

Engaging the Whole Breadth of Reason: Catholic Bioethics in the University and in the Post-Secular World

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ABSTRACT: From its beginnings, bioethics has been a secular enterprise. Scholars who hold religious beliefs are often disenfranchised in debate or writing as incapable of rational discourse. This antipathy has been extended to the disenfranchisement of “Catholic bioethics” as an illegitimate university discipline. This essay examines that claim in light of 450 years of Catholic scholarship in questions now often subsumed under the rubric of bioethics.

The West has long been endangered by this aversion to the questions that underlie its rationality, and can only suffer harm thereby. The courage to engage the whole breadth of reason, and not denial of its grandeur—this is the program with which theology grounded in Biblical Faith enters the debates of our times.

— Pope Benedict XVI, 12 September 2006¹

IS CATHOLIC BIOETHICS a viable university discipline?² Or is it, as some aver, merely a set of religious prejudices disguised as rational

¹ Pope Benedict XVI, “Three Stages in the Program of De-Hellenization,” papal address, University of Regensburg, 12 September 2006.

² This paper was originally delivered in 2009 at Blackfriars College, Oxford University, at the invitation of Dr. Richard Finn, O.P., Regent of Blackfriars.

discourse? Is Catholic bioethics ready for the capacious dustbin of outmoded classical-medieval notions that positive science long ago put to rest?

In the past half century I have been increasingly asked this question in the university and in the public square. I have seen important principles of ethics marginalized simply because they have been the heritage of five hundred years of serious cogitation by Catholic scholars. And I have witnessed the growing conviction that man is the ultimate source of morality, that moral truth is only ascertained by positive science, and that the Roman Catholic Church is the last repository of resistance to man's realization of the dream of enlightened moral freedom.

What is at issue is the growing societal schism between moral and epistemological doctrines of militant skepticism and a balanced view of the place of both reason and faith. This schism is not likely to be healed in the years immediately ahead. The only road to peaceful co-existence is a productive dialectic and dialogue between secular and religious world views. For this to occur, Catholic bioethics must have a place in the university—the locus at which the necessary reasoned engagement is, and will be, taking place.

This dialogue is essential to humanity's common need to respond intelligently to the central question posed by the new biology. How are we to use our new powers for the betterment of human life without being overshadowed by our own ingenuity? What do we mean by "betterment" of human life? What indeed makes life truly human? By what means shall we determine its moral content?

This question has increasing significance for the future of bioethics and not just for Roman Catholics. At its beginnings in the U.S., bioethics had strong roots in the Protestant religion as well as the Catholic.³ Few of us then suspected how rapidly those religious roots

³ Thomas K. McElhinney and Edmund D. Pellegrino, "The Institute on Human Values in Medicine: Its Role and Influence in the Conception and Evolution of Bioethics," *Theoretical Medicine* 22 (2001): 291-317.

would be weakened by the growth of secularism with its traditional skepticism and relativism, and now by the militant anti-religious spirit that characterizes some of the writing in academia today.

Militant secularism has cast religiously grounded bioethics in the role of a social evil whose influence in academia is deleterious to progress and societal good. This attitude is reflected in the subtle disenfranchisement of Catholic bioethics in academic discourse. Moral conclusions cohering with a religious perspective have become *ipso facto* intellectually suspect in the minds of many.

There is every indication that this situation will continue in the years ahead into what some have called the “post secular age,”⁴ an age in which secular and religious world views will live side by side. In this circumstance, if there is to be civil accord on some of our most pressing moral issues, productive dialogue between opposing world views is essential. In this dialogue Catholic bioethics has a central role. Since the intellectual locus of the debate will be in the universities, Catholic bioethics must be represented in the academic milieu. To ignore or banish it as academically disreputable deprives the university of a rich and relevant tradition of medical morality. It deprives millions of believers of an intellectual forum representing their world view. It also assumes, without justification, that radical secularism and militant rationalism have already demolished two millennia of religious moral discourse in the West.

