June 16, 2000. Interview with Leon Kass, MD, PhD, Addie Clark Harding Professor in The College and The Committee on Social Thought, University of Chicago, and Senior Fellow, MacLean Center for Clinical Medical Ethics. The interview is being conducted by Dr. Judith P. Swazey at Dr. Kass' office.

Swazey: Let's begin with a recap of your family background.

Kass: Okay. I'm a first generation American. My father came from Uman in the Ukraine, he came to Canada shortly after the Russian revolution. My mother, who was one of nine children, came to Canada from a shtetl in territory disputed by Poland and Russia. My father was a peddler selling dry goods door-to-door with a horse and buggy. Eventually they moved to Chicago where my father had a clothing store with my uncle. I was born in Chicago and raised here. My home was Yiddish speaking, I was bilingual. We were rather stridently secular. My mother was very far left. My grandfather, my mother's father, I knew very slightly. He was a religious man but sort of interested in enlightenment. My eldest uncle had been given some religious education but made a break in his teenage years. All nine, my mother and her siblings, all became socialists. It was the classical story of the secularization of prophetic Judaism and the belief that somehow in socialism lay the solution to the problem of justice in which the Jewish tradition had been so interested. I went to public school, and went to Yiddish school after school several days a week. I never had a Bar Mitzvah, was
in synagogue maybe twice for Bar Mitzvahs of some of my cousins. But I was raised sort of left wing, Progressive Party. I was at the Progressive Party convention in 1948 when Henry Wallace was nominated at Chicago Stadium.

Swazey: Siblings?

Kass: One brother, three years younger. He lives here in Chicago now.

Swazey: What does he do?

Kass: He’s a fifth grade teacher at the Lab School. He went to Berkeley, he was part of the free speech movement and then the People’s Republic of China invited him to tour the country and see the paradise with the Oakland Bay Area Teachers’ Union. He came back and decided it was time to bring the revolution home. He and a bunch of friends tried a co-operative move to Detroit. He worked on the assembly line making automobiles for the purpose of rising in the union so they could make the revolution. After twenty years he eventually figured it out...I’m not sure he ever figured it out that he was the wrong race to be elected to an office in the local union. He finally gave it up. He used to work the night shift 10 to 12 hours a day under a mask; it was a horrible life as far as I could see. In the meantime my
political life became more conservative. I love my brother very much, but most of
the subjects of real interest to me are not discussable with him. It’s getting better
but there was a long stretch of time where we had nothing much in common. My
mother out lived my father by about 13 years and had terrible Alzheimer’s for
most of that time, but not so bad that there weren’t the occasional lucid moments.
During her decline I once visited her and she said, “I have two sons, one of them
wants to make the world better through education, and one wants to make the
world better through revolution.” I said, “You’ve got that right, Mother.” And
she said, “And which one of them is right, I don’t know!”

Swazey: That was a very lucid moment!!

Kass: It was wonderful!! Even though we disagree, I think my brother is one of these
old-time radicals rather than the new existential sort. When he made up his mind
he put his life where his thoughts were. Were there to be a revolution we’d be on
opposite sides but I’ve always had an ungrudging respect for his integrity.

Swazey: What led you into medicine?

Kass: That’s sort of odd. My home was a place of not so much book learning; my
mother went to night school, my father also. My mother was a big reader, but the interest in the family household was morals. From the very earliest age both of us were encouraged, but it really took with me especially, to sort of examine people's behavior and to take an interest in not just questions of justice in the abstract, but decorum, fineness, and things of that sort. I had an interest, I think, in law, which is probably what I was headed for. There were two things that changed it. One was that I came to college after two years of University High, so I started college (University of Chicago) at the age of 15 in 1954. This was McCarthy times and we were left, and it seemed to me an unpropitious time for law. Little did one know that in eight years the thing would be upside down. The other thing was that in my last year of high school, which was my second year in high school, I had an absolutely terrific biology teacher who got me very excited about biology. On my application to college it said, "Write down what you're interested in." I wrote down law and biology, I can't remember which one first. I took placement tests here at Chicago when I arrived and I placed out of six courses, including a couple of science courses. So they assumed I was a scientist and they gave me a biology advisor. I was 15 years-old, I didn't know any better. He put me in a course in calculus and a course in chemistry, and I was on the track. I was, in a way, too young for the humanities, too young for the social sciences. I did fine, but to that point I had unthinking answers to all of the interesting and important
questions. So in some ways the education here didn’t really take. I acquired
certain salutary prejudices, so that when I actually woke up toward the end of
college and later, I had some familiarity with books that could eventually help me
think about things. But I was very good in the sciences, things were rolling well,
and I was quite happy doing that work. But I suspect that my deepest passions
and concerns were always with the human questions, questions of interpersonal
relations, questions of character.

Swazey: Very strong imprinting.

Kass: Very strong, very strong. You scratch away and what you discover is the child of
my parents. My mother was a very exacting moralist, not in any bookish way, but
she was perfectly happy to be one against the crowd. If she thought it was right,
that was all there was to it. On religion, by the way, she had strong sense of
respect for those people who believed and practiced, so on the Jewish holidays we
were kept home. We weren’t allowed on the street on those days because it would
be disgraceful, whereas all of my religious friends went to the synagogue in the
morning and they played ball in the afternoon. She had a kind of natural
reverence, but it was unattached. It seemed to me that there was something
improper about going to the synagogue and then playing ball in the afternoon. If
you weren't going to do it you should at least honor it in some way. Though I didn't know it at the time, and although I was being given no particular religious content, I was acquiring a certain disposition with respect to... There was a deep natural reverence in the house, it was attached to different things. I had extraordinary regard for old people, and a real love of old people. The older I get the more you look at children, the more you see how they divide; most kids want nothing to do with old people. These temperamental things and these acculturations of the home....

Swazey: They persist.

Kass: They persist. No great surprise, though one would like to think that one has figured out one's own way.

Swazey: But you can't get away from the way you were brought up.

Kass: Even if you get away from it by rebellion, you haven't gotten away from it.

Swazey: Yes. So in college you were a good science major. What happened after that?
My last year in college I had a teacher who really woke me up. He was a legendary teacher, his name was Joseph Jackson Schwab, now deceased. Schwab had started life as a geneticist, he started teaching and discovered how little he understood what was going on in the classroom and what the impediments to learning were. So he became a lay analyst in order to figure out the dynamics of the classroom. By the time he finished he’d taught everything in the Hutchins College except for the history of Western civilization, which meant all the natural sciences, all the social sciences, mathematics, music, everything, the works.

A Renaissance man.

Really! He was, in retrospect, something of an intellectual bully. But he was the first teacher I had who showed me that there were real questions where I had formerly had answers. It was wonderful. You would go to class and he would take the bright and aggressive kids like me, and he wouldn’t exactly humiliate us but he’d make it very tough on us. Then he would take the timid and not terribly articulate students in the class and they would say something that the rest of us would think was dumb and he’d turn it into gold by showing something that was somehow imbedded in it.
Swazey: What a privilege.

Kass: Oh, it was wonderful to see. He taught every student in the class individually, twenty to twenty five people. So I got very interested in philosophy as a result of this. I have some very clear memories of how this came about. He was something of a father figure too. I remember asking his advice, thinking I should go to graduate school in philosophy, this was after I had been admitted into medical school. He discouraged me. He said, “Look, go to medical school. If you are still interested in these things they’ll still be there for you later.” My last year in college I took classes with him, and I took classes with Richard McKeon and I was sorely tempted to become a student of McKeon’s. This would have been a terrible mistake, just a dreadful mistake. Schwab had a course on the philosophy of organism which I took in my last year in college. Up until then I had been concentrating on the science courses, and I did the humanities and social science courses in a merely dutiful way but they never touched me. Schwab’s course really touched me. I was all of 19 about the time that people begin to wake up. He showed me that there were philosophical issues in biology of the sort that one just didn’t see if you studied science. Question’s like what is an organism, and what is its integrity? How do you actually think about it? I still have the bachelor’s paper I wrote. It was a major paper I wrote under his direction that
year on five different theories of the organism, which distinguished me amongst
call the other people who wound up doing research.

When I got to NIH I had a philosophical interest in living nature and knew
that there were other ways to think about living things besides the reductionist
way that I was also learning and was pretty good at. So between the kind of
moralism of my home and the beginning philosophical education here in the
college at the hands of this man, I was sort of different. I should say one more
thing which I think is of some importance. First generation Americans...well, I
shouldn’t make that generalization, I’ll let you make it. My parents married late
and had children late, so my mother was 36 when I was born and my father was
42. I was born in 1939 and around that time that was quite unusual. So

sociologically and culturally I identify with people who are fifteen to twenty years
older than I am. I became more aware of it later but I even knew it as a school
child, in a Yiddish speaking bilingual home with one foot still in the old country.

