

**Leon Kass**  
**Acadia Institute Project on Bioethics in American Society**  
**page 1**

1           June 16, 2000. Interview with Leon Kass, MD, PhD, Addie Clark Harding Professor in  
2           The College and The Committee on Social Thought, University of Chicago, and Senior  
3           Fellow, MacLean Center for Clinical Medical Ethics. The interview is being conducted  
4           by Dr. Judith P. Swazey at Dr. Kass' office.  
5

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

7  
8           Kass:         Okay. I'm a first generation American. My father came from Uman in the  
9                        Ukraine, he came to Canada shortly after the Russian revolution. My mother, who  
10                      was one of nine children, came to Canada from a shtetl in territory disputed by  
11                      Poland and Russia. My father was a peddler selling dry goods door-to-door with a  
12                      horse and buggy. Eventually they moved to Chicago where my father had a  
13                      clothing store with my uncle. I was born in Chicago and raised here. My home  
14                      was Yiddish speaking, I was bilingual. We were rather stridently secular. My  
15                      mother was very far left. My grandfather, my mother's father, I knew very  
16                      slightly. He was a religious man but sort of interested in enlightenment. My  
17                      eldest uncle had been given some religious education but made a break in his  
18                      teenage years. All nine, my mother and her siblings, all became socialists. It was  
19                      the classical story of the secularization of prophetic Judaism and the belief that  
20                      somehow in socialism lay the solution to the problem of justice in which the  
21                      Jewish tradition had been so interested. I went to public school, and went to  
22                      Yiddish school after school several days a week. I never had a Bar Mitzvah, was

**Leon Kass**  
**Acadia Institute Project on Bioethics in American Society**  
**page 2**

23 in synagogue maybe twice for Bar Mitzvahs of some of my cousins. But I was  
24 raised sort of left wing, Progressive Party. I was at the Progressive Party  
25 convention in 1948 when Henry Wallace was nominated at Chicago Stadium.

26

27 Swazey: Siblings?

28

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

30

31 Swazey: What does he do?

32

33 Kass: He's a fifth grade teacher at the Lab School. He went to Berkeley, he was part of  
34 the free speech movement and then the People's Republic of China invited him to  
35 tour the country and see the paradise with the Oakland Bay Area Teachers' Union.  
36 He came back and decided it was time to bring the revolution home. He and a  
37 bunch of friends tried a co-operative move to Detroit. He worked on the assembly  
38 line making automobiles for the purpose of rising in the union so they could make  
39 the revolution. After twenty years he eventually figured it out...I'm not sure he  
40 ever figured it out that he was the wrong race to be elected to an office in the local  
41 union. He finally gave it up. He used to work the night shift 10 to 12 hours a day  
42 under a mask; it was a horrible life as far as I could see. In the meantime my

**Leon Kass**  
**Acadia Institute Project on Bioethics in American Society**  
**page 3**

43 political life became more conservative. I love my brother very much, but most of  
44 the subjects of real interest to me are not discussable with him. It's getting better  
45 but there was a long stretch of time where we had nothing much in common. My  
46 mother out lived my father by about 13 years and had terrible Alzheimer's for  
47 most of that time, but not so bad that there weren't the occasional lucid moments.  
48 During her decline I once visited her and she said, "I have two sons, one of them  
49 wants to make the world better through education, and one wants to make the  
50 world better through revolution." I said, "You've got that right, Mother." And  
51 she said, "And which one of them is right, I don't know!"

52

53 Swazey: That was a very lucid moment!!

54

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

59

60 Swazey: What led you into medicine?

61

62 Kass: That's sort of odd. My home was a place of not so much book learning; my

**Leon Kass**  
**Acadia Institute Project on Bioethics in American Society**  
**page 4**

63 mother went to night school, my father also. My mother was a big reader, but the  
64 interest in the family household was morals. From the very earliest age both of us  
65 were encouraged, but it really took with me especially, to sort of examine people's  
66 behavior and to take an interest in not just questions of justice in the abstract, but  
67 decorum, fineness, and things of that sort. I had an interest, I think, in law, which  
68 is probably what I was headed for. There were two things that changed it. One  
69 was that I came to college after two years of University High, so I started college  
70 (University of Chicago) at the age of 15 in 1954. This was McCarthy times and  
71 we were left, and it seemed to me an unpropitious time for law. Little did one  
72 know that in eight years the thing would be upside down. The other thing was  
73 that in my last year of high school, which was my second year in high school, I  
74 had an absolutely terrific biology teacher who got me very excited about biology.  
75 On my application to college it said, "Write down what you're interested in." I  
76 wrote down law and biology, I can't remember which one first. I took placement  
77 tests here at Chicago when I arrived and I placed out of six courses, including a  
78 couple of science courses. So they assumed I was a scientist and they gave me a  
79 biology advisor. I was 15 years-old, I didn't know any better. He put me in a  
80 course in calculus and a course in chemistry, and I was on the track. I was, in a  
81 way, too young for the humanities, too young for the social sciences. I did fine,  
82 but to that point I had unthinking answers to all of the interesting and important

**Leon Kass**  
**Acadia Institute Project on Bioethics in American Society**  
**page 5**

83 questions. So in some ways the education here didn't really take. I acquired  
84 certain salutary prejudices, so that when I actually woke up toward the end of  
85 college and later, I had some familiarity with books that could eventually help me  
86 think about things. But I was very good in the sciences, things were rolling well,  
87 and I was quite happy doing that work. But I suspect that my deepest passions  
88 and concerns were always with the human questions, questions of interpersonal  
89 relations, questions of character.

