Leon Kass: quite substantially right

"The world is a dangerous place to live, not because of the people who are evil, but because of the people who don't do anything about it." - Albert Einstein

I imagine I will surprise readers by devoting my first "real" editorial to a defence of much of what Leon Kass has written in recent years. I do so not only because I have become convinced that Kass is a great deal nearer the mark in his arguments than any of the other noted bioconservatives who, like him, are basking so freely in the improbable limelight afforded them by the American electorate's verdict in November 2000, but also because the areas on which I think he is right are so key to the arguments involved that I feel he is genuinely susceptible to persuasion of the merits of extreme life extension, albeit not of many other aspects of modern or anticipated biomedical modifications of our natural lives. It is seldom effective to overstate one's disagreements, nor to overlook one's areas of agreement, with someone whose views one would like to affect—and Kass's present influence is so great that even a softening of his opposition to such work would have considerable policy consequences, at least if George Bush is re-elected in November.

The most straightforward way to explain what I like about Kass's views on life extension is to refer not to their most high-profile exposition, the chapter "Ageless Bodies" from the recent President's Council report, but rather to two of Kass's earlier publications. The first of these is a 1997 essay entitled "The wisdom of repugnance", which first appeared in the journal The New Republic. This essay was not about life extension but about human reproductive cloning, and needless to say I find its thrust flawed in many ways which I will not enumerate here. But the pivotal passage in the essay, from which its title is drawn, starts like this:

"Offensive," "Grotesque." "Revolting." "Repugnant." "Repulsive." These are the words most commonly heard regarding the prospect of human cloning. Such reactions come both from the man or woman in the street and from the intellectuals, from believers and atheists, from humanists and scientists. Even Dolly's creator has said he "would find it offensive" to clone a human being.

... Revulsion is not an argument; and some of yesterday's repugnances are today calmly accepted - though, one must add, not always for the better. In crucial cases, however, repugnance is the emotional expression of deep wisdom, beyond reason's power fully to articulate it. Can anyone really give an argument fully adequate to the horror which is father-daughter incest (even with consent), or having sex with animals, or mutilating a corpse, or eating human flesh, or even just (just!) raping or murdering another human being? Would anybody's failure to give full rational justification for his or her revulsion at these practices make that revulsion ethically suspect? Not at all. On the contrary, we are suspicious of those who think that they can rationalize away our horror, say, by trying to explain the enormity of incest with arguments only about the genetic risks of in-breeding.

A common reaction to this passage, and to others like it, has been that it amounts to capitulation: that Kass is conceding that he has no articulable argument for his view, and thus that his view is irrational, the sort of view that only the uneducated masses are entitled to hold, and hence invalid. I feel that such a reaction is incorrect and misses the entirely correct point that Kass is making. In short, I think he is right that ethics is ultimately more about instinct than about logic. Morality is not absolute but relative—relative to what one already "knows" to be "right". On discussing this with a philosopher recently I was entertained to discover that my position here has a name—I am apparently a non-cognitivist. So are most of us, I claim, and we have no need to be ashamed of it.
Kass misuses this insight, however: a hint of how appears in the above passage. Some activities that used to be repugnant to most people are now largely agreed to be unexceptionable: homosexuality, for example. This is a case where what is repugnant to us now is the fact that we so recently felt that repugnance! Kass dodges this by describing those cases in which our attitudes have not changed as "crucial"—but he conspicuously omits any discussion of what makes these cases crucial, leaving as his only criterion the circular observation that they have not changed.

If our moral instinct is self-defining, how can it change? I think the answer is clear, though perhaps surprising: we apply the scientific method to it. Our non-acceptance of homosexuality was progressively seen to be inconsistent with other, even more deeply held, aspects of our sense of right and wrong, such as the right to do what one likes that does not harm others; this bears a rather clear similarity to the emergence of relativity and the quantum theory from the increasingly awkward internal inconsistency of classical physics in respect of (for example) whether light is made of waves or particles.

This way of looking at the evolution of morality also illuminates the opposite transition, the emergence of popular repugnance at something that was once accepted. Kass largely avoids such cases (he makes no mention of slavery, for example), but not entirely: he does mention murder. I need not review how recently it was that those of European descent, when colonising distant lands, freely massacred indigenous populations: we all know our history all too well. Here too, we came to appreciate the inconsistency of such attitudes with others that we found more central to our ethical code, and having done so we have set aside our misguided ways.

What can such history tell us about the future of morality, and in particular about what we will think in future of the desirability of aging? It tells us a great deal. The other earlier publication by Kass to which I referred above is "L'chaim and its limits: why not immortality?", first published in 2001 in First Things. This article is clear, at first:

How much longer life is a blessing for an individual? Ignoring now the possible harms flowing back to individuals from adverse social consequences, how much more life is good for us as individuals, other things being equal? How much more life do we want, assuming it to be healthy and vigorous? Assuming that it were up to us to set the human life span, where would or should we set the limit and why?

The simple answer is that no limit should be set. Life is good, and death is bad. Therefore, the more life the better, provided, of course, that we remain fit and our friends do, too.

This answer has the virtues of clarity and honesty.

Indeed it does—and those are virtues not lightly dismissed. How, then, does Kass proceed? As follows:

But most public advocates of conquering aging deny any such greediness. They hope not for immortality, but for something reasonable - just a few more years.

Huh? How can one possibly suggest that the statements of "most public advocates"—people who are simply following the maxim of only going as far as their audience might be willing to follow them—bear on the ethics of the situation? But reassurance is swift, because this is not the end of Kass's argument: indeed, he continues by stating cogently that these statements are a self-deception and that we do not in fact feel any limits on how long we want to live while still healthy. He then proceeds to the many societal difficulties that the availability of an indefinite lifespan might bring, which were repeated in "Ageless Bodies" and with which readers are thus familiar enough to make their repetition here unnecessary. However, he is also perfectly candid in regard to the paltry force of his argument: he peppers it with statements such as "I know I won't persuade many people to my position" and "To praise mortality must seem to be madness".
This, not his resort to emotional justification for a moral position, is where Kass capitulates. For, what is the source of this distaste for death that is so profound that Kass openly concedes that he will not appreciably diminish it? It is none other than that same wisdom of repugnance upon which his entire argument pivots and which I find rings so true. Death is, quite simply, repugnant, however much the slowness of most people’s physical and cognitive decline may allow us to come to terms with it in advance. The fellow-countrymen of the mass-murdering pioneers of the New World, sitting at home and hearing patchily of such events, doubtless felt some mild discomfort at them but felt that it was ultimately the natural order of things in a generally brutal world, still rife with wars between wealthy nations. It took an advance in our understanding of how to live together, and a consequently greater appreciation of the value of all human life, to open our eyes to the horror of such activity and bring it to an end. Quite simply, we became civilised enough to resolve the stark internal inconsistency of our moral position. We are still becoming more civilised today; shortly we will, at long last, arrive at the collective realisation that death of the old is as barbaric as death of the ethnically unfamiliar. Those who defend our current amorality in this regard will be consigned to the same dark corners of history as those who defended ethnic "cleansing" in centuries past. Even to suggest that the value of a life varies with how long it has already been lived, as Arthur Caplan did in our interview with him published in this issue,¹ will—shortly? I hope so—be seen as an indefensibly ageist stance.

References