Many of us who were first generation Americans, I think felt this way if they
didn’t simply rebel and feel embarrassment for the European immigrant origins of
one’s parents, which I didn’t. I never was embarrassed by my parents, I really
respected my parents enormously. But, we helped raise them as they helped raise
us, we looked out for them. And that produced a certain kind of precocious self-
consciousness. My brother doesn’t have it; I helped my parents raise my brother
even though he’s three and a half years younger. That meant that though I’m
obviously an American, in an important respect I vicariously lived through my
parents’ immigrant experience. I saw the world almost always through their eyes,
especially through the eyes of my mother who had a knack for making me do so,
for better or for worse. So that I came to be astonished with my own kids when I
discovered it wasn’t natural for children to see the world through the eyes of their
parents. I would say to my daughter, “If you were in my place how would you
feel about this?” She’d say, “What a dumb question!” For me that was the most
natural thing in the world. I think it has to do with that first generation where you
acutely see that your parents, on certain kinds of matters, don’t know the ropes.
And out of love for them and protection for them, you somehow identify with
them. So I would say, I was very influenced by the moralism of my home, the
kind of peculiar psychosocial consequences of being one of these first-born
Americans who identifies with the parents and the parents are fifteen or twenty
years older. Then the kind of philosophical education that I was exposed to here
in Chicago, especially at the hands of this man, Schwab. Those are the formative
things that in retrospect make it unlikely that I would have a conventional life as a
scientist or physician.

There’s one other thing too, come to think of it. Robert Hutchins had left
here in 1951 but his legacy was still fairly strong and being contested. There was
a student organization called the Student Orientation Board, whose nominal function was to orient new students to the college during orientation week, but which, as a self-perpetuating organization, regarded itself as the sole legitimate heir and protector of the legacy of Robert Hutchins in a time when our administrators were trying -- as they have been trying ever since -- to return this place to normal. They are going to succeed, I think, if we give them another ten years. It’s remarkable how long it’s taken to kill it, given how little effort has been made in renewing it. In any case, I was a member of this organization and we used to sponsor discussion groups on the purpose of liberal education. I had a picture of Hutchins on my wall. I think my college dream was that I would go to medical school and wind up coming back either here or some other place as a professor of academic medicine and use that as a basis for getting involved in liberal education and eventually I wanted to be a college president like Hutchins and continue to fight his battle. This was quite a self-conscious dream. As I was going off to medical school bioethics wasn’t the competing subject, but liberal education was the other big thing in my aspirations.

Swazey: I certainly now understand a lot more about your extraordinary career than when I walked in the door.
Kass: It’s funny, you know, one’s debts are absolutely enormous. There are lots of other things but let this be.

Swazey: Having become a physician and having that dream of what you would do, why did you go on to get a PhD?

Kass: Well, there were people who encouraged me to do that even while I was a student here. In fact this was a place that pushed people into PhD programs before it was fashionable. I resisted it. I worked in the laboratory here already in college. It’s really a weird coincidence -- on my way bicycling here today, I passed my boss, the guy who’s laboratory I worked in and I haven’t seen him in years! I had a job as a technician in the lab at the age of 15, and I worked there part-time through college, and all my summers, and even during medical school. I was encouraged, in fact, to do a PhD and it would’ve served the purposes of a career in academic medicine but I was just resistant to it, in part because it seemed to me to be credentials’ hunting at the time. When I was a medical student here, we tried to form a student organization that would discuss some of the social issues in medicine which, for me then, probably would’ve been questions of health care for the poor, racism, things of that sort. I remember I got into big trouble for publishing an article in the Maroon, the campus newspaper, under a pseudonym,
pointing out the fact that in the entire history of the University of Chicago Medical
School there had only been four blacks who'd graduated. I went down the halls
and counted on all the photographs, this was in the 1960's. I tried to found this
student organization, but we couldn't get ten people who would sign their names.

Just fear...1959.

Swazey: Fear of retaliation?

Kass: This looked like leftist stuff. When was the Cuban revolution? 1959?

Swazey: Right around then.

Kass: I remember embarrassing conversations from that time. People in medical school
didn't want to call attention to themselves, and I think nobody did. People played
it safe. Anyhow, Amy and I were married in 1961 when I was still a medical
student and Amy was in her last year of college. She wanted to go to Brandeis for
graduate school, so she persuaded me to put Boston internships higher than
Chicago, I wanted to stay here and spend the rest of my life here. But I got an
internship at the Beth Israel in Boston and that was just absolutely wonderful! It
was a wonderful hospital, a wonderful time to be there, shortly before The House
of God and all the rest of that garbage. I couldn’t believe what was being said
about the place!

But that book was not just about Beth Israel. It was sort of a generic muckraking
of the worst of academic medicine. I remember I had a discussion about it with
Mitch Rabkin. He wanted to ban it for sale on the hospitals premises and I said,
“Mitch, that’s a mistake. You’ll just call attention to it.” It’s just as true of
virtually any teaching hospital I can think of. They are drawing out the experience
that you know goes on.” It was an instant underground classic. But as you said,
Beth Israel was a wonderful place.

I stood in the bookstore and read the thing, and I was livid! I was absolutely livid!
I was an intern from 1962-63. This was written when? The late 1960's or 1970
maybe?

Yes.

I would bet an arm and a leg that nothing that this guy said went on when I was an
intern...nothing! Maybe things had changed, maybe this was part of a counter
cultural attack on authority, but one doesn’t wash one’s professional dirty laundry
in public like that. In fact, I remember a conversation (when I was a medical
student) in our library with a guy who was a graduate student in sociology. He
was writing his doctoral dissertation on some sort of sociological study of the
medical profession and I remonstrated with him that he ought not to be doing this
kind of stuff. You’ll excuse me, Judith, but it seems to me that to analyze the
medical profession was to demystify it and to destroy it. I’m not sure I had the
right words then, but my reaction to it was it’s like looking on the nakedness of
your father. You just don’t do things like that! Why would anybody want to go
around and look over the shoulder of our own venerable profession and carve it
up?

Swazey: Would you have felt that way about any of the professions? Law?

Kass: Yes! I guess, in some ways, I still do. Let me put it another way. I feel even
more that way to the extent to which our academics reward irreverence and
cynicism. Its like killing your father, which is what so many of these people do. I
hate psychobiographies. I just can’t stand it! These institutions are precarious. In
fact, part of the reason I became a conservative was when I saw how the kids
turned on the university. They took out their frustrations, if you want to put a nice
construction on it, or their youthful rebellion, on the authorities nearest at hand.
That’s an important turn later down the road, but I want to go back to the question you asked about how I ended up going back and doing a PhD. This is not quite so honorable. I thought probably I would go back and get some scientific training so I could go into academic medicine, but the army was interested in me. This was 1962. I hadn’t really thought past the internship. I was headed for neurology, but I got called for a physical during my internship. It seemed that pursuing a PhD would be a prudent course for staying out of the army. I was motivated mainly by an aversion to wasting two years of my life and taking orders from people I didn’t respect. I say this now with embarrassment, but that’s the truth of the matter under those circumstances. So I scrambled around and I was told that there was a chance that if I went to a PhD program I could get a 2S deferment as a student, which I did. I went to see Jim Watson, who was chairman of biochemistry and molecular biology at Harvard, it was a merged department. I discovered he’d had my draft board; he was from the south side here, and they wanted to send him to Korea when he wanted to go to Cambridge and work on DNA. He, at the last minute, managed to get a deferment out of them. I was astonished because to look at him you’d think he barely knows how to tie his shoes, but he was fairly savvy about these things and he wrote a letter to the draft board.

Swazey: It’s hard to picture him in basic training!
Kass: Exactly! But he did write a letter to the draft board and I was accepted at Harvard. In the fall of 1963 I was back in the classroom and then two or three very interesting things happened. I forget what the trigger for this stuff was; I guess it must’ve been the civil rights movement. Amy and I went to Mississippi in 1965, not the terrible summer of 1964, but the year after. I went with the Medical Committee for Human Rights and Amy came along. We went ostensibly to do community organizing around issues of health in the Delta. Jack Geiger, whom you may know, organized this, and Al Pouissant who’s now a psychiatric expert on these and other subjects, was a young physician in Jackson, Mississippi. Right. We went to Mississippi for five weeks and it became pretty clear when we got down there that health was a marginal issue and politics was the real issue. Amy and I lived with a black farmer and his wife in Holmes County, no hot water in the house, the toilet was an outhouse. I took a bath outdoors once a week by filling up an iron tub, built a fire and boiled water outside and jumped into this thing. They watched television, however, inside with spic and span kitchens. I couldn’t figure out what the hell they made of this. It was a very important experience, and when we came back to Harvard at the end of the summer, we wrote a seven-page, single-spaced letter for fund raising for the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, which was trying to get seated and challenge the Democratic Party. But this time in Mississippi would change my entire worldview. I came back from that
trip with this pressing question: how come there was more dignity and honor, and
decency, and general reverence in these ignorant black farmers in Mississippi with
whom we lived, than in my privileged fellow graduate students at Harvard? If
everything I’d been taught was true, namely that the more people become
educated and the more they become prosperous, they throw off superstition and
poverty and the various things that beat people down, the more you will see them
flowering into the kind of perfect creatures that they are by nature, made worse
only by faulty society. I didn’t learn this view from books, but it was the tacit
Enlightenment view of my home and my rearing. But if the trouble with human
beings were only external by caused, say by prejudice and oppression, and if they
would disappear once you fixed those things, it didn’t scan that among all these
privileged people at Harvard. There wasn’t one who you want your sister to
marry, if you had a sister. I hung out with a bunch of left liberals. We had a
regular Sunday softball game, Marty Peretz, Sam Bowles, Mark Ptashne, Fox
Butterfield, all the right people. We played softball every Sunday morning and
these guys were limousine liberals before the term was invented. They sat and
simply drooled over the advertisements in the Sunday New York Times
Magazine, but they had all the right opinions. Ptashne was doing his terrific work
on the lambda repressor. He’d come over to Bloch’s lab to use our scintillation
counter, and a more arrogant, fellow you’d never want to see! “My work is
important, get your stuff out of the machine!” I just began to wonder...this really

