

The contingency of men and limits of medical sciences

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SUMMARY

Progress in contemporary medicine seems to be unveiling amazing prospects for the future of humanity. Research on human stem cells, which due to their totipotentiality (embryonic stem cells) and pluripotentiality (adult stem cells) may raise the possibility of recreating entire human organs, inspires a whole new vision of the world in which human organism could be recreated almost endlessly. This research, however, calls for some ethical reflection. While collecting stem cells from adults does not provoke moral reservations, the use of embryonic stem cells raises the question: can such procedures be morally justified? According to the principle of justice, one may never sacrifice a single human life for the sake of an advantage for many others. On the other hand we must not forget that contingency is and always will be the immutable dimension of human life on earth.

Key words: contingency; ethics; medical science; death

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Ultimately, medicine is a search for an antidote to death, a quest for immortality. But can we find the medicine that will assure us immortality?

Pope Benedict XVI during a visit
in the International Youth Center
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INTRODUCTION

The subject of this reflection takes us back to the first chapters of the Book of Genesis. In the Garden of Eden, the first parents are forbidden to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil and Satan attempts to persuade them not to obey. He suggests: if you eat the fruit of this tree “you will not die” (Genesis 3,4). These words express a desire that has accompanied humans since the very beginning. This desire, a wish for immortality, tells us something significant about who a man is; it is an expression of his transcendence towards the temporal dimension of his existence and prompts him to search for whatever goes beyond this dimension and could fully satisfy human passions. According to St. Augustine, a man who fully accepts the finiteness of his existence is an alienated man, in the most profound meaning of this word, since he is someone who has lost sensitivity to whatever makes up the essence of his very humanity and what distinguishes him from the world of animals. In other words: finiteness and infiniteness coincide in a human being and that is why he cannot fully accept his own mortality.

The vision of an endless life can be enticing, as described in the Book of Genesis. A man can wish to prolong his life on Earth without referring to transcendence and without a search for what goes beyond the earthly dimension of his life. He might strive for immortality using his own resources and ultimately locking himself in the immanence of his earthly life.

This transcendence-free vision of immortality raises two questions. First: *is it possible to prolong human earthly life endlessly?* The an-

swer is rather obvious: no, it is not. Second: *is this sort of life, if not immortal then at least considerably prolonged, something worth craving for?* The progress of contemporary medicine, particularly the application of biotechnologies, seems highly promising. The answer that I will attempt to substantiate in this article is as follows: in current conditions (i.e. in the conditions frequently created by contemporary medical sciences), an attempt to prolong human life on Earth is often associated with injustice towards other people and, in this case, it is not something we should crave for.

However, let us begin from the question about the possibilities of endless regeneration of our bodies. That what until recently remained in the sphere of science-fiction (this kind of literature holds multiple similar examples) starts appearing more and more real thanks to advances in science. This is how a vision, or rather a myth, is created. It concerns the world without illness, the world in which humans are able to overcome the fragility of their own nature using their own inventions. It would not be an exaggeration to state that contemporary medical sciences, and particularly biotechnologies, have become a sort of a new paradise tree of knowledge whose fruit promise us (almost) endless life.

This article briefly depicts two ways of understanding the tasks faced by medical sciences. As long as the first one is inspired by the vision of overcoming human contingency, i.e. gaining victory over the fragility of human nature, the other considers tasks of medicine and science in the context of immutable contingency of the human nature.

CONFRONTATION WITH CONTINGENCY

A man has always had to face his contingency. Contingency of the human nature assumes various forms: physical contingency (our organism does not always function well and its limitations are suffered more and more explicitly over time), emotional contingency (we are not always able to control our emotional reactions), moral contingency (we make morally bad decisions) and, finally, existential contingency (we cannot preserve our life). People have always tried to deal with their contingency in all these aspects. However, they have also been aware of the fact that there are certain dimensions of contingency that cannot be overcome and must be accepted.

The form of contingency that affects us in the most profound way and which combines all other contingency types together is the existential one. Each manifestation of our contingency reminds us about the fact that we are not in full control of our life and that ultimately we cannot preserve it. The awareness of this fact imprints on the human life in such a strong way that certain philosophers consider it a defining feature of humanity. Martin Heidegger called a human “a being-toward-death” (*Sein zum Tode*). Even earlier, Soren Kierkegaard referred to a human being as one that suffers from a disease to death.

