

# THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE

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## “LIVE” WITH LEON KASS

Leon Kass is a medical doctor, biologist, ethicist, philosopher, and teacher. After decades as a professor at the University of Chicago, he accepted responsibility for chairing President Bush’s Council on Bioethics, a position he held from 2001 until last year. Today he is the Hertog Fellow in Religion, Philosophy, and Culture at the American Enterprise Institute.

A true renaissance man, Kass has written about subjects as wide-ranging as classical philosophy, the Bible, and bioethics. Among his books are *The Beginning of Wisdom: Reading Genesis*; *Life, Liberty and the Defense of Dignity*; and *Toward a More Natural Science: Biology and Human Affairs*.

His primary concern is over the dignity of human life and the threats posed to it by modern sensibilities, as is clear in this interview, which was conducted for The American Enterprise by Ethics and Public Policy Center fellow Adam Wolfson at Kass’s office in Washington.

**WOLFSON:** Tell us about your parents. Did they have any influence on your interest in bioethics?

**KASS:** My parents were immigrants from Eastern Europe, and ours was a Yiddish-speaking home. It was also a secular home; we were kept back from school on the Jewish holidays, out of respect, but my brother and I never set foot in a synagogue. I think the most important legacy of my upbringing was the moral seriousness of my parents, and their preoccupation with questions not only of social justice but of matters of character and issues of right and wrong. My parents did not have any formal schooling, so they came at these large questions in human terms. My father was a saintly man, and he loved this country. My mother, a socialist, was a harsh critic, a perfectionist, and she always laid great emphasis on matters of human decency and dignity. It is these last two concerns and qualities that I've tried to bring to bear in my studies of biotechnological advance.

**WOLFSON:** When did you first become interested in science and medicine?

**KASS:** High school biology made a big impression on me, and I had a chemistry set I pattered around with as a youngster. At the age of 15, I entered the University of Chicago, and I had some notion of studying law and biology. But on the placement tests I did especially well in the sciences, so they gave me a pre-med adviser and suggested I take calculus and chemistry in my first year. I'm not sure I had a real passion for medicine, but it did seem to me that science could be interesting.

I ended up going to medical school at the University of Chicago, and after that pursued a Ph.D. in biochemistry at Harvard. I had decided I wanted to become a professor, doing basic research but also studying some of the more philosophical questions in biology, a subject that excited me in college. Ethics then was a dead field. I'd try to start an ethics conversation and the people at the university would just laugh. They believed that a scientific psychology and sociology would soon make ethical questions obsolete.

I have to add that another reason I got my Ph.D. was to avoid being drafted into the Army—something I'm not at all proud of today. It wasn't so much the Vietnam War, it was just my dislike of wasting time and having to take orders. After completing my doctorate, I served two years in the Public Health Service, stationed at NIH.

**WOLFSON:** Lore has it you were involved in the civil rights movement in the 1960s.

**KASS:** In the summer of 1965 my wife Amy and I went to Mississippi to work for an organization called the Medical Committee for Human Rights. Ironically, that's when I began to doubt the liberal enlightenment view on which I had been raised. I started wondering about the relation between progress in the arts and sciences and the state of morality and character, for I found more honor and decency among Mississippi's unschooled African Americans than among my fellow graduate students at Harvard. Harvard's liberal students had all the right opinions, but they'd just as soon knock you over if you got in their way. On reflection, the difference seemed to me to have something to do with the presence or absence of awe and reverence, of religious belief and practice.

**WOLFSON:** Does this explain why you have just authored a monumental 700-page study of the Book of Genesis? And is this related to your work in bioethics?

**KASS:** I don't think that it is related in the obvious sense. Some of my critics claim that "Kass has finally come clean; his thoughts about bioethics really are just disguised theology." That's simply false. I don't think I've had any thoughts in the area of biomedical ethics that are religious per se. Indeed, my intuitions on some of the bioethical questions are probably more cautious and conservative than the Jewish teaching on these matters.

However, I have discovered rather late in life that many of my moral sensibilities and concerns are really Jewish interests and concerns. My intuitions about the meaning of family life reflect, I'm sure, a Jewish understanding of marriage and family life, although I did not come to it in that way.

My Bible book was an absolute surprise to me. Thirty years ago my wife and I designed a course asking what is a good human being and what is a good citizen, and how these two excellences might be related. Genesis and Exodus were among our readings. What I discovered was that these books contained a profound teaching about human nature and human good, a teaching that rivaled in wisdom my beloved Greeks. The book is the outgrowth of 20 years of teaching Genesis at the University of Chicago.

**WOLFSON:** During four years as chairman of the President's Council on Bioethics, you conducted countless conferences and

meetings and produced seven major reports. What would you say is the council's greatest legacy?