goes back to the kind of sentiments of my home. I had always had a kind of

suspicion of wealth and prosperity. I believed in personal integtrity, and I thought

that holding yourself to high standards and holding yourself to account mattered,

and that you didn’t make excuses for yourself. And that’s the way I saw these

farmers in Mississippi. At this point, my closest friend from this college, a fellow

named Harvey Flanmenhaft, who had studied political philosophy -- he’s been at

St. John’s in Annapolis since 1968, he’s now the dean on the Annapolis campus --

he studied political philosophy here. He said, “There’s something I’ve got for you
to read.” And he gave me Rousseau’s First Discourse on the Arts and Sciences,

which argues that - not only in his time, but as a kind of permanent law - progress

in the arts and sciences, or enlightenment, necessarily brings in its train the

debasement of taste and the decline of morals. If you are interested in morality

and character, you’re not a friend of progress, and you certainly are not a friend of

popular enlightenment. That’s too crude for Rousseau’s Final view, but that’s
certainly the surface picture of the Discourse. Boy, was I ready for that! I was

just fresh from this experience. If it wasn’t really true that there is a certain

friendship between progress and morals, between scientific and moral progress,

then I faced a real question, whereas up until this point, I had held what I though

were just self-evident answers. This is the summer of 1966; Harvey gave us this
book for our fifth anniversary present. That’s when all of a sudden I really began
to get interested in things. I also realized, with my friend’s help, that there were
moral questions of great moment that were rolling around at my feet in science,
thanks to the biological revolution. One didn’t have to go to Mississippi to find
moral questions. In fact, the moral questions of Mississippi were child’s play,
because it was perfectly clear where right lay and it was just a question of how to
see that it triumphed. In contrast, with the biological revolution, the problem was
what I would come to call the tragic character of medical progress, that the evils
are the backside of the good. The goods are absolutely unambiguous, the evils are
hard to recognize as evils because they just tag along. I read about the same time
two books pertinent to the new biology that I keep rereading; they have their
deficiencies but they made a huge impression on me. One is Huxley’s *Brave New
World* and the other was C.S. Lewis’ *The Abolition of Man*. They both struck me
as profoundly true. Huxley takes the humanitarian project and pushes it to the
limit, and shows us its likely outcome even in the hands of benevolent despotism.
Huxley sees the problem as being primarily the decline of human freedom, as well
as the disappearance of science, art, religion, self-government, genuine feeling,
family relationships, and the like. But with Lewis’ help, I think I came to see the
problem not in terms of the loss of freedom but in terms of dehumanization: the
creation of a shrunken humanity, by virtue of the very victories that we achieve in
the realm of the flesh.

In my last year at graduate school, 1966-67, I organized a student-faculty discussion group around some of these bioethical topics. Everett Mendelsohn was the one faculty member who came regularly. Several of my fellow graduate students and I met five or six times that year to read some readings and talk about them. One of the readings during that year, I don’t remember how it came to me, was an essay by Paul Ramsey. I don’t remember the title but it was an essay that dealt with the moral dimensions of contraception and abortion. It was the first time that it ever occurred to me that abortion was a moral question. I had had the fairly standard liberal view of this matter, but it just didn’t dawn on me. By the time I’d finished reading this, he hadn’t changed my mind completely but I actually felt different about something as a result of reading something. In my long experience as a teacher, by the way, one discovers that the world divides into those who can actually be moved to change their mind and those who simply read for agreement.

I finished my dissertation in the spring of 1967, our first child had been born the December before, the army was interested in me again. I got into the public health service with a station at NIH a day or two ahead of my draft notice. In retrospect, this is again not something I’m especially proud of, but that’s the way it was. I wound up working for Gordon Tomkins. At Harvard I was a
student of Konrad Bloch’s and Bloch was of the old school. Unlike these molecular biology hot shots who were setting the world on fire, Bloch was temperamentally conservative. I liked him enormously. I had just great regard for his person and his human way. But at NIH I ended up in the company of the hot shots. Gordon I liked but I was relatively unhappy in the lab during the first months. I missed Harvard. At the very end of my time there some research had gone very, very well and I wanted to carry it with me, but there wasn’t much opportunity to do so. Then a funny thing happened shortly after I arrived. After about six months I changed labs and worked for Michael Yarmolinsky, I was much happier there. Joshua Lederberg had a weekly column in The Washington Post on science and society, I think it ran on Saturdays. These columns used to infuriate me. Lederberg was enormously smart, but he was willing to think the unthinkable about human affairs with no regard for what he would’ve called conventional, and other people would’ve called traditional, moral sensibilities. This just generally rankled me. Then in the fall of 1967, he had a column on human cloning called “Unpredictable Variety Still Rules Human Reproduction,” in which he imagines how we might be able to do better through cloning human beings than we now do through the chance of sexual union. This was shortly after the frog cloning experiments, by J.D. Gurdon in England. Lederberg was spinning out what this could mean for us humanly speaking. This particular
column really set my teeth on edge. So I went around the lab and I tried to
arrange for a group of people who would be willing, on a regular basis, to write
columns for The Post to answer Lederberg. Three or four guys volunteered to join
me. So I wrote a reply to The Post. I wrote a letter to the editor, which they
printed, attacking Lederberg. I accompanied it with a little note to the then
manager of the “Outlook” section, Howard Simons, saying, “Look, a bunch of us
at NIH are willing to join issues with Lederberg, on a regular basis. Don’t you
think it would be a nice idea to have these scientific things debated?” They
invited me to lunch. It was Howard Simons and, I think, Ben Bradles was the
other. They were very interested in this and said, “Let’s do it!” In December of
1967, I think I’ve got the dates right, there was the first heart transplant, by
Christian Barnard. Lederberg rushes to the “Outlook” section with the front page,
full-page story on how wonderful heart transplants are going to be. So I went
around the lab and asked, “Anybody want to respond?” And it turned out that no
one was really interested, their research was too interesting. It was a matter of
shame, it was put up or shut up. I’ve made this bravado offer to The Post and here
this is. So I wrote what (apart from this short letter on cloning) was my first
venture. It was called “A Caveat on Transplants,” it appeared in January of 1968
in the “Outlook” section. The first draft was abysmal! My friend Flaumenhaft
gone over it with a blue pencil, somewhere in the files I have his corrections. I’d
been a lousy writer in college. I never thought I’d have to write. My language
was Latinate and Harvey just beat the bejeezus out of this article! It went through
several drafts. The Post did publish it.

Right after that there was an article that appeared in the Post, a little, tiny
article that said, “Princeton Professor of Ethics to Visit Georgetown.” This
would’ve been sometime early in 1968; there was a picture of Paul Ramsey, he’s
coming to Georgetown to work on his books. He was going to conduct seminars,
so I called Georgetown to ask if it would be possible for me to attend these things.
I had read some things by Ramsey’s before. I got turned down. So I wrote
Ramsey a letter saying that I saw that he was coming to Washington, to be at
Georgetown, I had read something of his that had impressed me very much, and I
would very much like the opportunity to meet him during his time in Washington.
And I sent him a copy of the transplant paper. The next thing I know I’m invited
to the first luncheon meeting with Ramsey at Georgetown. He had called Andre
Hellegers and told Andre to invite me. I got a nice note back from Ramsey saying
that someone else had, in fact, sent him my column from the “Outlook” section
and he was looking forward to getting together. I think I have got the dates right, I
think this was the spring of 1968. These were wonderful seminars. What would
happen was some doctor or researcher would come in and make a kind of
presentation on science or the clinical situation as he saw it, and Paul would then
lead the conversation, raising these ethical questions. There were about ten or
twelve people in the room. He was wonderful! He had this desire to simply
understand things, and to learn things. He was a good polemicist but he wanted
no cheap shots. I always complained to him later that, in his writings, he treated
people much better than they deserved. He wanted to understand medical ethics
and bioethics from the practitioner’s point of view before he had anything further
to say about it. During this time - he came again the next year - he was working
on two books. One was Fabricated Man, the three essays on reproductive
technologies. The other was The Patient as Person. He once asked me, would I
mind reading a chapter of what was then to be Fabricated Man? I don’t remember
which essay it was. I think it could’ve been the one on cloning, just to check for
its scientific accuracy. This was the beginning of my education in this matter. I
read this draft over with great care. I never really liked his English prose; it had
something of a Southern itinerant preacher’s mode. So I scribbled my notes in the
margins. He resided in a rented coach house somewhere in Georgetown, and I
went with great nervousness to visit him and discuss my comments. We talked
for about four hours and there wasn’t any comment that I had made in the margin
that he didn’t treat with absolute seriousness. As a result of this exchange I got all
the other chapters in draft from both of those volumes, and each one became the
occasion of a night at his apartment. We just talked and talked. I acquired a sense
that it's possible about these matters not just to have intuitions but you can have arguments. That there is a way of developing a position on these sorts of things, and to defend it, and to ground it. We didn't exactly see eye to eye on certain foundational things.

