

**Philosophical Anthropological
Implications of Biotechnology:
An Investigation Based
on Thomas Aquinas and Hans Jonas**

(Extractum ex Dissertatione ad Doctoratum in Facultate Philosophiae)

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Author:	Rev. Dr. J.C. Paul Rohan
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Rev. Dr. J.C. Paul Rohan
Facultas Philosophiae
Pontificia Universitas Urbaniana
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General Introduction

Unlike other living creatures, human beings have the capacity to lead an eventful life which makes their existence significant. Other creatures have no option except to be subject to the laws of nature, whereas humans have aptitude and competence to explore and transform the world and their own existence continuously. One of the many fora that manifest the inherent human capacity for exploring great matters and moving towards perfection is the advancement in science and technology. While other living creatures remained static and contented with given capacities, the integral nature of the human being, with a spiritual and mental capacity, has empowered him to develop and to arrive at this present stage of progress.

Centuries ago the state of the progress of the species which came to be named *homo sapiens* reached a significant point of human development and this ushered humanity into a new age. The human beings with the immense capacity provided by such faculty for knowledge started to probe and research into all possible fields. In this process the development of science and thereafter the advancement in technology are considered as effects of the state of *homo sapiens*. The human being at this stage of development was called *homo faber* which is one of the stages of human growth and subsidiary to the state of *homo sapiens*.¹

The advancements in science and technology by the human beings, especially the progress made within biological sciences, has explosively increased the theoretical understanding and possible technical manipulations not only with regard to external organic nature, but also with regard to human nature.² Currently

¹ Cfr., H. JONAS, *The Imperative of Responsibility: In Search of an Ethics for the Technological Age*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago & London 1984, 9.

² Cfr., Idem, "Toward a Philosophy of Technology", in *Readings in the Philosophy of Technology*, David M. Kaplan, ed., Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., Lanham 2004, 28; also cfr., K. BAYERTZ, *Genetics: Technological Intervention in Human Reproduction as a Philosophical Problem*, trans., Sarah L. Kirkby, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1994, 5.

such technological intervention on human nature is called biotechnology or bio-engineering. Hans Jonas observed that, "in recent years the life sciences have been moving toward the point where the technological or engineering potentials inherent in the progress of all physical science are beginning to knock at the door of the biological realms and of human biology in particular."³ With such intervention of the technological and engineering potentials of the physical science into the realm of human biology and with the unprecedented progress in biotechnology, *homo faber* seems to be spearheading an era of uncertainty where human beings themselves are becoming the objects of research, manipulation and modification. In this sense biotechnology can be viewed as a "most ambitious dream of *homo faber*, summed up in the phrase that man will take his own evolution in hand, with the aim of not just preserving the integrity of the species but of modifying it by improvements of his own design."⁴

In the context of such biotechnological intervention on the human being, where man is reduced to be an object of scientific research, there is an urgent need to reflect on his integral nature. The integrality of the human being manifests his wholeness and the substantial union of the spiritual and physical realms in the same being. This makes the human being, not merely a spirit (spiritualism), not merely a body (physicalism) but a person with the essential unity of both. This opens up new horizons to appreciate the human reality in a variety of ways and in a deeper sense. The integrality of spirit and matter in the same being makes the human being a mystery and a microcosm which includes every aspect of creature-hood.

³ H. JONAS, *Philosophical Essays: From Ancient Creed to Technological Man*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago & London 1980², 141. Long ago Dario Composta called it as 'anthropo-technique'. Cfr., D. COMPOSTA, *Natura e ragione. Studio sulle inclinazioni naturali in rapporto al diritto naturale*, Pas-Verlag, Zurich 1971, 10. It has to be noted that 'biotechnology' is widely used now as a common term for such technological interventions on the human being.

⁴ *Idem*, *Imperative of Responsibility*, 21.

