“Why Not Immortality”

The Ninth Annual Alloway Lecture  
Featuring Leon R. Kass, MD, PhD

Monday, December 2nd, 2002

by Michael De Robertis, PhD and Natalie Hudson

Last month, Dr. Leon Kass gave the Ninth Annual Alloway Lecture sponsored by the University of Toronto’s Joint Center for Bioethics. Dr. Kass is a leading biomedical ethicist from the University of Chicago and an orthodox Jew. He was appointed Chair of the President’s Council on Bioethics by President Bush in August of 2001, and serves on the Board of both the American Enterprise Institute and Committee on Social Thought at the University of Chicago.

His fascinating and well-received lecture addressed the issue of modern medicine’s continued flirtation with prolonging human life. Is immortality possible? Is immortality a “good” that should be sought after in this life? The attitude in today’s society, particularly among academics, is that aging and death are a disease. Consequently, anything that prolongs life is considered to be the highest human good. It is a good that seems to trump all other goods and therefore, at least according to the prevailing view, should be encouraged and permitted. But is death something that society should seek to “cure”? Not necessarily, according to Dr. Kass.

How is science seeking to cure death? Three areas of contemporary biomedical research appear to support the presumption that death is merely a disease:

1. The use of human growth hormone (HGH) is considered by many to be an anti-ageing treatment, even though there is no good evidence at this time that this is so.
2. Stem cell research offers the promise of an indefinite supply of “worn-out parts” for ageing human bodies.
3. Research appears to show there is a “genetic switch” that may control ageing to a certain degree. Experiments on fruit flies, for example, show that age may be somewhat under genetic control.

With such strong evidence, few would argue that science’s “victory” over nature and hence mortality is within sight. Yet Dr. Kass objected to the assumption that everything that can be done should be done to prolong human life. His re-examination of this issue concentrated on four fronts.

First, he began by addressing the repercussions a significantly longer lifespan would have. What would happen to the size and age distribution of the population and what kind of sociological effects might we expect? There are deleterious social consequences to prolonging life significantly, which include a possible destabilization of the distribution of young to old. Pro-creation could take a back seat in a prolonged cycle of life resulting in a large, childless, adult population. Already most of the Western world is experiencing a dramatic rise in single-child families. Many are now without uncles, aunts, cousins, nieces and nephews. Loss of family life and values often leads to a greater sense of isolation and emptiness. A longer lifespan involves a greater risk of hostility toward children as the sacrifice involved in child rearing is forfeited for regenerative medicine.

Secondly and more fundamentally, is a longer life necessarily a better life? How much more life do we want? If we say ten more healthy, vigorous years, why stop there? Why not twenty, thirty, one hundred? The secular view holds that death would be even less acceptable if life were prolonged even modestly.

Further, a longer, healthier life may actually be less satisfying according to Dr. Kass. Mortality has its virtues, independent of any promise of life after death. It allows us to pace our life, focusing on specific goals in an allotted time. The advantages of mortality are that it:
a) stimulates interest and engagement, leading to a greater personal happiness,
b) cultivates seriousness and aspiration; mortality makes life matter. We add life to years instead of years to life,
c) encourages beauty and love; our finite nature leads us to an acknowledgement of the transcendent, giving truth, beauty and love greater meaning,
d) develops character, virtue, and moral courage. In Homer’s epic poetry, the gods are almost instinctively portrayed as ignoble brats. In the same way, earthly immortals cannot be noble. Earthly immortality, as Odysseus discovers when he is tempted to stay forever with the beautiful siren Calypso, is a kind of unpalatable oblivion. Odysseus spurns her offer of lingering eternally without fear of death or injury and chooses the hardship of his journey home; for he sees that there his character, endurance and virtue will be put to the test.

The virtue of mortality is that it adds to our ability to reflect on our own finitude, forcing us to make proper use of the time that we do have. Without a limit, humans risk falling into the abyss of insatiable desires to an even greater degree, becoming even more attached to the things of this world and less likely to reflect on our true end.

Thirdly, human beings do long for immortality. In fact, the greater part of our nature is seen in the pursuit of the unconditional. However, the state that the human soul directs its activities towards and longs for seems to elude us in this life. There is a conflict between our transcendent aspirations and the function of our bodies. Human beings long for wholeness, wisdom and godliness, not longer life. This is why the Bible explicitly values wisdom and holiness more than health or long life. Ageing research does not satisfy these deepest aspirations. More of the same just won’t do it. Mere continuance won’t buy what we really want, the fulfillment of our nature by a transcendent, perfect, unconditionally good and loving being: “our missing half.”

Finally, human beings seek perpetuation. We are not merely reproducing animals who avoid pain and seek pleasure. We are much deeper creatures through our intellect, language and culture, and what some refer to as our “soul.” It is through our offspring that we achieve the transcendence of the “self”, through the “death of self.”

The natural human lifespan – whose maximum has remained relatively constant over the centuries/millennia, though the average age has increased markedly in the last century as a result of improved sanitation, diet, etc. – optimizes this cycle. A significantly shorter or longer life would not permit as full a participation in this cycle.

If we prolong life significantly the existential emptiness most of us feel won’t vanish. “Life fatigue” is inevitable, so an indefinite lifespan is really no solution at all. Children and not Human Growth Hormone are life’s answer to immortality, according to Dr. Kass. In the end, he counsels us to resist the siren song of immortality and to join him in his exhortation of, “L’Chaim!… To Life!”