By this time, as a result of being smitten by Rousseau and those other things, I had begun seriously to read Aristotle with my friend Flaumenhaft. I was looking for a deductive ethics, and he said, "Let's read Aristotle's Ethics." It turned out to be very disappointing. I wanted a kind of scientific ethics that would be able to take the place of the one I thought I had to abandon. It turns out Aristotle's Ethics is dialectical, and it doesn't tell you about right and wrong. It turns out to be about characters, good and bad, rather than about, "Thou shalt" and "Thou shalt not." My eyes were really being opened to the different ways of thinking morally than the one I'd been reared with. And we then read Aristotle's Physics. Thus, I wasn't exactly on all fours with Ramsey's Christian foundations, although he didn't traffic in it much, though it was there and he didn't hide it. He was, I think, perhaps the only one of the early people in bioethics who wasn't apologetic about his religious orientation. "I write as the Christian ethicist I am," he would say.

Swazey: We've had a number of people say to us that Patient as Person has no trace of Paul
Ramsey, the Christian Protestant ethicist.

Kass: I don’t think that’s right.

Swazey: As you said, it doesn’t say in every other sentence, “I am a Christian...blah, blah, blah,” but it’s in there.

Kass: It certainly is in there! We once tangled on the subject of death with dignity, where I was a respondent, and it sort of came out that his attachment to individuality and the dignity of a never-to-be-repeated unique life really rests upon a theological understanding of the relation of each individual and God. I was arguing that dignity resides not so much in individuality but in that which we have in common, in what is the human soul, rather than what makes him Ramsey and me Kass. I began gradually to move further from him, but I saw the possibility of a rigorous intellectual approach that was deeply grounded and was not afraid to say, “This we should not do for these and these reasons.” In fact, one of the things about Ramsey that I really admired was his willingness to say “No.” At the end of my cloning essay, I quote a passage of his to the effect that to do ethics with a serious conscience means being willing to reach the conclusion that says there are some things we ought not to do. Otherwise what you’re doing is wringing your
hands and eventually pronouncing the ethicist's blessings upon the inevitable.

That's my gloss on it, but the first part is his. I admired that greatly, it resonated
with my own moral sensibilities as a child where there were certain things...this
you didn’t do!

So those were terribly important two years, and it was Paul who brought
me into the Hastings Center. He was the one who had mentioned my name to Dan
Callahan. The other crucial thing came, again, from my friend Flaumenhaft. We
had met here in 1956 when he entered The College. We became fast and deep
friends. During the last two years of our time in Cambridge we lived on
Hammond St., he lived behind us on Museum St.; he was then a bachelor and had
dinner at our house five nights a week. I’d go to the lab and he and Amy would
sit there and talk about Plato and Aristotle, they’d still be there at midnight when
I’d come home.

Swazey: They were probably having a better time than you were!

Kass: Yes! Anyhow, he had suggested that I read this essay by Hans Jonas called, “Is
God a Mathematician?” It’s the third essay in The Phenomenon of Life. And in
addition to the kind of moral questions that were being raised by the new
technologies, the reductionism of the science was interesting me. I remember
trying to provoke conversations at NIH about whether they called viruses alive,

questions of what actually makes for aliveness, and I found absolutely nobody

interested in these things. So Flaumenhaft said, “Hey, have a look at this essay by

Jonas, ‘Is God a Mathematician?, On the Meaning of Metabolism.’” This

would’ve been the summer of 1968 or 1969. I took The Phenomenon of Life with

me for vacation. Boy, was it hard reading for me at that time! I stood on my

intellectual tiptoes trying to make sense of what was going on here, but the result

of it was just exhilarating. This was a guy who was able to philosophize about

biology, not so much about the moral questions, but about what a living thing

was. He did so with due regard for hierarchy; he didn’t simply call some things

more complicated than others but some things were genuinely fuller and richer

and higher than others. He talked about teleology, he talked about form. It wasn’t

a return to Aristotle, but it was a more philosophical foundation that was perfectly

compatible with the findings of modern science. In the fall of 1969 I organized

what was to have been the first annual, but was in fact the first and last, NIH

Symposium on the Ethical Implications of...I guess it was on neuro- and

psychobiology. I should really dig this out because this was quite an event; part of

my purpose in doing this was that I wanted to invite Jonas. He came to be the

moderator of the whole thing. B.F. Skinner came, and I invited a man from

Chicago named George Anastapo who is a maverick political philosopher, and he
mopped the floor with Skinner. He just destroyed him by cross questioning him in a kind of Socratic way. It was perfectly clear to the meanest intelligence Skinner just couldn’t think his way out of a paper bag. We had Gardner Quarten from the University of Michigan, and Herbert Vaughn, who was the neuroscientist from Einstein involved in the Hastings Center from the beginning, but who later dropped out. Walter Mondale came to do the public policy talk. Also Goddard, was that the guy that was the head of the Food and Drug Administration?

Swazey: Yes, Jim Goddard.

Kass: It was a big, big meeting in Building 10, the big auditorium...I think over two days. I was very excited by this, and I’m a young squirt, it’s the fall of 1969. Very, very exciting discussions and it was the beginning of a long association with Jonas, who although I never took classes from him, we became quite close. I guess I’m missing some dates because I think the organizational meetings at Hastings had already started. I think they began in the beginning of 1969, earlier that year. I was at those first meetings on Paul’s recommendation. The meeting at NIH was in the fall. But around that time, on behalf of the Hastings Center, I went to the National Research Council to find out what the committee on the Life Sciences and Social Policy was doing. I think Dan had asked me to go find out
what these guys are doing. I went down there and, at the end of the 45 minute
conversation in which I discovered they weren’t doing anything because the staff
person had been promoted, the fellow offered me the job to run this committee as
the staff person. I said no. My friends said, don’t leave science. But I’m kicking
myself, and kicking myself, a couple of months pass by and I ask them if the job is
still open. They said yes. So on April Fool’s Day of 1970 I left the lab with a
one-year leave of absence to go work as the Executive Secretary of the
Committee. There’s actually a good story to be told about this Committee and its
report, a story on which I’ve sat for twenty five years. Milton Katz of the Harvard
Law School was the chairman, Robin Williams, the sociologist from Cornell,
Tom Schelling at Harvard, Gardner Lindsey from the University of Texas, David
Hamburg from Stanford. Arthur Galston, and Everett Mendelsohn were members
of the Committee, and Arnold Motulsky, and Marian Pearsall at Kentucky.

Anyhow, I went around and interviewed all these various members of the
Committee. The antecedent to this Committee was the Committee on Technology
Assessment; the staff person of that committee was Larry Tribe, and Milton Katz
had been a member. Milton’s view was that the main purpose of the Committee
on the Life Sciences was the education and training of Leon Kass. He thought
that what I would do with my career was much more important than the impact of
this report. He wanted to get the report done, but he saw this as an opportunity for
a career change for me. I was taking a one-year leave. The original committee
was somewhat detached from the project, and so, what I wound up doing, with
Milton’s help and advice, was recruiting an intensive summer study group that
met at Dartmouth, a two week conference in August 1971 in Hanover. It included
some of the members of the original Committee and some additional people that I
wanted to bring in: Herb Vaughn, Andre Hellegers, Ted Cooper, Raymond
Bowers, Bob Morison, with whom I’d become fairly close at Hastings. We spent
two weeks at Dartmouth working on this stuff. I wrote this report with two hands
tied behind my back. We had to write it in such a way that not only would the
working group sign off on it but the original committee would sign it.

Swazey: Bill Carey used to say that it was easier getting something out of the Vatican than
out of the Academy.