I will begin by considering the root of the fundamental schism between the rationalist and the religious world views as well as the way that schism has contributed to the fractiousness of today’s bioethics debates. I shall close by outlining why and how Catholic bioethics must occupy an unavoidable place in the moral controversy and the university. Throughout I shall maintain that Catholic bioethics, and other religiously connected systems of bioethics, must be in

⁴ K. Eder, “Europäische Säkularisierung-Sonderweg in die Postsäkular Gesellschaft?” *Berliner Journal für Soziologie* 3 (2002): 321-43; M. King, *Postsecularism: The Hidden Challenges to Extremism* (Cambridge UK: James Clark & Co., 2009).

continuing discourse with secular bioethics. This interchange is essential if we are to find agreement on the practical ethical guidelines we need to modulate the unprecedented powers modern biology puts before us.

In biology we face the same issue that Einstein touched on in the physical sciences when he said:

For the scientific method can teach us nothing else beyond how facts are related to and conditioned by each other. The aspiration toward such objective knowledge belongs to the highest of which man is capable and you will certainly not suspect me of wishing to belittle the achievements and heroic efforts of man in this sphere. Yet it is equally clear that knowledge of what is does not open the door directly to what should be.⁵

Although he was not a “believer” in the usual sense, Einstein’s distinction is just as true for the biological as it is for the physical sciences. To confuse or conflate their respective epistemologies imperils the credibility of both. Empirical science and ethics must respect each other’s domain even while examining the overlapping truths between them.

In a post-secular world neither the naturalistic nor the religious worldview can assume *prima facie* advantage over the other. Continuing interactions between secular and religious worldviews must be sought if these views are to live peaceably with one another. Humankind shares a powerful and continuing need to agree on how to channel the power and the opportunities of biotechnology so that all may benefit and all may be protected against the misuse of that power. For this, some source of criticism outside of science is essential.

CATHOLIC BIOETHICS AS AN ACADEMIC DISCIPLINE

A valid discipline must, at a minimum, possess an organized body of knowledge and a distinctive method for the study of that body of knowledge. On this view Catholic bioethics is an academic discipline.

⁵ Alfred Einstein, *Out of My Later Years* (Secaucus NJ: Citadel, 1974), pp. 21-22.

It is a branch of ethics whose specific focus is right and good action in the use of biological knowledge in human affairs. It shares with other studies subsumed under the rubric of ethics an orderly, systematic, critical, and definable body of knowledge aimed at a cognitive grasp of right and wrong, good and bad human conduct. Catholic bioethics as an organized body of knowledge is examined by trained professionals who belong to professional organizations and publish their work in available journals open to public and scholarly criticism. Catholic bioethics conducts its inquiries with a variety of analytic methods, both philosophical and theological. It has roots in classical, medieval, and contemporary philosophy. Many of the principles and methods that Catholic bioethics uses are shared by secular philosophers, even when their pre-logical presuppositions are different.

That Catholic bioethics differs in important ways from secular ethical systems of analyses and their conclusions does not *per se* make it either irrational or an exercise of religious prejudice. Measured by the usual criteria, Catholic bioethics is as valid an academic discipline as any other organized body of knowledge now accepted on university campuses. Humanity's need for the fullest examination of the ethical issues in contemporary biology and biotechnology is incomplete without the participation of Catholic bioethics. This inquiry is as crucial for believers as it is for non-believers. In a post-secular world the exile of Catholic bioethics from academia would be a loss for the whole of society.

This is not to suggest that to be legitimate academically *Catholic* bioethics must be reducible to secular bioethics. Like secular bioethics, Catholic bioethics argues its propositions from the point of view of reason. Its conclusions are open to reasoned objection. The fact that its conclusions are also consistent with Church teaching does not *per se* invalidate them. Like any other philosophical endeavor Catholic bioethics answers reasons with reasons. It does not offer scripture, tradition, church teaching or papal encyclicals as evidence against reasoned objections by those who do not accept such evidence.

