

# Book Review

Gilbert Meilaender, *Bioethics and the Character of Human Life: Essays and Reflections* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2020). 192 pp.

Reviewed by Robert Henry

THE RISE OF TODAY'S technological advancements has raised concerns in relation to ethics. This is particularly true concerning Artificial Intelligence (AI), Media, and Medicine. These concerns have emerged almost as rapidly as the advancements themselves. Recently, these apprehensions have been dominated by AI's threat to the arts, labor, and our overall economy and way of life through such online software as ChatGPT. Bioethics, even more so as it relates to the medical field, presents some of the most profound challenges to humanity. Gilbert Meilaender, an American bioethicist and theologian, addresses many of these concerns in his book *Bioethics and the Character of Human Life*.

Many secular philosophical works seek to balance the practical with the academic and address ethics from both sides, with more emphasis on the former than the latter. Meilaender's book comprises a series of lectures addressing many concerns that reflect the lack of dignity and sacred reverence of our secular culture. Meilaender arranges his compilation of essays thematically. The book is a scholarly and secular expression of Lutheran bioethics and a testament to upholding the sanctity of humanity along with the individual by clearly delineating the practical distinction between therapy and enhancement in medicine.

The book's essays stem from the author's professional experience as an educator, researcher, and bioethics consultant. And while the topics are varied, universal themes are highlighted through four section headings. Section I contains the first of these themes and is entitled "Bioethics and Public Life." It was inspired by the author's participation as a member of the Presidential Council on Bioethics. Chapter One is entitled "Bioethics and the Character of Human Life." Here, Meilaender identifies four distinct areas of research: 1) Death and dying, 2) behavioral control, 3) genetic screening, counseling, and engineering, and 4) population policy and family planning (3). All of these culminate into a definition of bioethics, which he describes as "the wisdom to discern right order among other competing goods" (10) vis-à-vis issues in the medical field. Chapter Two is aptly titled "Bioethics in Public: Reflections on an Experience." Here, he explores personal experiences emphasizing public discourse over academic insularity and serves as a segue into Chapter Three, "Biotech Enhancement and the History of Redemption." Caution

is advised against “beyond therapy” into human enhancement and moves into the next chapter on stem cells and torture.

This first section of essays is a buildup to a succinct arrangement of essays in Sections II, III, and IV. Each section is labeled “Thinking Theologically.” Section II is entitled “Thinking Theologically: Life’s Beginning.” Section III is listed as “Thinking Theologically: Life’s Ending,” and section IV is named “Thinking Theologically: Being a Person.” These sections explore a blend of theological issues related to the intersection of secular public concerns. For Meilaender, to think theologically about the beginning of life and preserving its unique character entails maintaining a close tie of “babymaking” to relationships grounded in love, preferring the act of “making” over “doing,” without “designing our descendants” (84). Section III, “Thinking Theologically: Life’s Ending,” discusses euthanasia and organ donations in the context of theologically sound principles of the body’s sanctity as embodying the person rather than a sum of the body’s parts. Section IV urges the reader to think of the person theologically, thus avoiding reductionistic identification of the individual or holding to the person as some disembodied Platonic, ethereal “idea.” Meilaender leads the reader to think of the person as an embodied “unrepeatable” entity, irreducible and mysterious (157).

Meilaender’s commitment to Lutheran theology is expressed in each section of “Thinking Theologically.” He grounds ethical issues in theological themes. In the chapter “The End of Sex,” the author reflects on Stanford law professor Henry Greely’s book, *The End of Sex and the Future of Reproduction*. Greely presents specific objections to those criticizing his predictions concerning an end to the use of sex for reproduction and its moral implications. Greely dismisses the claims that PGDs (preimplantation genetic diagnosis) go against God’s will and supporting PGDs is an employment of the naturalistic fallacy. And so, it is confusing an “is” with an “ought,” to where one needs humility in the face of such alternatives to natural “baby making,” and to Leon Kass’s objection to cloning as innately repugnant, suggesting that feelings change over time. All of these concerns, as well as others mentioned in subsequent chapters, are dealt with by Meilaender through demonstrating a failure of secular ethics to map out its values onto any rationally consistent system. Instead, as in PGDs, the author distinguishes between an ethically neutral—and indeed indifferent—*finis* of babymaking and lovemaking. He does this in contrast to the ethics’ proper concept of a *telos*, which identifies the two acts as one.

Similarly, Meilaender, in Section III of “Thinking Theologically,” recommends the issues of euthanasia and organ donations to be seen within the context of our bodies as gifts. This means our bodies are not our own to do with as we wish. They are sacred and deserving of reverence. Thus, we should refuse the dangerously destructive temptation to divorce the soul from the body in which it is instantiated.

Likewise, in Section IV, “Thinking Theologically: On Persons,” Meilaender draws on Karl Barth’s three angles of seeing humans through creation, reconciliation, and redemption. The mystery of personhood is found in the same mystery of the Trinity, with God the Father neither created nor begotten, the Son not created but begotten of the Father, and the Holy Spirit as proceeding from this relationship of the Father and the Son. Therefore, personhood cannot be reduced to a parts/whole emergentism but must be upheld with the same attitude as the religious notion of God’s mysterious nature.

Finally, Meilaender’s work is a testament to upholding the sanctity of humanity and the individual through clearly delineating the practical distinction between therapy and enhancement in medicine. If one is to take anything away from these essays on bioethics, the most important matter is a call to “pump the brakes” in enhancing our natural abilities and avoid going “beyond therapy” in the medical field. To quote Jeff Goldblum’s character, Dr. Ian Malcolm, in *Jurassic Park*, “Your scientists were so preoccupied with whether they could, they didn’t stop to think if they should.”<sup>1</sup> Dr. Malcolm does not elaborate on what this “should” might entail. Fortunately, Meilaender does elaborate in these essays, with the framework of human health as therapeutic and human enhancement beyond the parameters of what it means to be human from the perspective of a sound theological (and natural theology) foundation.

Ultimately this book is a much-needed text for those tackling the challenges facing bioethicists today. Through these lively essays, he derives universal themes that propel the book’s thoughtful and contemplative reflections on bioethics in the 21st Century. Presenting theological principles about life and humanity to the reader, Meilaender straddles the line between secular and religious obligations within the medical field. Even more, he presents terminology such as “beyond therapy” and “human enhancement” to delineate between ethical and unethical practices in modern medicine. All of this is due to an attempt to preserve the surreptitiously diminishing sanctity of humanity and the distinctiveness of the individual in our current era of advanced technology.

**Robert Henry** is *Adjunct Professor, Gateway Community Technical College (KCTCS)* and *Assistant Editor of Verba Vitae*.

## Note

1. Spielberg, Steven [director]. *Jurassic Park* (Universal Pictures, 1993). 127 minutes.