Kass: But this was terrible, this was very badly timed. Just before our report was to
come up, just before, someone had leaked the report on the SST to the press and it
was a huge embarrassment to the Academy. As a result, they established the
Report Review Committee to review and approve all reports issued under The
Academy’s auspices. There hadn’t been such a body before and ours one of the
first documents to come up for review. I’d finished the report in September of
1972, but the publication date is 1975. It was censored, it was censored by the Academy. This was a wonderfully ironic suppression of much vaunted freedom of inquiry about which scientists have prided themselves and for which they have looked down their nose at the persecutors of Galileo. At this time there were two such cases cooking in the Academy. There was our report, I have all the documents, and someday I really should get it out and write it up. The Report Review Committee was saying, “If this thing gets out, Congress will never appropriate another penny for biomedical research,” that kind of naive, self-serving mentality. At the same time, Mr. Shockley was interested in getting the Academy to do a study on race and IQ, and they appoint Dobzhansky the chairman of a small committee to decide whether this is a question that the Academy ought to allow to be researched. The Dobzhansky report was really quite brilliant. It, in effect, said that there is nothing good that can come out of this. If you are interested in this case, you should look Dobzhansky’s report up. It’s a statesmen-like, wonderful treatment. But here you have the vaunted Academy censoring one kind of research because it’s potentially explosive - culturally, racially, politically. And they sit on our report because it’s going to look bad for science to raise questions about where science is taking us. At the same time there is a dissent at the end of my report. Two members of my committee, who never did me the courtesy of sending me any written comments
on the drafts through the whole time I was sending them stuff back, when the thing is finally done write a dissent. Joe Goldstein, who recently died, and Arthur Galston, who is still active at Yale, dissenting by saying, "This is the most mealy-mouthed...this doesn't tell you anything." So on the one hand you've got the scientists of the Academy complaining that this is terrible stuff and it's killing science. And these other guys saying, "This doesn't say anything. It's milk toast light." I'm struggling in the middle. I had a really good book in me to write at that time. There are four chapters in here: on in vitro reproductive technologies; on choosing the sex of children, that Tom Schelling and I wrote together; on retardation of aging, the conquest of mortality; and on behavior control through drugs, behavior modification and psychosurgery. What eventually got published is a mutilated form of the original. And even the original is not the book I would've written had I been able to write it in my own name. It just killed me, this whole process. I eventually wrote pieces on this and that topic. But I had wanted to do a book. I really had the zeal for it, I had the data for it, but because I had to write for other people I lost a good chance. I'm not sorry, but it was a very important learning experience. By the way, there is a guy that's done an oral history of this stuff, Charles Weiner at MIT. I sent him a box of all of my stuff which he kept for two or three years or something like that, I got it back from him about two years ago. He was more interested in the part that I played in the
Asilomar business, which is sort of an accidental thing. I think it was while I was working for the Academy that I met Paul Berg at a dinner at Maxine Singer’s. He was just starting on the recombinant DNA research and I sent him a four-page, single-spaced letter analyzing the issues. Somewhere in the files I have it. Apparently that played some important part in his own thinking.

Anyhow, I stayed at the Academy for two and a half years. My friends told me, don’t leave science. It was really as if... it would be the equivalent of what the Rabbis would’ve said if I told them I was becoming Catholic, it was that kind of sense of betrayal. Eventually, by the way, the report got published, because the Academy had received NSF funding for part of our project and NSF finally said to the Academy, “Look, you publish it, or we will.” And so the Academy didn’t publish it, they printed it. They printed, I think, 300 copies. It’s an interesting story. I have all the letters, the letters back from the Report Review Committee. My sense was that this was the way the process worked and it was improper of me to run to the newspapers. I joined this organization and this is the way they do things. Eventually, if all the people are dead, it’s an interesting vignette about the scientific mind set. I also, during the last year I worked at the Academy, was offered a part-time teaching job. I gave a couple of public lectures. One of the things Milton Katz didn’t mind my doing during this time was to write in my own name. So while I’m working on this report, two things of mine are
published in *Science*. One is an overview essay, which in fact was.... Now it
becomes clear to me! I wrote a position paper for my Academy/Research Council
Committee, laying out the issues as I saw them. It became the essay, "The New
Biology: What Price Relieving Man's Estate."

Swazey: It became rapidly a seminal paper. I'll say it if you won't!

Kass: It was an attempt to somehow organize the issues as I then saw them. I was also
asked to give a public lecture at St. John's College at Annapolis in January of
1971. I gave that lecture. Robert Goldwin, who was then the dean, asked if I
would be interested in teaching part-time there, which I started doing in 1972. I
think Jim Gustafson nominated me for a Guggenheim, which I won, one of those
years. And Irving Kristol had the ear of the chairman of NEH, Ron Berman and
NEH got me a one-year, I had to apply for it, but I got funding for a year to do
research on philosophy of organism. That would've been 1972-73 and 1973-74,
so having finished with the Academy I had two years to study and do part-time
teaching at St. John's and we moved to Annapolis in 1971, when my second
daughter was born. So I'm now sort of soaking up the culture of Annapolis,
hanging out there an awful lot. In some ways the real broadening of my education
began there. I had to teach the great books of Ancient Greece, reading most of
them for the first time the day before I had to go to the seminars. Teaching is not
the right word, you’re not really responsible for teaching those books, you are
responsible for trying to be the occasion of the students’ learning, asking good
questions.

I also was very active at Hastings. During this time from 1969, when
Hastings started, April of 1970 when I started at the Academy, 1972 in September
when I start teaching at St. John’s, 1974-76 when I joined the Kennedy Institute at
Georgetown. All of that time I’m doing some writing of my own, working very
intensely at Hastings. The other article that was published in 1971 was this debate
with Bob Morison on “Death, Process, or Event?” Those were papers done for
the Death and Dying Task Force, a research group at the Hastings Center. I was
very active in the beginning of Hastings. I wasn’t on the premises but I was really
probably the third person, in addition to Dan and Will, in the planning and the
organization of the early things. Will was the chairman of the Behavior
Modification Task Force.

Swazey: I was on that one.

Kass: Dan did the population stuff and I did the death and dying stuff. The meetings of
that group were really outstanding. Paul Ramsey, Hans Jonas, Eric Cassell, Bob
Morrison, Bob Veatch, who was the staff of that committee. We recruited Alex Capron, there was a fellow named Bob Stevenson who worked out at American-type Culture Collection, who had been at NIH, who was connected with the Uniform Anatomical Gift Act. The Sadler brothers were active, although they didn’t do very much. We recruited Bill May.

I always wished I had opted for that group instead of the behavior modification group.

Those were wonderful, wonderful meetings! And Henry Beecher was also a member. So the first projects were something on the definition of death; the people who called that a new definition of organ donor eligibility were absolutely right. We did an assessment of the Harvard Committee’s report, which was ethically a junk heap, the reasoning in that was really pretty bad. Then we did something, shortly thereafter, on the statutory definition of death where Alex and I wrote a paper that was published in 1972. So that was a very, very important time. I think I was getting more stimulation out of Hastings than out of the Academy group. Between the work at Hastings and the kind of great books reading though St. John’s, that was a terribly exciting and important formative time for me.
Swazey: Let me jump ahead and talk about what led to your disenchantment with Hastings.

Kass: Well, I guess I would have to say that I was on the losing end of some of the arguments at the beginning of the Hastings Center about how it should develop. I don’t think I was right in those arguments, in terms of the success of the Center. I think had I prevailed the Center would’ve not gone to develop the reputation and influence, such as it is, that it has. I was more interested in the Center’s doing more fundamental work on questions of human nature and its normative implications. It seemed to me that the challenge of the scientific discoveries to our basic ethical notions were deeper and greater than the practical problems caused by the technologies and that the Center ought to devote a fair amount of its attention to those things, the stuff that Jonas would’ve been interested in, the stuff that I was interested in, and Ramsey in his own way. But lots of the people who joined early were eager for making a public policy difference. Dan, himself, I think while saying that the important questions were more fundamental, thought that the right stance was somehow as a bridge between the truly fundamental things and the everyday practical things. Partly for the need to attract funding, and partly I think because of the accident of who the players came to be in the early, and especially in the not quite so early, days. In the next phase I think that the Center moved too rapidly for my taste into playing the tune that those who paid
the piper were calling. I'm not sure that I can recover all of these sorts of things
but my political sensibilities became...certainly relatively more conservative. On
some questions I haven’t changed my mind at all. My thoughts about the racial
questions are the same as they were, but if you believe in integration you’re now a
neanderthal. If the cutting edge is multi-culturalism, I’m not there. But it seemed
to me that the standard operative notions in the Hastings Center were the notions
of a certain kind of strictly secular, highly analytic, and rather left wing, left-
liberal. It reflected the academy. The generation that came into ascendancy in the
field (after the old-timers who helped start it) were not attracted to bioethics by
the same concerns that moved those that got it started. I would regularly complain
to Dan, “Where are you getting these guys from?” on the staff. He said, “Look,
I’d like to hire different people but they’re just not showing up! They are coming
from the universities in these and these ways.” I remember an application for a
fellowship, when the Hastings Center got some money for year long fellowships,
and I remember they were circulating the vitae and recommendations. The Rabbi
J. David Bleich, who now writes in bioethics was a candidate for a fellowship for
one summer. Jim Gustafson was on the committee, I was, and it was passed
through the hands of the staff. One member of the staff wrote a comment, “What
does this Orthodox Rabbi have to offer on the subject of contemporary bioethics?”
Jim Gustafson in a kind of wonderful response said he ventured to say that the
tradition represented by this Rabbi will be around a lot longer, when all of the
current readings in bioethics have been forgotten. I can no longer remember, but I
think he did get a fellowship.

