Cures?" (ABC News.Com, February 16, 2001), <http://abcnews.go.sections/scitech/DailyNews/cloning010216.html>

¹² Peter Gorner, "Embryo is Picked to Try to Save Sister's Life," *Chicago Tribune*, October 2, 2000, <http://chicagotribune.com/news/metro/chicago/article/0,2669,ART-47235,FF.html>

¹³ Sue Leonard, "Embryo Given Away Because Its Not a Girl," *The London Times*, March 4, 2001 (www.sunday-times.co.uk/news/pages/sti/2001/03/04stinwenws02052.html)

¹⁴ Grisez, 34.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ The National Right to Life Committee, "The Pro-Life Majorities," <http://www.nrlc.org/abortion/major.html>

¹⁷ Grisez, 34.