In a sense, then, Catholic bioethics is a "bipolar" discipline, i.e.,

a continuous line of thought extending from reason to revelation. At one end it can be engaged by reason alone unaided by theology. At the other end, it is compatible with theological ethics. How far one goes along this continuum is dependent on how far the inquirer wishes to go. Catholic bioethics engages the intellect through reason at one end and through faith on the other. Faith complements reason, while reason complements faith.⁶

That there is in Catholic bioethics a congruence between faith and reason does not *per se* invalidate it either as philosophy or theology. Each end of its bipolar structure can be engaged on its own terms. This bipolarity equips Catholic bioethics to serve as a linch pin in the current and future dialogue between the secular and religious world views.

SECULAR AND CATHOLIC BIOETHICS: THE WIDENING GAP

Before turning to the ways by which Catholic bioethics can engage in productive dialogue and dialectic with secular bioethics, a very brief summarization of the forces driving them apart is in order. I need not repeat here the extraordinary efforts of Pope John Paul II and now Pope Benedict XVI to encourage dialogue with contemporary culture in all its manifestations.

Despite some progress this encounter has been difficult in academic circles. Here the gap has been made dialogue difficult, or even impossible in some cases, by narrowing the legitimacy of reason itself as a means of ascertaining truth. Until the Enlightenment, classical human reason could engage the whole world of things and events in search of the truth. Since the Enlightenment human reason has gradually been reduced to scientific reason, to only those truths judged valid by the criterion of falsifiability. This narrowing has now come to include morality and ethics, thus eroding their underpinning in moral philosophy as well.

⁶ John Paul II, *Fides et Ratio*, 1998.

This limitation of reason to scientific reason has dealt a double blow to bioethics, which must consider the moral dimensions of biology when it is used to re-shape our notions of *being* human, and human *being*. Moral truths, if any are left, are further reduced to psychology, axiology, or evolutionary biology. With the societal revolution of the mid-sixties of the last century morality became the province of social or cultural construction. Here the repudiation of received traditions and authority has led to atomization of moral standards. They have become matters of personal preference instead.

This trajectory leaves little room for sources beyond man that can bind the moral life of all humans as humans. Total freedom of choice reduces the moral life solely to personal “values” that are as such inarguable by reason alone. Given that this, or something like it, is presently the case, what is the status of today’s moral discourse?

THE FRACTIOUSNESS OF CURRENT BIOETHICAL DISCOURSE

In 1997, H.T. Engelhardt, Jr. viewed the state of ethical discourse in bioethics with a mixture of satisfaction and foreboding. He was pleasantly surprised that bioethicists without a shared moral narrative were, nonetheless, able to engage in a productive degree of ethical discourse. His satisfaction, however, was tempered by his longstanding conviction that rational discourse could not long survive without a shared, content-full, moral consensus. He phrased his doubts in clearly apodictic terms: “In particular, the project of discovering a shared normative consensus in general secular terms must always fail.”⁷ Bereft of a shared moral yardstick, Engelhardt argued, bioethicists must be “moral strangers,” incapable of meaningful moral discourse between, or among, communities with opposing values.⁸

⁷ H.T. Engelhardt, “Bioethics and Philosophy Reconsidered” in *Philosophy and Medicine Reconsidered, A Twenty Year Retrospective and Critical Appraisal*, ed. Ronald Carson and Chester Burns (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1997), pp. 85-105.

⁸ H.T. Engelhardt, *The Foundations of Bioethics*, 2nd Edition (New York NY: Oxford Univ. Press, 1996).

Any realistic appraisal of the trajectory of discourse in bioethics today will give testimony to Engelhardt's prescience. Moreover, today's discord in bioethics is not limited to failure to agree on a secular moral vision. The same failure is becoming evident between and within religion-inspired moral narratives as well. One example is the sad division between liberal and conservative Catholics on some of the most crucial human life issues (e.g., abortion, embryonic stem cell research).