There was another very important thing, and if Renée were here I would
like her to hear this from my mouth! This part is for her! Renée was an outsider
at those early meetings for her insistence on the importance of the cultural
questions. Dan had something of a feel for this. This is worth a long discussion
on a substantive matter, not so much for oral history. I was one of those who
thought that social science had nothing to offer us on this subject. I don’t think I
would’ve said it quite so nakedly, out of politeness, but it seemed to me the
questions were philosophical and ethical, and they were matters of reasoning
things through from first principles. And certainly cross-cultural questions were
interesting in some way but they didn’t decide any matters. That cultures differed
about these matters was not the end of the discussion, that was the beginning of
the question: “Who had it right?” Which was a question not for sociology or
anthropology but for maybe philosophy and for ethics. I was wrong. I was
wrong. It seems to me that philosophy that is deaf to cultural matters can’t be any
beacon to touch these things. In fact the foundations of morals are much more
deeply imbedded in culture, and that also means in religion, than any of the people
at Hastings in the beginning, with the exception of Renée, would’ve said. Now, I
didn’t understand her to think that one was somehow going to look at these things
to help to discover the truth; I still think that there was a certain sort of relativizing
professional cast. I wish she were here. Renée, this is also for you. We had
conversations in those early days, Renée was part of the Death and Dying Task
Force too. How could I forget her! She would say wonderful things in the
meetings and attribute them to her discipline. I would say, “Renée, you’re all wet!
This has got nothing to do with your discipline, this has to do with you!” In those
days my hunch was that she was so defensive that she didn’t want really to take
any kind of credit. To say that this was somehow her intuitive intelligence would
have been offensive to her, whether it was because she was a woman, or because
she was bucking that view of her profession. She wanted it to look as if it came
out of Talcott Parsons and the profession. It always seemed to me that I knew lots
of people in this profession that couldn’t shine her shoes!

Swazey: I think that’s right. I think some of it clearly is her training in sociology and an
awful lot of it is Renée, who is deeply perceptive, and also deeply spiritual.

Kass: Absolutely right! The last time we were together was at a Hastings meeting, I
don’t remember which it was, but she talked about the absence of religious
perspectives in bioethics and I realized what a long distance I’d come. Because
apart from her and Gil Meilaender, who I’m very close with, and Bill May...in a way the people in the field of bioethics now to whom I would immediately turn, turn out, I think not accidentally, to be the students of Paul Ramsey. David Smith, Bill May, Gil Meilaender, and it has everything to do with the fact that there is a kind of spiritual depth to these men, and Renée has it too. On that occasion I’m saying to myself, “You know, she’s talking about the heart of the matter.” My own changes on this came about when I realized that I’m sitting worrying about the effect on our self-conception about what happens to a few spare embryos when the culture’s sexual and family mores are self-destructing right and left. True, technology plays a part in it, but a tiny part. The history of the influence and importance of the Pill is yet to be properly written I think.

Swazey: Was this a fellows meeting? Was this a couple of years ago, or longer?

Kass: My memory for the 70's is good, my memory for the 90's is terrible! The meeting honoring Dan, it was that meeting. It was the talk she gave then in which...my sense was that this was a voice of wisdom. She always had wise things to say. I’m not sure whether she thinks her thinking has changed or developed on these matters. I never got the sense when she used to talk about religion in the early days that she was talking from the inside; it was mostly you have to sort of pay
attention to these things. Maybe if I had, myself, been more attuned to those matters I would’ve seen it as less a sociological...less the taxonomist’s description of the scene and more a kind of humanly sensitive, even an insider, but not necessarily an insider to a particular tradition but a recognition that religion and culture are intertwined and are the foundations of these matters.

Swazey: Your sense of where Hastings went after that founder generation, do you feel that way about bioethics in general?

Kass: Oh yes. Partly I think it’s the impoverishment of the analytic philosophical tradition when it tries to speak about human matters, partly it’s the only, at best, partial moral truth of the two dominant schools. Utilitarianism and Kantism are not wrong, but they’re wrong in so far as they present a claim to be the whole thing. Partly it’s the view that religious views are sectarian and therefore don’t have a place at the table. Of course, the mainstream “universalists” are unaware of their own sectarianism. You could’ve seen it beautifully in the way in which the Hastings Center handled the AIDS business. Will Gaylin is denounced by the members of the committee for seeming to raise questions about the moral responsibility of people who are HIV positive to behave themselves. Matilda Krim attacks him in print, Ron Bayer attacks him. There was a kind of monolith
of opinion. If there had been some people at Hastings who did religious bioethics, and if we had some regular garden variety conservatives present, there wouldn’t have been this homogeneity of opinion. The Hastings Center goes lock, stock, and barrel to work for Mrs. Clinton in the health reform, all of those guys are there.

Swazey: Yes, with people like Bill May who I gather was treated terribly by a lot of people in that group. Pat King talked to me about that. She refused to go to their final reception and she said she actually stopped going to the meetings because she was so appalled at how people reacted to Bill trying to get a religious voice in there, with Art Caplan being about the only philosopher-bioethicist who was arguing that Bill was right and those views have to get in there. I guess what fascinates me is the implicit assumption that religious voices in America are too heterogeneous to sort of bring to the table, which says somehow we think secular views are homogeneous in this country, which is a bizarre view to begin with.

Kass: But it is in those circles.

Swazey: Well, if you’re in analytic philosophy.
Or if you've come out of Harvard, Yale, Princeton, Dartmouth, those places. My public arguments, even to this day, are not religiously founded. I still am speaking to the skeptics. But I find that some people simply suspect that I am a crypto-theologian. Or, they'll say that my concerns are symbolic. The only important harms are dangers to the body or violations of the will, and therefore people can't willingly degrade themselves, that's not a category. To go to be a witness at the National Bioethics Advisory Commission and have the people who are making the case for the goodness of cloning, people like Ruth Macklin and John Robertson, on bioethical grounds, says to me that mainstream bioethics is weird. It's just very strange. It would be worth something perhaps for me to unearth this paper on “Practicing Ethics, Where is the Action?” because that really argues that ethics is not a theoretical subject that begins with abstract principles which you then imply and practice. That's really what's wrong with the way in which the Childress-Beauchamp thing works. The other school of ethics is that ethics is reflection on practice and the heart of ethics is not rules, but mores and habits and sensibilities. It's this latter view of ethics which really thinks about how opinions are formed, how characters are shaped. It winds up, therefore, being really a cultural matter in which the moral sensibilities and teachings have a large part to play. If you think ethics is a branch of philosophy first and foremost, if you figure things out in an abstract way and then you get down to cases and you
apply your principles, that’s just not the way the world runs. It’s not the way people live their lives, it’s not the way their intuitions are formed, it’s not where their beliefs come from, it’s not where their characters are formed. This paper was, in effect, a critique of the entire abstract rationalist way of doing bioethics, which I don’t think was designed that way to keep the religious sensibilities out, but if that’s what you think ethics is this other kind of stuff just doesn’t cut it.

Swazey: I think that’s why there has been a strong, persisting cleavage with the social sciences, because if you believe in the totally rational abstract analytic approach, the social sciences have nothing to contribute. And I think, even though mainstream bioethicists are now saying, “Yes, we know social science is really important and we’re utilizing it,” it’s hard to find much evidence.

Kass: Yes, and I’m not sure that the quantitative social scientists are going to help out; to some extent they’re reaping the same kind of rationalism.... They were meant to be a kind of antidote to the kind of reductionism and rationalism, but in some ways to gain a kind of legitimacy they borrowed something of the same ways.

Swazey: When you’re told, directly or indirectly, that social science isn’t “useful,” then you know you don’t have a place at the table. That was what happened with me and
Renée at Hastings, which is why we resigned as fellows, there was no role for us to play.

Kass: I think there would’ve been a time when I would’ve been a member of the offending outlook. This is a long argument about the describing what is, not to say what should be. On the other hand, you’d be an idiot to try to think about what should be in any kind of practical way without paying attention to what is. I suspect that I was not at that particular time sufficiently thoughtful about those matters. I really thought the urgent thing was to somehow figure out human nature, in this chaotic time when human nature was on the table for dissection and remaking, and where the basic values that we would rely on to make the judgements were, themselves, under assault. That the urgent task was a problem of philosophical anthropology and that the moral foundation was not of the principlist sort, because the principlistism descends from Kantianism and from a certain analytical logical mode. I only thought that if you could figure out the nature of the human, that would have normative pointings. I still think to some extent you can do that. I don’t know that you know this, I’m working on a book on Genesis. I’ve changed sides.