The awareness of our contingency, which ultimately means that we must end our existence, raises anxiety and even fright. Pascal, a great expert on the human interior, wrote that most tasks or chores that fill our life are only a way to detach our thoughts from a reflection on this tragic necessity which would otherwise poison all joys of life [1].

Divertissement can help us forget about contingency but it certainly is not the form of confrontation with this inevitable dimension of our life that would allow its conscious integration. Religion, however, is such a form. The German language has a notion of *Kontingenzbewältigung*, which might be translated as “coping with contingency”. One of its theoreticians, Hermann Lübbe, believes that the main function of religion is providing answers to this significant need of the human life [2]. Briefly speaking, we might state that religion not only addresses the need to cope with the experience of contingency, but also radicalizes this experience. In religions that assume the creation of the world in the strict sense of this world, i.e. *creatio ex nihilo*, the idea of contingency becomes radicalized, and, as Robert Spaemann notes, religion addresses the problem it itself has created [3].

From this point of view, we might state that medicine exists thanks to immutable contingency of the human nature. If a man was not contingent in nature, he would not need its services. This is how Pope Benedict XVI understands it in the quote at the beginning of this paper. Medicine tries to defy contingency and seeks immortality in this sense. Can we, however, hope that this aim will ever be fulfilled?

Religion is certainly not the only manner of coping with contingency. There are various ways whose systemic theories were thoroughly discussed by Niklas Luhmann [4]. One of them, and certainly one of the most effective manners,

is science. Contemporary science derives from the postulate of “torturing nature” (F. Bacon) in order to force it to reveal its secrets. Knowledge gained this way becomes applied for human advantage. The contemporary concept of science differs from its ancient idea in this very aspect. The aim of ancient science was considered only in cognitive and contemplative terms; science never aimed to change the surrounding world, but merely attempted to understand it. According to its contemporary goals, a man strives for becoming, as Descartes says, the “master and possessor of nature”. From our point of view, we might state that a man attempts to limit or, if possible, eliminate contingency by the power delivered by science and by applying it. Essentially, the man who is the master and possessor of nature is not subject to forces that he might not control but is able to use these forces for the sake of his own advantage. It is known for a fact that, in many aspects, contemporary science has contributed to the limitation of the contingency of our life. At present, we are better protected against elemental forces and we are capable of providing protection from diseases that until recently were lethal. The comparison of current statistics concerning life expectancy in the so-called developed countries with those from a hundred years ago supports this fact. The new concept of science and its technical application have entailed other consequences as well, related with the new vision of the human reason. I would like to mention two such consequences. One of them is associated with the moral dimension and the other, apart from the moral side, has also cultural and social aspects.

THE NEED FOR ETHICS

It is not an exaggeration to say that the Aristotelian science needed no ethics. A man of science did not try to change the world, and his actions were limited to attempts to understand it. That is why he could justly claim that methodology is his ethics. As the concept of science has changed, this statement is no longer just. Because science and its technical application aim at changing the world in which we live, a scientist cannot evade the question *whether his or her scientific goals and the manner of achieving them can be justified from the moral point of view*. The argument of scientific progress was put forward for a long time: whatever contributes to increasing our knowledge about the world and whatever magnifies our capabilities to

master it is good. Today, we realize that it is not the case. Because humans themselves are a part of the world that is subject to scientific interventions, it might happen that whatever serves to increase our knowledge and enables us to take broader actions will be carried out at the expense of another human individual. One can imagine a situation in which instrumental treatment of one individual can be advantageous even for the entire mankind. Viewing science from the moral point of view means, however, that this ultimately utilitarian calculation is inadmissible.

Impressive progress that has been recently observed within the field of medical sciences delivers various examples of such situations. Dynamically developing studies on stem cells seem to open completely new and highly promising perspectives. It occurs, however, that while mature stem cells are characterized by, so-called, pluripotentiality, embryonic stem cells are totipotent which gives them an advantage in their therapeutic use. Even if this is true (not all experts share the opinion about therapeutic superiority of embryonic stem cells over mature ones), we cannot evade the question *whether the sole fact of a greater therapeutic potential of embryonic stem cells is a sufficient justification for their application in scientific research and therapy*.