The current discord between "moral strangers" impedes discourse on topics of common concern—e.g., physician-patient relationships, health care reform, the care of the very young and the very old, human enhancement, end-of-life decisions, abortion, euthanasia, and virtually every other biomedical issue of importance. These divisions become most acute when important bioethical issues of the day are debated in the public square or the venue of public policy. In that venue, both private and public disagreements have too often ended in socially ruinous eventualities: capitulation, unacceptable compromise, or incommensurability, all lethal to productive discourse.

We are indeed becoming the "moral strangers" that Engelhardt predicted. In democratic societies the tendency is often to think that legislative judicial fiat or a simple majority plebiscite will "settle" the issues. This tendency for Americans to seek juridical resolution was recognized in our country's early history by de Tocqueville a long time ago in these words: "Scarcely any political question arises in the United States which is not resolved, sooner or later, into a judicial question."⁹

When we resort to the resolution of debated moral issues by legislation or the courts, there is the additional danger that de Tocqueville also saw of conflict between equality and freedom, between conformity to the majority rule and the power of the majority over individual freedoms. De Tocqueville put it this way: "I have

⁹ Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, ed. Richard Heffner (New York NY: New American Library, 1956), p. 126.

sought to point out the dangers to which the principle of equality exposes the independence of man...because I firmly believe that these dangers are the most formidable.”¹⁰

This is an issue in the United States now. There are currently pressures to equate legality with morality. In the case of abortion, some argue that physicians, being licensed by the State, are legally compelled to do what they believe intrinsically wrong. Some bioethicists insist that all physicians must be “morally neutral” on the human most serious human life issues.¹¹ The central Catholic teaching on conscience and moral accountability is thus imperiled.¹²

ONE MECHANISM FOR ACCORD: “CONSENT AND FORBEARANCE”

Fortunately, at the international level the process of decision-making in the absence of consensus on a moral narrative has had some genuine success. Engelhardt describes this as the “consent and forbearance method.” Using this method, the participants eschewed debating the foundational questions and justifications on which they based their opposing positions. Instead, they focused on those aspects of the issues on which they could agree. To these they gave their consent and practiced the forbearance necessary to actualize particular undertakings to which their consent could be given. For Engelhardt, the free consent of the participants and their moral forbearance counted as valid moral permission. Differences of opinion then centered on the validity of the consent process. The ideological, metaphysical, and theological differences grounding the particular undertaking on which agreement was sought were voluntarily set aside and not engaged.

This method succeeded in gaining consent to a variety of

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 315.

¹¹ J. Blustein and A.R. Fleishman, “The Pro-Life Maternal-Fetal Medicine Physician: A Problem of Integrity,” *Hastings Center Report* (Jan.-Feb., 1995).

¹² W.J. Smith, “Pulling the Plug on the Conscience Clause,” *First Things* (Dec. 2009): 41-44.

agreements between nations and individuals representing a wide variety of cultures, legal philosophies, and religious beliefs. Some examples are these: the 1929 International Declaration on the Rights of Man of the Institute of International Law, the 1948 U.N. Declaration on the Rights of Man, the UNESCO Universal Declaration on Bioethics and Human Rights,¹³ the 1946 Nuremberg Code on Permissible Medical Experiments, and the 2003 Revised Declaration of Helsinki of the World Medical Association.

These bodies came to agreements despite their moral and cultural diversity and the complexity of the issues. However, it is important to recognize that at the outset the participants shared certain practical perspectives, were willing to work together cooperatively, and held moral positions at least in part amenable to compromise. These conditions rarely obtain in academe or “public debates” involving bioethics today. They are most notably missing in attempts at dialogue between secular and Catholic viewpoints on the human life issues.

CONSENT AND FORBEARANCE: SOME PROBLEMS

Today, the aforementioned conditions favoring constructive collaboration have become difficult for a variety of reasons. A more diverse cadre of younger bioethicists has taken the place of the more experienced participants of the earlier discourses. Their moral viewpoints are more diverse, and more sharply divided, than those of their predecessors. Their partisan political sympathies are more overtly expressed. Self-designated ethical “progressives” or “retrogressives” array themselves against each other. Thus loyalty to political ideology is often confused with ethical consistency. Common consent and forbearance—and, at times, even common civility—are thus harder to achieve.