Swazey: How long have you been working on it?
Off and on for probably five or six years. This probably warms the heart of some deceased grandparent, or great grandparent who I never knew. I describe it as a laid-on rabbinic gene!

Didn’t you say one of your grandfathers was highly observant?

He was observant; he died when I was three.

Is there a point where you characterized yourself as a bioethicist?

No. The word “ethicist,” I use it but I don’t like it. There were probably times when I would correct people and then I just out of fatigue....

You give up after a while. I have, Renée has, Alex has.

Yes. I’ve done much less in the field, too though I’m somewhat tempted to have another go-round. I took my own advice to heart when I really concluded that the practical problems of what you do with organ transplants or in vitro fertilization are somehow less important than the search for ethical foundations and to look for a more natural science. So the Genesis book was a search to try to do that, to
build bridges between a richer understanding of nature that might have some
moral pointings, not in the sense that it would give you specific rules of conduct.
I can’t read the bioethics literature, I hate it. I just can’t read it. You probably
have to as a profession.

Swazey: I’ve had to for the past three years, but it is so boring I find it stultifying and arid.
A number of people I have talked to who are bioethicists, who’ve been around for
a long time, feel the same way.

Kass: That’s interesting -- it’s one of the terrible things about memory: you arrest
everybody where you last had dealings with them and you change but you count
on them being where they were. You don’t do them the honor of thinking they
could’ve figured things out, just as you have. I was at a small meeting of a group
called the Center for Bioethics and Human Dignity; have you run across these
people?

Swazey: Yes.

Kass: This is Trinity University. This is a different stripe. Very explicitly religiously
grounded. There is a real gravity, and I have a feeling that some way they knew
what was at stake in this business. Whereas, my sense that the main field of
bioethics is content really to do the fine tuning around the edges, yell and scream
about certain kinds of issues of distributive justice or violations of autonomy.
But, on all of the other large things they are willing to say, “Well, these are
dangers of abuse here and we’ll write good regulations and we’ll keep things in
line.” But that’s partly because I don’t think that most of the people who practice
bioethics worry about the abolition of man. I don’t think they worry about the
question of what this means, or if they do, they don’t want to be on the losing side
of history. An interesting story can be told about the role of bioethics experts and
the various government panels that have pronounced on fetal research, or embryo
research, or the National Bioethics Advisory Commission, including present
leadership at Hastings. Art Caplan recently had a conference on extended life and
eternal life at Penn, sponsored with the Templeton Foundation. Here are these
Templeton people with gobs of money and interested in religion but they don’t
want to say anything religious that would offend science, so they’re looking for a
kind of marriage on the cheap in which science is good and religion is good, so
there can’t really be any problem between them. We’re going to have both sides
meeting, and you get a bunch of theologians pronouncing God’s blessings on
bodily immortality on the grounds that if people live longer they would become
more pious. You sort of scratch your head and you wonder who’s been buying
these people off? A guy named Peters from the Berkeley Graduate Theological Union, a fellow named Cole Turner. I came home from this meeting and was actually inspired to do something as a result of it. I’m thinking maybe much of my stuff on this was premature. I didn’t develop it all that well. As I said, I lost one book in the Committee on Life Sciences report. So I’m tempted, maybe after this Genesis project, to come back and re-educate myself on the science, much of which I’ve not been up to speed on and revisit the question of the meaning for our humanity of all this stuff that we’re doing. Dan was at the Templeton-Penn meeting. I made an argument that in effect the decision to choose to be immortal is not just one decision amongst many, it’s to choose to become a different kind of being altogether. I went on to talk about something about humanity. Dan and I were on the same side of the debate against this snake oil salesman, Lee Silver from Princeton, and Cole Turner. Dan said to me afterwards, “You know, I’ve never understood this argument you’ve made all these thirty years about humanization, dehumanization.” I scratched my head and said, “Dan, for God’s sake, that’s why we started this business!” His arguments are always in terms of social consequences. Dan started the Hastings Center hot on the heels of the abortion book. I don’t know what he thinks of the abortion book now, but that was in fact an attempt to use cross-cultural studies to reach a moral conclusion that was a betrayal of his beginnings, whether he would regard it that way or not.
I thought it was an intellectual cop out. A serious bit of hand wringing but for a conclusion that was unprincipled. The Hastings Center might have been different not been founded by a man who was making his break with his Catholic origins, and the other leading person was a man who was culturally Jewish and some of his moral sensibilities come from there, but neither of them, it seems to me, really with a fine ear for the religious sensibilities, but vastly more than the people that they hired as staff down the road.

I remember there were two theologians very active at the beginning, Ramsey and Gustafson. Jim was much more influenced by the social sciences and much less inclined to try to argue through a firm ethical conclusion. He once said to me, when I was having a rather frank talk with him about his stuff and Paul’s stuff, “Well, somebody said to me Ramsey’s right about ethics but Gustafson’s right about counseling.” In effect, what he was saying was he was somehow more in tune to the human dimensions to these things though Paul might have gotten the arguments right. Jim’s Christian identity was less in evidence in the bioethics business than was Ramsey’s, but it was still somewhat present. After that, even their very students, and I would say in the beginning it was true of Bill May -- his original contributions came less out of his theological background and more out of a certain great insight into literature. He read things that nobody else read. He would come at things out of novels and various sociological works, so you
couldn’t really tell that this was a Protestant theologian talking in the early days. But almost everybody else that came, and Jim Childress would’ve been the classical example, almost as if it were a matter of principle, hid his religious sensibilities at the door when he entered the conversation. It was as if somebody had tacitly set the rules and if you don’t play on secular grounds you’re self-declaring yourself as illegitimate. That to speak out of your own tradition was narrow, parochial. You had to find not only a universal language but, to some extent, the more abstract and desiccated the better, because you couldn’t somehow be suspected, as I’ve always been suspected, of being a crypto-Catholic. When you start talking about nature and Aristotle it looks like you’re the Pope’s advance man. So I remember berating these guys. Jim came to Georgetown, before he moved back here to Chicago in 1976. I had two years at the Kennedy Institute and Jim Childress was there the second of those years. Even in the in-house conversations, I couldn’t figure out why in the world this guy, this student of Jim Gustafson, talks as if he’s the lowest common denominator logician. He’s a very sober and a very rational, careful fellow. I like him, by the way, I like him a lot and I respect him. I don’t know, it’s partly temperamental, it’s partly I think what he thinks the field requires, but partly for a long time that was the American way in these matters. It’s only that since the fundamentalists decided that the country had been taken away from them and started to fight back that we haven’t sorted it
out yet, how it’s going to work out, but you now can sort of wander into a public
discussion with a religious perspective.

Although if you look at the role of that perspective on policy, it seems to me that
the concerns about that fundamentalist perspective are more deeply entrenching
the secular rationalist voice. The concerns about that fundamentalist perspective
having a polity voice means that people are even more determined that it just be a
rational, secular voice. If you look at the NBAC reports on cloning and stem cell
research, they sort of said we had these people testify and this is what they said,
and here is our report. And certainly the cloning recommendation couldn’t have
been more reduced and simplified, saying until we know the risks and benefits....

That was the most appalling thing. Or the job that this guy Ron Green played in
the embryo research. Talking about the respect that’s owed this thing, using
words with almost a Clinton-esque kind of double speak. It was embarrassing, just
really embarrassing!

It did seem to me that NBAC didn’t really need 90 days to come up with that as
their cloning recommendation.
Kass: I think there might be some kind of other pockets springing up. For a while the only alternative was the Pope John Center, which I think probably was not intellectually strong enough to make a difference. I wonder how these guys with Trinity’s Center for Bioethics and Human Dignity are going to do. There’s also a book by Wesley Smith which is about to come out, which is published by Encounter Books, a new press in California. I don’t know. I’m the signer of a letter of complaint to the Annals where they’ve published this consensus document about the usefulness of terminal sedation, which is in fact to sedate people to make them terminal rather than to sedate people when they’re in pain. They put together some kind of so-called consensus panel that had no pro-life representatives and passed this off. It’s a combination of Quill and his cronies and Art Caplan and the Annals leadership. A bunch of people said this is hardly the consensus of the medical profession, this is what you should be doing. So there have been panels that have been put together at the federal level and various other kinds of places that have pretended that there really is only one voice, only one way of doing this. I guess one other thing that is probably worth a mention -- where some people at Hastings have played a role, Bob Veatch in particular, although he was saying these things when I think it was culturally happening anyhow -- is that the medical profession has lost its moral voice.
Swazey: Do you agree with that?