**KASS:** From the beginning we aspired to do two things. One was to develop a “richer” bioethics that would do justice to the deeper human goods that were at issue. We were going to avoid the abstract jargon prevailing in formal academic bioethics. We were going to try to fulfill the President's charge to inquire into the human and moral significance of scientific and technological advances. For example, what does it mean for our humanity that we are now acquiring the ability to select the sex of children, to block memories, or to change human temperament? I think we succeeded in our efforts to lift the conversation to include such human considerations.

Second, we aspired to actually be useful when people make decisions in bioethics. And that meant taking seriously the legitimacy of political bioethics. Previous bioethics councils had used the “expertise” model—it was assumed that science and ethics experts would meet, discuss the issue among themselves, and tell us what to do. But this generated policies that were at odds with large segments of the American public, which had never been invited to the table.

I'm especially proud of our report *Beyond Therapy: Biotechnology and the Pursuit of Happiness*. It has no policy recommendations, but is a deep inquiry into the meaning of acquiring powers to satisfy ancient human desires for better children, superior performance, ageless bodies, and happy souls. I think that 20 to 30 years from now it will be seen that we were ahead of the curve on some of these issues. I'm also very proud of the general reader that was put together by the council (*Being Human*), which includes literature selections that grapple with some of the neglected questions of bioethics. Both of these reports, as well as our report on cloning, were picked up by commercial publishers and are being widely used in college courses. The final report of which I'm especially proud is *Taking Care*, which looks at the crisis of long-term care of the elderly and the demented, and how to think about what we owe each other in human terms.

**WOLFSON:** Why has a Republican-controlled Congress for the most part not acted on any of the council's proposals?

**KASS:** Well, we have an appropriations bill rider banning the patenting of human organisms. And we have a moderate funding pol-

icy for embryonic stem cell research—which will be overturned by the next Democratic President. But that's it.

At present we have a President as friendly to the concerns of human dignity as we have had in a long time, or are likely to have for a long time to come. We have a Congress that is equally sympathetic. So it would be tragic if we came to the end of the second Bush administration and had nothing more to show for it in bioethics legislation. But the President has powerful opponents out there. Many scientists are only too happy to have a stalemate over cloning legislation. And some of the President's supporters in Congress want the whole loaf or nothing at all.

One big sticking point is embryo politics. Despite our own disagreements about the moral status of human embryos, the council's report on Reproduction and Responsibility offered unanimous recommendations for some legislative moratoria. I worked vigorously with both the scientists and the pro-life members to ensure that those recommendations would in no way compromise scientific research or the respect owed to nascent human life. To my amazement, the day the report came out, the pro-life groups hammered it as being insufficiently pro-life. Their opposition made it impossible for otherwise sympathetic congressmen to act on our recommendations.

So I think it's a very sad situation. Unlike every other major industrialized country that has biotechnological activities, we alone have virtually no official monitoring of these developments from an ethical point of view.

I would very much like to see some legislation, though I do not favor many outright prohibitions. I'm much more inclined to go the regulatory route. But I would like to see us take advantage of the current political situation to erect at least some barriers against the more egregious practices that are in the offing. That way we could begin to hope that human beings can in fact take some control of where biotechnology is leading us.

**WOLFSON:** Your disagreements with liberal bioethicists are well known, but could you tell us more about your disagreements with conservatives?

**KASS:** First of all I want to say that although I think some pro-lifers' views are too narrow, they deserve credit for recognizing how easy it is to exploit and abuse the early stages of life for utilitarian benefits. They deserve credit for bearing witness, even if

they don't win battles. They are defending something deeply important to all of us.

However, I think they take too narrow a view of what's at issue with these bioethical decisions. Some of the pro-life organizations don't officially care whether babies are produced in bottles, so long as no embryo was killed in the process. I had one leading pro-life activist tell me in private that they were not sure they could support our proposed ban on transferring human embryos to the body of an animal because it might be the only way in which you could rescue a human embryo. I said, "Do you mean you would rescue an embryo by giving it a pig for a mother?" And this person said, "Yes, if necessary." This seems to me an unhealthy monomania.

**WOLFSON:** Was monomania on display in the Terri Schiavo case?

**KASS:** Since I did not have the facts I stayed out of the Terri Schiavo case. The facts were very hard to get. But I regret very much that it became the political controversy that it did. To me, the Schiavo case highlighted the fragility of our agreement that people with severe disabilities are nonetheless equal members of the human community and ought not be written off because it's burdensome to care for them. At the same time, I don't believe that you should do absolutely everything to keep somebody alive. There's a longstanding Catholic tradition, for instance, about when it's not only permissible but obligatory to cease medical intervention, namely, when treatments become useless or unduly burdensome to the patient.

**WOLFSON:** What are your thoughts on Oregon's doctor-assisted suicide law, the one that was recently upheld on federalism grounds by the Supreme Court?