¹³ E. D. Pellegrino, “Article 4: Benefit and Harm” in *The UNESCO Universal Declaration on Bioethics and Human Rights: Background, Principles and Application*, ed. H.A. ten Have and M.S. Jean (UNESCO Publishing, 2009), pp. 99-109.

Today's bioethicists come from a wide variety of disciplines in the humanities, social sciences, political science, the law, and medicine. They have had varying degrees of formal education in ethics or bioethics. Some interpret bioethics as a discipline; for others it is a public forum within which to shape societal mores in ways that would justify their own political views.

This variety of backgrounds has enhanced and enriched bioethical discourse and fostered interdisciplinary dialogue. But it has also diluted the ethical rigor of the discourse and increased the possibilities for discord in debate. In the past philosophical or theological ethics enjoyed intellectual stature. For many "bioethicists" today, those disciplines are demeaned as retrogressive, too abstract, or too close to religion. Moral arguments today are often shaped in terms of "values" rather than moral principle or reasoning. Some bioethicists want to be "comfortable" with their conclusions rather than being rationally convinced by them.

This de-emphasis on ethics *per se* tends to weaken the process of dialectic that is essential to the kind of argumentation needed to distinguish compromise from capitulation and to recognize when arguments have reached the state of incommensurability and can no longer be pursued productively.

Elsewhere I have detailed the current trajectory toward normative decay in bioethics, together with the difficulties of retrieving its normative status.¹⁴ Unfortunately traditionalists, modernists, and postmodernists have each contributed to this normative decadence. Whenever bioethics fails to engage the deeper issues (classically the domain of metaphysics and theology), it succumbs easily to moral nihilism. This is not a plea for nostalgia but simply recognition of a cultural heritage within the perennial philosophy still latent in the major philosophical systems today. Rather, it is to recognize the obstacles that must be dealt with for secular and religiously oriented

¹⁴ E. D. Pellegrino, "Bioethics at Century's End: Can Normative Ethics be Retrieved?" in *Journal of Medicine and Philosophy* 25/6 (2000): 655-75.

views to engage each other.

CATHOLIC BIOETHICS, THE UNIVERSITY AND THE POST SECULAR AGE

I will turn from these reflections to the necessity for Catholic bioethics to engage in productive discourse with the rationalist world view. This can only be accomplished in an intellectually serious way if Catholic bioethics is a full partner in academia with the bioethics of Western rationalism and skepticism. Full academic partnership does not mean mere tolerance, but a true mutually respectful dialectic between mature scholars, like that between Jürgen Habermas and Joseph Ratzinger.¹⁵ I will use their dialectic as an example of how mature scholars with fundamentally different worldviews can engage in a productive discourse.

It is difficult to imagine the productive relationship exhibited in the dialectic between Habermas and Pope Benedict XVI without the academic presence of Catholic bioethics. If we are ever to overcome the barriers between the “moral strangers” described by Engelhardt, universities must play a leadership role in sustaining the requisite discourse. To label reasoned approaches that look to theology or classical philosophy as off-limits ignores the most serious questions of philosophical anthropology implicit and explicit in what we may aspire to be as humans.¹⁶ To assume, on the other hand, that the secularized perspective is unwarranted or without merit, or to deny that it can contribute to philosophical anthropology is similarly mistaken.

What is more, to exclude Catholic bioethics from academia deprives the university community of contact with the *philosophia perennis*, the longest continuous repository of philosophy and ethics,

¹⁵ Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger and Jürgen Habermas, *Dialectic of Secularization, On Reason and Religion* with a foreword by Florian Schuller, trans. Brian McNeill (San Francisco CA: Ignatius, 2006).