Kass: I do. We were always a more decentralized profession than Britain. And I’m not talking about just the AMA. The AMA has got its own things to answer for. That there really is an ethic of a profession, as I would put it: you can choose to be a physician but it’s not simply up to you what being a physician means. But there is this weird view of everybody sort of figuring out his or her own moral way. It would be surprising if the cultural events of the sixties didn’t show up in the academy and the professions, and since you were a college president you know all about it. What some of those people didn’t win politically they have won institutionally by the drip of water method. So we don’t have robust profession of medicine saying, “These and these are the boundaries, we call physicians to these and these kinds of norms.” Rather, it’s gone entrepreneurial and it’s gone to do your own thing. In fact, you could say that the rise of bioethics is in part a response to a kind of declaration of medical moral bankruptcy. There are some of the bioethical issues that are not yet in the mainstream of medicine, but part of what’s helped to put bioethics on the map are these hospital ethics committees, and the bioethics consultation services, and the appointments of bioethicists in major medical schools, as if you need some outside expertise to solve medicine’s own medical ethical difficulties. What that’s in effect saying is that medicine
doesn’t have it’s own internal ethic in which reflective practitioners and maybe
some patient advocates can sit down together and work this out. That you have to
call in an ethics expert, in effect, says the rest of the profession doesn’t have it.
It’s one of the reasons why I like Mark Siegler’s program here. It in a way insists
that medical ethics ought to be done by clinicians who’ve been made reflective
about their practice, rather than get somebody a PhD in bioethics and then let him
come and apply his theories to the cases that come up in hospitals. That’s a
caricature but in the direction of the truth.

Swazey: Does bioethics have a future as it’s presently constituted? I guess two questions:
does it and should it?

Kass: I think what’s coming, both scientifically and technologically, is terribly
important. Computer-human interactions, brain implants, neuro and psycho
biology, and the way this interacts with all kinds of other cultural things — an
addition that I would not have said when I first got started — those are terribly
important things and we need the best thinking we can about what this means and
what to do about it. We have people blindly talking about increasing the human
life span by 50 or 100 years. You’ve got other people talking cheerfully about
somatic germ line interventions. Pharmacology of the brain is kid stuff today
compared to what we’re going to have in 20 years. These are important things
and they deserves serious and thoughtful attention. I don’t think they will get that
kind of attention if the field continues in its present way; won’t be adequate to the
gravity, the magnitude of the subject. For my money, when people tell me that
they are going to medical school and they’re interested in ethical questions, and
they want to know where they can go that they can actually study bioethics on the
side, I tell them, “don’t do that. If you want to actually become thoughtful about
the deep human matters that you are going to be dealing with, find somebody
good to read The Iliad with, and read War and Peace. Steep yourself in the best
that people have written and thought about the human condition, because despite
all of the changes, those are the things that are dear and the things one has to
preserve and fight for.” I’m not simply despairing, I think that one’s up against
the terrible juggernaut if you combine the general infatuation with technology,
free markets, and globalization and the belief that there should be no restrictions
on scientific inquiry and almost no restrictions on technological application. I do
think that the road runs all by itself left to its own devices in the direction of
Brave New World and that evils that we are accumulating are not freestanding
evils but are the accompaniments of things that people want, and that if there were
a cheap way to add fifty years to the life span and you didn’t prevent it, and I don’t
see how you could prevent it, you know pretty well what people are going to
choose. You’ll find some way to enhance people’s performance by genetic or
pharmacological means, and even the people who don’t want to do it are going to
be compelled to think about doing it for their children if other people are doing it.
One sees the cultural dynamics and one doesn’t know exactly how to set about
changing them. But I think it’s also the case that the culture is just barely
beginning to see the implications of all of this, that those of us who got into this
field thirty years ago maybe had a clear vision of where it was headed, perhaps
somewhat prematurely, culturally speaking. I certainly feel that way about my
own work. I think I would get a much better hearing amongst biologists today
than I got at the beginning. There’s nobody around who would say what the
Academy’s Report Review Committee said of the report I wrote, that these are
fictitious problems.

Swazey: We’ve never been really willing, especially culturally, to engage in prospective
thinking, that we need to think about these before they’re upon us.

Kass: Yes, that’s not our way. That’s partly because the decisions that produced the
quandaries are invisible publically, nobody’s asking these guys to put brain
implants, to wire people to the Internet...but some guy is doing it off in the private
place. That’s the way, and fifty years from now we’re going to have a problem
figuring out what to do with this.

Renée and I thought a lot about that perspective when we were in China and they were getting ready to open China’s first chronic dialysis facility at the hospital where we were working. They had four machines. We kept asking, “how are you going to decide who gets dialysis?” And they kept saying, “No problem.” So we’d go on to something else and then we would come back to it. “No problem.” What that meant for the Chinese was that because the unit hadn’t opened there was not a problem because they didn’t have to make a decision.

That’s really what that meant?

Yes, that’s really what that meant. It was later explained to us by a Chinese scholar. I think some of us thirty years ago were trying to do that “what if” for science and medicine, but it was almost that Chinese “We’re not there yet so....”

It’s a daunting matter. There’s a funny anecdote. When I first changed jobs, when I first left the lab, I happened to be in Canada and was conversing with my father’s cousin, a man who’s still alive, he’s in his 80’s. He said, “What are you doing?” I told him, I explained. He said, “And you think you can do something
about this? This is a job for the Messiah.” I wrote it off to his provincialism.

I’ve now concluded that he’s right, which is another way of saying, on the
question of should bioethics continue?: It’s going to continue. It’s like all kinds
of things, they have their own momentum and perpetuate themselves. I’ve felt for
some time that the Hastings Center should declare itself a success and close its
doors. I do think that the interesting questions are not so much the bioethical
questions but the larger cultural questions. The real issue of this generation and
the next is whether there can be a kind of cultural moral renewal around the
fundamental things which the bioethics business impinges on. But if we can’t
somehow figure out a better answer to the meaning of our sexuality, to the
questions of family structure and what it means to care for children and make the
way for the next generation, if we don’t fix the problem of social order and
education, just very fundamental sorts of things, the rest of this stuff is trivial.

That’s really where the problem is. My activities in the ethics business have
shifted to another project on the ethics of everyday life. We’ve put out five
volumes in a series that Notre Dame is publishing. Amy and I did one on courting
and marrying, an anthology of readings. Gil Meilaender has one on working.

There are also volumes on dying, on teaching and learning in everyday life, and on
leadership and leading. This is an attempt to say to the whole ethics business,
“Look, the interesting questions are not the questions about when do you pull the
plug.” There are so many neglected areas of discourse on the moral dimensions of ordinary life. All of our human interactions are ethically charged. Those things are not the subject of moral reflection; much of the moral wisdom about those things is in disarray. The religious communities are trying as best they can to restore something of their moral capital, although truth to say I think a lot of what’s mainstream Protestant is in big trouble but trying to stay with it as much as bioethicists have tried to sort of stay with it. But I think that if we don’t somehow restore -- let’s speak simply in the language of the past -- if we do not acquire a strong moral bearing with respect to the ordinary dimensions of life, we’re not going to do very well with these other sorts of things. The attempt at some kind of rationalist and rule making solution will float as an unanchored, bit of dressing on a sea of chaos.

In some ways it is a luxury of an developed society to pay attention to most things bioethics has paid attention to. In turn, it’s interesting to reflect on why they haven’t really dealt with some of the more macro issues like what does it mean to have just health care and those issues, which Paul Ramsey, decades ago, said seemed almost intractable to moral reasoning. But they are so important.

One of the things that’s different, I think, if you teach undergraduates, which I
continue to do and Amy and I do some teaching together, and you stay close to
them, you find there’s still a kind of hungering for a life that has meaning. In fact,
the major difference on this campus in the 25 years we’ve been here is that in the
last 10 years people are interested in religion. Not just in spirituality of the sort
you peddle in California. There’s been a return to the major religious traditions
and that’s partly because of various things. I think that positivism and other
things our generation thought might take the place of it have been shown to be off
a pretty thin gruel at best. So the kids are serious but in many ways they’re lost.
This is a whole other subject. About half of them are children of divorce; they
don’t even enter into a conversation in a classroom the same way. They’ll sit
more guarded, they’re watching out for themselves, the basic trust in ordinary
human relations is not the same as...you can walk in a classroom and you can
practically tell something like that now. And that means that they don’t have
confidence. About certain sorts of things they are very quick to moralize, but
even those things are just on the tip of their tongue. They’ve imbibed the kind of
politically correct things in certain matters. But they don’t really have ingrained
in them, as a matter of rearing, a certain kind of moral sensibility and moral
compass. That seems to me where the real action is, and I suspect it is

Swazey: You’re very lucky to have Amy teach with you, you both and people like Renée,
who are real teachers committed to undergraduates, that’s too rare too.

Kass: The kids are good. We just did a course on courtship with them, before we went on leave.

Swazey: You’re beaming, you must’ve enjoyed it.

Kass: It was interesting, it was very interesting.

END OF INTERVIEW