This is not the place where a discussion on the ontic and moral status of a human embryo is needed. From the viewpoint of current reflections, it is sufficient to state that the sole likelihood of dealing with a human being should prompt scientists to set moral questions and prevent them from thinking only about what contributes to the development of science and serves the good of mankind. A scientist cannot avoid confrontation with ethical problems. If an embryo is a human being in an early phase of development, then the basic principle of justice applies: One cannot use a human being for goals that infringe his or her basic rights; the usage of embryonic stem cells entails destruction of one human being in order to save life or health of other people.

It seems that the danger of instrumental treatment of certain people for the benefit of others is, at least partly, associated with typically modern understanding of reason which does not acknowledge objective aims (objective aims are related with acknowledging the existence of objective values), but considers merely means. This is so-called instrumental reason. It has become the subject of critical

analysis of the Frankfurt School. If it is said that reason is blind to values, then values become objective of necessity, and the role of reason is limited to indicating the means that best satisfy our passions; according to a well-known doctrine of David Hume, reason is and should be their slave. Then, reason becomes a tool with which men subject the world to themselves. If, however, reason knows only goals and not means, it treats another human being as an instrument only. It is not surprising then that in the modern days, contractual justice (justice as a contract) becomes the typical form of justice. This is the only way people can create a space in which life is not constantly threatened by others. The idea of justice as a contract has, however, its limitations. In order to become a party to an agreement, a man must be able to express his or her desires. If someone is unable to do so, e.g. an unborn child, it is easy to exclude him from the zone of justice and let him be treated as a mere object. It is not hard to notice that this is the fate of unborn children in the contemporary liberal democracies.

On the other hand, it is difficult for instrumental reason to respect the limits set up by contractual justice. For example: in 1998, the ethics committee appointed by Geron company indicated moral requirements that must be respected while investigating stem cells [5]. One of these requirements, preventing reproductive cloning and creating chimeras, seemed commonly acceptable. At the beginning of April 2008, the press revealed that scientists from the University of Newcastle had created the first cytoplasmic hybrid (human–animal) embryos. Such news had appeared even earlier but was not confirmed, and the results reported by a Korean scientist, Dr. Hwang, occurred to be a fraud. Scientists managed to transfer human genetic material to an animal testicle. This action was motivated by a perspective of “producing” stem cells that could help in the therapy of various diseases. Embryos created this way were killed after three days. It is hard to believe that such attempts will not be undertaken in the future. To date, there have been lots of hopes associated with the therapeutic application of so-called “surplus” embryos, unused in *in vitro* procedures. It seems, however, that we are currently on the verge of crossing another boundary. This entails bringing to life embryos to be used merely as genetic material. Of note is the fact that even liberal thinkers, e.g. Jürgen Habermas, believe this step to be dangerous. Let us remind that the etymology of the

word “hybrid” is common with Greek *hybris* which means unbridled human pride.

EXCESSIVE EXPECTATIONS

The other consequence of the new approach to goals of science and the new concept of reason that I would like to reflect on is characterized by, apart from the moral aspect, cultural and social dimension. For example: During a congress of molecular biology that took place in London in 1962, the participants debated on future goals of science. The debate concluded that the world will be freed from contagious diseases, life will be without pain and it will last (almost) endlessly thanks to organ transplantation and perfection of the human genetic legacy [6]. A year later, also in London, a symposium on the future of the human kind was held. A well-known English biologist, Julian Huxley, argued that it was high time for transforming spontaneous evolution into a controlled process. Huxley claimed that thanks to advances of medicine many people who would have died in the past before reaching a reproductive age still live and have children, thereby introducing genetic defects to the population. That is why evolution does not lead to perfection but to deterioration of the human genetic legacy. According to Huxley, this situation must be changed. This could be done with tools provided by science and technology. A man can transform from being an object of evolution to becoming its subject, without letting blind forces of nature guide it, but directing it according to his rational projects [7].