The qualities, expressed by the integrality of the human being, are not recognized today in the midst of the impact of technological and biotechnological processes. These affect the overall contemporary view about the human being and have their impact on social, medical, cultural and other areas of human endeavours, where recognition and respect for personhood have become relativized and pragmatic. Consequently contemporary society faces choices especially in its view of who an individual is. This manifests itself in caring for the sick and respect for the feeble, the aged, the unborn and the dying. Since today an individual human being is too often considered as a mere thing or object of experiment which involves the body, the dignity of the body is lost and the concept of person is degenerated into such instrumental, functional and utilitarian models which are reductionist and determinist in content.

This situation constitutes a serious invitation to delve into biotechnological issues, to ponder their demands and impacts and to unravel their implications for human nature. This involves an urgent and relevant philosophical reflection to shed light upon the ultimate and interwoven issues that are connected with the human nature and biotechnology.⁵ After all, the nature of philosophy is to enter into the ultimate causes of realities and to explain the phenomena in their ontological vision. When technological and biotechnological processes purport to be the destiny of man, it is apt that philosophy highlights such questions about the destiny of man.⁶ In fact, philosophy as always, tries to deduce possible rational answers to human concerns and existential restlessness. Such a philosophical inquiry serves as the provocative background of this research.

Thomistic philosophical anthropology is taken in this research as the first theoretical tool to affirm the integrality of the human being. The history of philosophy records how Platonic dualism asserted the division of the human being into soul and

⁵ Cfr., H. JONAS, "Ethics and Biogenetic Art", in *Social Research*, 52 (1985)3, 493.

⁶ Cfr., G. I. ONAH, *Self-Transcendence and Human History in Wolhart Pannenberg*, University Press of America, New York 1999, 33.

body. St. Thomas, basing himself on Aristotelian hylemorphism emphasized the substantial union of body and soul in man against the then prevalent dualistic notions. Furthermore basing himself on Boethius, St. Thomas affirmed the human being as person, which means, human person is something unique and a culminating point in the order of creation. It can be said that Thomistic philosophical anthropology promoted an integral anthropology against the partial and distorted notions of man.

The philosophical biology of Hans Jonas and his views on technology and biotechnology come as the next principal source to examine the modern partial notions on man and to affirm the integrality of the human being. Hans Jonas is one of the pioneering philosophers who reflected systematically on the ramifications of technological growth on the human organism and the crisis created by it. According to him, "Biotechnology in particular has introduced into the realm of morality completely new dilemmas, heightened complications, and refined nuances that philosophers must take account of, although it often has nothing to offer except compromises between conflicting principles. This brings to light an important aspect of the entire technological syndrome: in a previously undreamt of power, a product of the power of the human mind, confronts this same mind with new and previously undreamt of challenges."⁷

Furthermore, by offering what he calls 'an existential interpretation of biological facts',⁸ he sought to correct the errors of materialistic and empiricist notions on man. He had a new view of the organism as such, one that would see it as a psychophysical unity and the living concretion of embodied inwardness (mind with a body). At the same time, he elaborated a view that appraised the trans-animality of the human being which does justice to the hierarchical character found in the organic order, thereby affirming the unquestionable superiority of the human being.

⁷ H. JONAS, "Philosophy at the End of the Century, A Survey of its Past and Future", in *Social Research*, 61(1994), 825 - 826.

⁸ Cfr., Idem, *The Phenomenon of Life: Toward a Philosophical Biology*, Northwestern University Press, Evanston, IL 2001, xxiii.

Current biotechnological issues are analyzed in the last phase basing on the above two views, one medieval and the other contemporary, with the view of affirming that the human being is not partial or distorted, but an integral being. Before entering into an analysis of biotechnology a brief study is done on technology. This is because biotechnology is best understood against the background of the technological culture which is the matrix for biotechnology. An investigation of the philosophical anthropological implications in the issues of biotechnology is made with the aim of examining how the integrality of human nature is lost in biotechnology.

This research therefore affirms in its entirety that the human being is a substantial unity or psychophysical unity and his nature culminates as person or as trans-animality.