¹⁶ E. D. Pellegrino, “Toward a Richer Bioethics: A Conclusion” in *Health and Human Flourishing*, ed. Carol R. Taylor and Roberto Dell’Oro (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown Univ. Press, 2006), pp. 247-69.

dating from classical times, through the middle ages, to the contemporary era. This is not to suggest that immediate answers to contemporary problems are ready for picking from the mature tree of Western philosophical reflection. Rather, it is to afford the secular ethicist an insight into ideas that once flourished and some of which can still enrich contemporary thought.

Then, there is an array of concepts crucial to any creditable moral philosophy that is currently interpreted solely in naturalist terms. The modern rationalist and naturalist interpretations of scientific evidence are crucial. But so, too, are the ways in which they have been interpreted by philosophers and theologians over the ages in the classical and Catholic moral traditions. I refer here to such concepts crucial to any philosophical anthropology like dignity, mind, spirit, soul, self, virtue, consciousness, responsibility, and so on. Of late, these concepts have received much attention from psychology, neurophysiology, and phenomenology. The possible correlations between localized brain activity observed by MRI and the mind-body problem are current cases in point. Our understandings of these concepts have been expanded by contemporary imaging techniques. Our knowledge of neurophysiology does not exhaust our understanding of the human experiences with which they may correlate experimentally.

Exiling Catholic bioethics also ignores the five-hundred-year old history of Catholic efforts in bioethics *per se*.¹⁷ Beginning with the penitential books of the thirteenth century, the Church encouraged the study of medical morals. It fostered the earliest moral discussions about the responsibilities of physicians regarding embryology, abortion, euthanasia, craniotomy, medical fees, and futile treatment, for example. Even if one disagrees with Catholic ethical positions, their intellectual history cannot be lightly ignored.

In the modern history of bioethics, even before it was recognized

¹⁷ D. Kelly, *The Emergence of Roman Catholic Bioethics in North America* (New York NY: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1987).

by the secular world, a wide range of bioethics problems were examined in depth by the Church. Contemporary issues like the duties of confidentiality, organ donation, ordinary-extraordinary means, the principle of double effect, the physician's ethics, etc. were discussed in the teachings of Pope Pius XII. Indeed I think it no exaggeration to call him the "first modern bioethicist." He addressed these issues more than a decade before bioethics was "born."

The scholarly contributions of Catholic scholars worldwide, especially since Pius XII, have covered every imaginable topic germane to the field of bioethics. No scholar can responsibly set these aside as mere religious prejudices. We also add the enormously influential encyclicals of John Paul II. These together with numerous reports of the Pontifical Academy for Science and the Pontifical Academy for Life, as well as the writings of numerous Catholic scholars cannot be responsibly ignored as mere "religious prejudice."

Yet, as recently as 2008, this is what occurred at Rome's Sapienza University where the irrational and intemperate objections of students and faculty forced cancellation of a speech by Benedict XVI.¹⁸ More subtle forms of disenfranchisement are not rare when the human life issues are discussed in academe.

Fortunately, not all secularists are so openly disdainful of ideas with which they do not agree. Some are closer to the position of Jürgen Habermas, philosopher and committed secularist as he was, expressed in his extraordinary dialectic with Joseph Ratzinger (now Benedict XVI). Habermas argued that

...in the public arena, naturalistic world views which owe their genesis to a speculative assimilation of scientific information and are relevant to the ethical self-understanding of the citizens do not in the least enjoy a *prima facie* advantage over competing world views or religious understandings.¹⁹

¹⁸ Pope Benedict XVI, "Planned Lecture at La Sapienza," *Catholic online*, 1 (2008): 20.

¹⁹ Ratzinger and Habermas, *op. cit.*, p. 51.

Ratzinger for his part of the dialectic expressed an equally reasonable openness to rational dialogue:

Accordingly, I would speak of a necessary relatedness between reason and faith and between reason and religion which are called to purify and help one another. They need each other and they must acknowledge their mutual need.²⁰

Religion must continually allow itself to be purified and structured by reason and this was the view of the Church Fathers too. However, we have also seen in our reflections that there are also pathologies of reason.²¹

If more secularists are to be open to genuine discourse like Habermas, Catholic bioethicists will have to settle some of their differences in interpretation of natural law.²² The traditional Aristotelian-Thomist themes that have characterized natural law in the past are currently subject to contested interpretations. The core themes, moral and epistemological, remain but their inter-relationships are more intricate than previously suggested.

