
The Human Person: A Bioethical Word

by Francis Etheredge

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In *The Human Person: A Bioethical Word*, Francis Etheredge insists that bioethics touches on those issues most vital to each human being and is thus too important to leave to specialists (25). Consequently, the book is addressed to a wide audience of readers who are immersed in a network of relationships wherein they raise similar existential questions regarding the origin, meaning, and end of human life (27, 29).

Etheredge's fundamental goal is to present the foundations of bioethics by reflecting on the beginnings of the human person, which unites all people as recipients of the gift of existence and renders them all equal before the Creator God and before the law that reflects his wisdom (35, 37). As the author notes, many atrocities of the twentieth century were rooted in a denial of God and the consequent reduction of human beings

to the most evolved of animals (42). What Etheredge's work lacks in terms of scholarly apparatus and detailed interaction with warring views, it makes up for in its heartfelt and passionately personal exploration of how the truths of bioethical personalism can illuminate the fundamental mysteries of life and death. Although he does not lack philosophical rigor, Etheredge avoids cold detachment by using numerous anecdotes about how bioethical personalism has sustained him in the difficulties of raising a family of eleven children. His account of a suicide attempt is particularly harrowing, but it also illustrates the hopeful message that even failings and suffering can find meaningful redemption.

In the first chapter, Etheredge grounds his analysis of human nature and dignity on human beings' fundamental vocation to cocreate with God (47). The Church is not the oppressive outsider who imposes a heavy burden on people (53). Rather, she is the tender mother who teaches her children the joyful liberation that comes through a chastity that enables them to exercise the self-gift that brings fulfillment (55). For fallen human beings, these beautiful vocations are lived between the Cross and the Resurrection; that is, they give a real but incomplete foretaste of the call to love that is satisfied only in the beatific vision of heaven (77).

In Chapter two, Etheredge explores the marriage vocation in its liturgical dimensions. Marriage is a conjugal covenant that requires ongoing renewal through moments consecrated to prayer (such as attending Mass or saying the Liturgy of the Hours as a family) and through an ongoing offering of daily joys and sorrows in union with Christ's perfect sacrifice. Through the blend of philosophy and personal experience that is characteristic of his work, Etheredge gives a particularly moving account of how bedtime in a large family can become a particularly fecund time to engage children in discerning dialogue and prayer (111). When tensions, misunderstanding, and grudges naturally arise, only in the Pascal mystery can the family find the strength to transform revenge into reconciliation (117).

The third chapter focuses on human beings' universal vocation to philosophy. Such philosophical questions are particularly

pressing, since many key members of society tend to reduce persons to the sum of their electrochemical activities as though they were mere fleshy computers (123). Similarly, the line between persons and other animals is often so blurred, and the former is treated as a slightly more advanced member of the animal kingdom who deserves no qualitatively difference in respect (124). Yet, through their singular possession of reason, human beings can discover an origin, development, and destiny they share with each other and with no other animal (131). In studying their beginning, we can conclude philosophically that all human beings, although different in color, age, weight, height, intelligence, strength, and so on, are united in receiving life as a gift they did not give to themselves (133). The recognition that they have received the gift of existence at the beginning of their lives should inspire people to respect the same the gift of all other persons and acknowledge that one has no right to deprive oneself or others of the mysterious gift of life freely received (166).

The fourth chapter shifts to a detailed exegesis of the biblical account of human origins. While metaphysics can deduce the first cause who continually creates and whose fullness of being is unchanging, only the divinely inspired accounts of the Bible capture the people of God's encounter with his power through the Exodus (184, 186, 190). The term *bereishiith*, although often translated as "in the beginning" could also be translated "in beginning," thus indicating more clearly God's ongoing action in sustaining the being of all creatures (199). Etheredge observes that "God acts as 'us'" in the creation of human beings (201). The sexual complementarity inscribed in the human race thus reflects the unified plurality of the Holy Trinity who creates. Moreover, the threefold use of *bara* in Genesis 1:27 hints at the Trinitarian dimension of creation implicit in the Old Testament text (201). The reference to the *ruach* (feminine) *elohiim* (plural masculine) suggests that the complementarity of sexes reflects the very inner dynamism of the mutual exchange of the Holy Trinity (203). Again, human beings' creation in the image (*betsalmeinu* in masculine form) and likeness (*kidmutheinu* in the

feminine form) subtlety confirms that sexual differentiation and complementarity are part of a divine plan that goes deeper than mere external social convention (204). The two accounts of creation are linked through *waw* (consecutive use of *and*), thus manifesting the unity of God's plan for human beings in the visible cosmos (207). Throughout the chapter, Etheredge demonstrates how the light of revelation confirms, purifies, complements, and elevates anthropological truths known through rational philosophy.

In chapter five, Etheredge returns to a philosophical examination critiquing several dangerous ideologies that rob people of their dignity and fulfillment through reductive perspectives. A person discovers oneself to be a biological word; that is, the profound meaning of one's inner life as a rational being is lived in and expressed through a body integral to one's person (253). When an individual's nature as incarnate spirit is disregarded in favor of a materialistic outlook that privileges the survival of the fittest, then the weak and vulnerable are quickly the first to suffer the negative practical consequences of a limited theoretical anthropology (255).