**KASS:** I am strongly opposed to what they've done in Oregon, but I wasn't in favor of this lawsuit. For one thing I thought that if the suit failed it would appear to legitimate assisted suicide, and that certainly is the way the ruling has been spun. But while I'm strongly opposed to physician-assisted suicide and euthanasia, I make a distinction between physicians actually killing and allowing patients to die. Of course, we do not want to say that a person is "better off dead." But we also don't want to keep people alive beyond their time by means of burdensome medical technologies. We need to develop an ethic of allowing-to-die that avoids deliberately killing and avoids deliberately hastening death.

**WOLFSON:** In terms of medical progress, was the twentieth century a golden age, where we found cures for many of the worst diseases, but hadn't yet reached the scary "Brave New World" that may arrive in the twenty-first century?

**KASS:** Before the twentieth century millions of people lived in abject poverty, died in childbirth or infancy, and so forth. So I don't want to say that modernity went wrong—that would be hypocritical. But I'm worried about where technology is taking us now. I have smart friends who argue that human nature has a kind of stabilizing good sense, and that we will recover our balance. But I'm not sure I believe that.

The question is not just biotechnology, but really the march of the wider technological mentality. Technology is more than machinery and acquired power to change the way things are. At its root, the technological disposition believes all aspects of life can be rationally mastered through technique. So now we have techniques for solving marital problems, grief, and almost everything else. And at the end of the day you've utterly transformed the character of human life. Eventually the things that really matter—family life, worship, self-governance, education of the next generation—become threatened.

**WOLFSON:** So where do we turn for answers? Philosophy? Religion?

**KASS:** Those things. And great literature too. It's remarkable how in an age that has a reasonable claim to being called decadent, young people still respond to fine works of literature with noble sensibilities and deep insights into enduring human matters. So liberal education is still a possibility, though universities are beleaguered by political correctness today and the great books are under attack; plus the high cost of education means everybody's in a hurry to learn something that will help to pay off their loans. Still, students are interested in the big questions. Who would have thought that religion would be of greater interest to young people today than it was 50 years ago?

**WOLFSON:** What about science itself as a source of wisdom?

**KASS:** I think modern science is a religion for many of its practitioners, by which I mean they have utter faith in the sufficiency of their concepts to give a full account of life. But science cannot be a source of wisdom. By design it is morally neutral and indifferent to

the pursuit of wisdom about human life that was the goal of pre-modern thought. If modernity went wrong, it was in taking the partial truths of science to be the whole truth about the world. One needs to recover a certain sense of the genuine mysteries of our existence on earth, which science doesn't explain but rather tries to explain away. The current argument of intelligent design is, however miscast, a way of raising again these fundamental questions. We need to restore a more philosophical science.

**WOLFSON:** How do you respond to scientists who say they're just seeking to help us live healthier, better lives when they "play God" in the lab, say, by trying to conquer aging and doing battle with decline and death?


**KASS:** They say that they are only trying to prevent degenerative arthritis, Parkinson's disease, or senility, to make old age less burdensome. But whether they know it or not, they are unlocking the process of senescence, and making us less inclined to make way for the young. No matter how long we live, most of us will not look upon the world with fresh eyes when we are old. There are exceptions: Stravinsky, Leonardo, Sophocles. But most of us go to sleep before our time, and what you need are children and a new generation to see the world afresh.

**WOLFSON:** In thinking of your grandchildren's future, are you a pessimist or an optimist?

**KASS:** I have to say that I'm pessimistic. I think growing up in the United States in the post-World War II era was as good a time as one could wish for—we got all those things that were in the 1939 World's Fair: washing machines, dishwashers, products to relieve the arduous toil of everyday life. Yet all those things haven't made anybody happier. We're not grateful for those devices. You could not today put on a World's Fair and arouse intense longings for a future we don't know. We simply couldn't do it, because there are no more deep unfulfilled human wishes for which technology of the future is going to provide the answer. Yes, we'd like a cure for cancer, and prevention of Alzheimer's disease. But in terms of how we live, we already have more than what we need to live well.

I myself have no desire or curiosity to see 2020, never mind later, except for the fact that I am deeply in love with my grandchildren, and I want to see how they will turn out and to be around to share as much of their life as I can. But I don't envy them their adolescence. I don't envy them the difficulty of finding husbands—they're all girls—or finding private happiness of the sort that I



have been blessed to enjoy. I don't envy them the possibilities of getting the kind of liberal education that I've had. I don't envy them living in a post-9/11 world, or the "plugged in" culture. I hope that they will find pockets where they can enjoy what modernity has to offer without becoming its slave. But I wouldn't trade my life for theirs. 

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## EDITOR'S NOTE

If the subjects discussed here are of interest to you, please note that several members are engaged in a discussion on these very issues in the Discussion Forum, under the topic entitled "Reason, Faith, and the Nature of Man." Please feel free to join in.

***We welcome your comments, questions or suggestions.***

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