

Meat Robots

There is no doubt that we have all benefited from the advances in medical science. It is quite incredible that body parts and vital organs can be replaced or transplanted as means to solve grave physical problems. We can and ought to give thanks for the discoveries of so many scientists, borne of extremely difficult, technical work.

However, a regrettable side-effect of these successes, which we all take for granted, is a very “mechanistic” view of the human person. It seems as if we are biological analogs of machines. The routine replacement of “parts” and the adjustments made through chemical interventions are quite suggestive of this sort of conception.

The other familiar ‘reduction’ with which we are faced is the animal analogy. In many ways, we are like the other mammals with whom we occupy the planet. We do relate to them and accord them a higher dignity than, say, plants and other living things. Nevertheless, the seeming restriction of animals to survival and reproduction necessitates a clear distinction: We are, clearly, more than animals. Our ‘rational souls’ lead us to act and live in ways which transcend mere survival and reproductive actions.

In addition to these two misperceptions, the great successes of science and medicine have imparted on society a sense of permission to proceed with whatever capability we have achieved. The shorthand for this notion is that *“if we can do it, we should do it.”*

Most ethicists, religious and secular, have some reservations about this attitude. We have all heard concerns expressed about “designer babies” and “eugenics,” (attempts at improving the human population by controlled breeding). Just these two examples give us pause to consider what sort of value judgements are being made about existing people who have deformities, disabilities and other conditions arising from some genetic predisposition. The assumptions which accompany these ideas are that human beings with such conditions are, somehow, less human than the rest.

On the surface, it seems like a good idea to root out diseases and genetic abnormalities for the sake of

future individuals who might be afflicted by them. However, the road to achieving such medical success would be strewn with the dead rejects of experimentation. We are, of course, alluding to human, embryonic research. The embryo is, under normal conditions, determined to develop into a fully human person: There is no question of it becoming anything else other than a human person. It is, therefore, as fully a human life as at any other stage in development.



Aside from this biological consideration, there are questions of meaning and purpose. Do not those unfortunates who have been born with disabilities bear witness to us to the triumph of the human spirit by overcoming the obstacles? Very often they will put those of us who are supposedly ‘intact’ to shame by what they accomplish. In other words, does our desire to ‘sanitize’ and ‘perfect’ through scientific techniques end up wiping out whole areas of profound meaning in human society?

Consider, also, how reproductive technologies divorce inherent meanings from the conception of children. In many cases conception begins to resemble the products of animal-husbandry or industrial production, rather than the one-flesh love-union between a man and a woman. This is not to say that children conceived in such ways were not, in some sense, the fruit of human love and a desire to be fruitful. However, a distinguishing trait of the human person was bypassed and, perhaps, other values were excluded from consideration: Might Divine Providence be guiding a couple toward adoption or some other mode of being fruitful?

At first read, all of these issues may seem esoteric or abstract ideals. But, it behooves us to maintain and uphold the difference God has given to our essence. There are real dangers of doing otherwise.