Etheredge continues his explorations of human beginnings through a sixth chapter focused on the psychosomatic unity of the person present from his or her first moments. The author observes that embryonic cell wall development is the outward expression of the dependence of the new human's life on his or her mother, which, by extension, reminds each of us of our ongoing dependence on a Creator God (304).

Etheredge focuses the seventh chapter on illuminating the meaning of the beginning of personhood, offering both theoretical insights and an impassioned plea for ecclesial clarification of the beginnings of the human person. He starts the key chapter of the work recalling that the goal of the book is to ground the field of bioethics on a proper understanding of personhood (330). As Etheredge contends, study of human beginnings discloses that all individuals receive a gift of existence they did not give to themselves, and therefore they are united in their equal dependence on their Creator and the laws He inscribed in the natural order (331). The

zinc spark detected through fluorescence microscopy as the sperm enters the egg, and the opening in the ovum wall closes, signals the transition from egg to embryo. It marks a genetically distinct new human life whose sex, hair color, eye color, body size, and other distinguishing features are already established (324, 335–337). While the infamous Warnock Report honestly admitted that all stages of embryological development are part of a continuous process, it lamentably allowed for experimentation on embryos before the fourteen-day mark through specious argumentation that the lack of a primitive streak and the possibility of twinning somehow contradict the individual unity of the genetically distinct human being present from the moment of conception (344). In the face of such abuses, Etheredge suggests that an international authority should acknowledge and protect the rights of vulnerable human embryos whose personhood is a philosophically demonstrable truth not exclusive to any religious body (352). Such an authoritative international body would need serious philosophical formation because such an organization would effectively protect vulnerable embryonic life only by promoting a universal natural law ethics in place of the utilitarianism that dominates groups like the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority in the United Kingdom.

Etheredge concludes chapter seven with an extended reflection on the plight of frozen embryos. He recommends that the magisterium more clearly endorse embryo rescue through transfer to the wombs of willing mothers. The author begins his analysis with a clear rejection of the instrumentalization of embryos as the means to satisfy the desires of potential parents or as the material for experimentation (354). The author notes that we should no more withhold a welcoming womb from an abandoned embryo than we should deprive food from a starving orphan (359–360). In short, the rights of the frozen embryo have already been attacked by his or her biological parents and the doctors involved in in vitro fertilization (IVF) (360). The adoptive parents are in no way responsible

for violating the dignity of the embryo but are instead engaged in a praiseworthy act of service that responds to the embryo's right to a nurturing environment that is conducive to development (360).

In light of such reflections, Etheredge makes a forceful case that the magisterium should more clearly instruct the faithful in two key points. First, the Church should clearly commit to teach that human personhood begins at the moment of fertilization so that the embryo's rights are protected against any form of experimental abuse or parental neglect. Etheredge also offers a compelling argument that vernacular translations of *Donum vitae* have caused interpretations of the text that the authoritative Latin text does not demand. According to Etheredge, note 27, which reads, "Zygotum est cellula orta a fusione duorum gametum," is best translated into English as "The zygote is the cell arising from a fusion of the two gametes" (370). There is thus no explicit mention in the Latin text of the fusion of the nuclei of the two gametes, despite the English, French, and Italian translations' allusions to the nuclei. Thus nothing in the authoritative text of *Donum vitae* prevents a Catholic from holding that both human life and personhood begin at the first moment of conception. Moreover, Etheredge notes that the egg and sperm cease to exist at the beginning of fertilization. He contends that the walled embryo manifests activity that the inert ovum lacked and thus manifests itself as a new, distinct human being and person (376).

Second, Etheredge argues that the magisterium should pronounce more fully on the distinction between illicit assisted reproductive technologies that replace the conjugal act and the licit acts of embryo transfer and adoption that favor the dignity of those embryos abandoned to a cruel, frozen fate. Unlike the biological parents, the adoptive parents have not willfully substituted the conjugal act with technical procedures (384). Instead, they are responding to the injustice that already occurred but for which they are not responsible. Etheredge adds that the Church already allows therapeutic interventions

on developing embryos to protect such nascent life's health (385). Thus, so long as a safe transfer can be assured, embryo adoption offers a licit means of protecting and promoting the health of the embryo desperately in need of the hospitable environment that another woman's womb can provide. Etheredge concludes that embryo adoption is a remedy against, not a collaboration with, the insidious IVF industry (386).

Overall, Etheredge's work weaves theology, philosophy, and the personal experience of a committed husband and father into an extended reflection on the foundations of a personalist bioethics. Such a vision can bear positive fruits when confronting the existential bioethical challenges that inevitably affect all members of our society. His final chapter, with its recommendation for a dual clarification of the magisterium's stance on the beginning of human person and the moral praiseworthiness of embryo adoption, is a particularly intriguing invitation to moral theologians to explore the possible fittingness of such doctrinal developments in a sequel to *Dignitas personae*. It would be interesting to see the author dedicate future works to engaging with proponents of other schools of bioethics, such as principlism or utilitarianism, to manifest more clearly the benefits of embracing his bioethical model. Moreover, Etheredge's subsequent work could offer a more robust exploration of the meaning and value of natural law reasoning in grounding a universal ethic persuasive to non-Catholic thinkers in the public square. *The Human Person: A Bioethical Word* steers clear of many of the polemics found in contemporary bioethical literature. While such an approach might disappoint the expert looking to resolve controversial questions, the positive tone of Etheredge's book will appeal to those who need an initiation into a personalist approach to bioethics.

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