This vision of science and medicine is not entirely new. This idea appeared at the beginning of the early modern period. In Part six of the *Discourse on Method*, Descartes says that we might free ourselves from countless diseases of both body and mind, and perhaps even from the infirmity of old age, if we possessed enough knowledge about their causes and about all the remedies that nature has provided for us [8]. As we can see, the idea of “aging without becoming old” is not an invention of our times. After three ages, Otfried Höffe claims that the hopes Descartes saw in medicine occurred to be fallacious or illusory in at least three aspects [9]. First, the progress of diagnosis occurred to much greater than that of therapy. Today, we still die although we know much more about the causes of death. Second, becoming free from the infirmity of old age occurred possible only to some extent. Even if we live longer today,

we are not free from diseases carried by old age (e.g. Alzheimer's disease) and we are unable to prevent general weakening of the organism. This situation creates new problems for medicine itself and for social life in general (growing costs of medical procedures lead to problems in maintaining health care systems). Therefore, a question arises whether attempts to prolong life at all costs hold a trap called *persistent therapy* that leads to the postulate of legalizing euthanasia. Finally third, Descartes did not take into account the fact that tools that science provides for us are ambivalent. Although they can serve the purposes mentioned by Descartes, some of them might be immoral. The examples of therapeutic cloning or therapeutic usage of embryonic stem cells are particularly meaningful in this context.

All that I have said about moral aspects of medical research certainly should not lead to negative assessment of studies conducted in the field of biotechnology. I only wish to underline that there are certain limits to research that should be respected by scientists. One of the basic limitations is the need for justice. We must not reduce certain people (or certain categories of people) to the status of object only because this could be the way to aid other people. This basic principle of morality cannot be suspended based on any benefit account. When dealing with basic moral requirements, benefits brought by our actions can be understood solely as distributive benefits, i.e. benefits for each and every one of people, rather than collective benefits, i.e. for most interested individuals (which might happen also when a certain minority suffers damage) [10].

Another limitation of medicine is the consequence of immutable contingency of men. It does not depend on the more or less good functioning of the organism, but is a permanent feature of human life on Earth. However, the modern world propagates the idea of medicine in which a doctor is somebody who does not have to undertake any efforts to understand the meaning but must only restore the functioning of the machine of our body [1]. Taking into account instrumental rationality, which aims to subordinate the world to human needs but does not attempt to understand that what evades human control, suffering and death are so scandalous only because they cannot be fully controlled. However, we must bear in mind that if

no effort is undertaken to understand the meaning of these human experiences, they will manifest themselves anyway, but then, we will attempt to conceal and defy them since they question the vision of the world in which a man can control all. Science cannot beguile us with a myth of life without suffering, disease and, finally, without death. This myth is harmful not only because it evokes hopes that cannot be fulfilled, but also because it devours resources that could be exploited in a much more useful manner.

CONFRONTATION WITH DEATH

The profession of a physician is, in a certain way, paradoxical since their attempts ultimately end in failure. If, as Pope Benedict XVI says as quoted in the beginning of this article, medicine is an attempt to defy death, we must conclude that finally a doctor must agree with the fact that this attempt is unsuccessful. Ancient medicine included this fact in its professional ethos. According to it, medicine was defined not only as an art of healing people, but also as an art of accompanying them when the hope for a cure is no more and a man must face death. It seems, however, that contemporary medicine excludes this aspect from its ethos. It is no surprise that it attempts to maintain the patient's life even if such actions become a "persistent therapy."

In his dialogues *Crito* and *Phaedo*, Plato leaves a moving testimony of Socrates' attitude towards approaching death. Socrates explains to his friends, who came to the prison to help him escape, that life is not about its duration but about living in agreement with virtue and justice. Socrates can sacrifice his life since he fully owns it. That is why he is a paradigmatic example of the attitude of a human being, as an individual, towards life and death. Being an individual consists in possessing one's own nature. Only he who is not completely immersed in one's own nature can be really called an individual [11]. In the case of a human being, the ownership concerns his own body as well, the life of which is also, according to Aristotle's maxim *vivere viventibus esse*, existence. We really own only what we can give away. If this is so, then the fullness of our individual existence is expressed in death understood as an act of sacrificing one's own life, as it was in the case of Socrates.

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