In his conversation with Habermas, Benedict XVI made some pointed comments on the present state of natural law. He was quite frank in saying that natural law had become a “blunt” instrument. He questioned the notion that nature and reason overlap since nature was thought to be rational. Evolution seems to indicate otherwise, in Benedict’s opinion. What remains, he suggests, is the modern notion that man *qua* man has rights simply by virtue of being human. Moreover, Benedict would expand the case for human rights to include

²⁰ Ratzinger and Habermas, op. cit., p. 78.

²¹ Ratzinger and Habermas, op. cit., p. 77.

²² Matthew Levering, *Biblical Natural Law: A Theocentric and Teleological Approach* (New York NY: Oxford Univ. Press, 2008); D. F. Kelly, *The Emergence of Roman Catholic Medical Ethics in North America* (New York NY: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1981); Paul J. Griffiths, “The Nature of Desire,” *First Things* 198 (2009): 27-30; Martin Rhonheimer, “Natural Law and the Thomistic Root of John Paul’s Ethics of Human Life,” *The National Catholic Bioethics Quarterly* 3 (2009): 517-39; J. Finnis, J. Boyle, and G. Grisez, *Nuclear Deterrence, Morality and Realism* (New York NY: Oxford Univ. Press, 1987), pp. 281-87.

obligations and limitations.²³

Clearly, Benedict's reflections call for a greater clarity in our use of natural law as an instrument of engagement. The central epistemological and ethical themes remain, but their interrelationships deserve re-inspection. William Wallace, in a carefully analyzed account of the ancient notion of philosophy of nature, identifies it with the philosophy of science. Indeed Wallace admits that the "essential task of the philosopher of science is to assist in the task of disengaging valid physical knowledge from the logical and mathematical scaffolding in which it may be embedded."²⁴ This the scientist does but there is also room here for the philosopher of science "in uncovering the presuppositions and constructions wherewith the puzzling and enigmatic results are being obtained."²⁵

This disengagement becomes crucial in the bioethics surrounding our rapidly emerging knowledge of the physiology of the human brain. Here the capacity to visualize brain tracts and nuclei in action too easily invites premature conclusions about the meanings of body, mind, and soul.²⁶ A disciplined philosophy of science can help to keep the different orders of abstraction separated in the interests of both secular and Catholic bioethics. Each, after all, seeks to understand these phenomena in their reality.

For myself, having engaged in the dialogue and dialectic as it pertains to bioethics and the human life issues especially, there is hope that the tensions of a post-secular world will not end in an intellectual or spiritual impasse. These issues will prove tendentious in the post-secular world. And it is only with Catholic bioethics *in situ* as a

²³ Op. cit., pp. 69-71.

²⁴ William Wallace, *The Modeling of Nature: Philosophy of Nature and Philosophy of Science in Synthesis* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic Univ. of America Press, 1996), p. 236.

²⁵ Wallace, p. 236.

²⁶ Martin Rhonheimer, "Natural Law and the Thomistic Root of John Paul's Ethics of Human Life," *National Catholic Bioethics Quarterly* 3 (2009): 517-39.

university discipline that the requisite dialogue and dialectic can be accomplished.

Thus, my answer to the question at the heart of this essay is that Catholic bioethics satisfies the criteria of a valid university discipline and that, more than most university disciplines, it addresses the most crucial questions arising in modern biology as they affect the nature and meaning of human life. Despite the current emergence of skeptical rationalism and secular naturalism, the long tradition of Catholic medical-moral scholarship cannot be banished from the university. Were it to be banished or marginalized, irreparable damage would occur to the ideals of the *Universitas* itself. Without the university intact as the critic of society, society itself will become the child of unrestrained intellectual hubris.