90

91 Swazey: Very strong imprinting.

92

93 Kass: Very strong, very strong. You scratch away and what you discover is the child of  
94 my parents. My mother was a very exacting moralist, not in any bookish way, but  
95 she was perfectly happy to be one against the crowd. If she thought it was right,  
96 that was all there was to it. On religion, by the way, she had strong sense of  
97 respect for those people who believed and practiced, so on the Jewish holidays we  
98 were kept home. We weren't allowed on the street on those days because it would  
99 be disgraceful, whereas all of my religious friends went to the synagogue in the  
100 morning and they played ball in the afternoon. She had a kind of natural  
101 reverence, but it was unattached. It seemed to me that there was something  
102 improper about going to the synagogue and then playing ball in the afternoon. If

**Leon Kass**  
**Acadia Institute Project on Bioethics in American Society**  
**page 6**

103                   you weren't going to do it you should at least honor it in some way. Though I  
104                   didn't know it at the time, and although I was being given no particular religious  
105                   content, I was acquiring a certain disposition with respect to.... There was a deep  
106                   natural reverence in the house, it was attached to different things. I had  
107                   extraordinary regard for old people, and a real love of old people. The older I get  
108                   the more you look at children, the more you see how they divide; most kids want  
109                   nothing to do with old people. These temperamental things and these  
110                   acculturations of the home....

111

112       Swazey:       They persist.

113

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

116

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

118

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

120

121       Swazey:       Yes. So in college you were a good science major. What happened after that?

122

**Leon Kass**  
**Acadia Institute Project on Bioethics in American Society**  
**page 7**

123      Kass:            My last year in college I had a teacher who really woke me up. He was a  
124                            legendary teacher, his name was Joseph Jackson Schwab, now deceased. Schwab  
125                            had started life as a geneticist, he started teaching and discovered how little he  
126                            understood what was going on in the classroom and what the impediments to  
127                            learning were. So he became a lay analyst in order to figure out the dynamics of  
128                            the classroom. By the time he finished he'd taught everything in the Hutchins  
129                            College except for the history of Western civilization, which meant all the natural  
130                            sciences, all the social sciences, mathematics, music, everything, the works.

131  
132      Swazey:            A Renaissance man.

133  
134      Kass:            Really! He was, in retrospect, something of an intellectual bully. But he was the  
135                            first teacher I had who showed me that there were real questions where I had  
136                            formerly had answers. It was wonderful. You would go to class and he would  
137                            take the bright and aggressive kids like me, and he wouldn't exactly humiliate us  
138                            but he'd make it very tough on us. Then he would take the timid and not terribly  
139                            articulate students in the class and they would say something that the rest of us  
140                            would think was dumb and he'd turn it into gold by showing something that was  
141                            somehow imbedded in it.

142

**Leon Kass**  
**Acadia Institute Project on Bioethics in American Society**  
**page 8**

143 Swazey: What a privilege.

144

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

**Leon Kass**  
**Acadia Institute Project on Bioethics in American Society**  
**page 9**

163 year on five different theories of the organism, which distinguished me amongst  
164 all the other people who wound up doing research.

165           When I got to NIH I had a philosophical interest in living nature and knew  
166 that there were other ways to think about living things besides the reductionist  
167 way that I was also learning and was pretty good at. So between the kind of  
168 moralism of my home and the beginning philosophical education here in the  
169 college at the hands of this man, I was sort of different. I should say one more  
170 thing which I think is of some importance. First generation Americans...well, I  
171 shouldn't make that generalization, I'll let you make it. My parents married late  
172 and had children late, so my mother was 36 when I was born and my father was  
173 42. I was born in 1939 and around that time that was quite unusual. So  
174 sociologically and culturally I identify with people who are fifteen to twenty years  
175 older than I am. I became more aware of it later but I even knew it as a school  
176 child, in a Yiddish speaking bilingual home with one foot still in the old country.  
177 Many of us who were first generation Americans, I think felt this way if they  
178 didn't simply rebel and feel embarrassment for the European immigrant origins of  
179 one's parents, which I didn't. I never was embarrassed by my parents, I really  
180 respected my parents enormously. But, we helped raise them as they helped raise  
181 us, we looked out for them. And that produced a certain kind of precocious self-  
182 consciousness. My brother doesn't have it; I helped my parents raise my brother

**Leon Kass**  
**Acadia Institute Project on Bioethics in American Society**  
**page 10**

183 even though he's three and a half years younger. That meant that though I'm  
184 obviously an American, in an important respect I vicariously lived through my  
185 parents' immigrant experience. I saw the world almost always through their eyes,  
186 especially through the eyes of my mother who had a knack for making me do so,  
187 for better or for worse. So that I came to be astonished with my own kids when I  
188 discovered it wasn't natural for children to see the world through the eyes of their  
189 parents. I would say to my daughter, "If you were in my place how would you  
190 feel about this?" She'd say, "What a dumb question!" For me that was the most  
191 natural thing in the world. I think it has to do with that first generation where you  
192 acutely see that your parents, on certain kinds of matters, don't know the ropes.  
193 And out of love for them and protection for them, you somehow identify with  
194 them. So I would say, I was very influenced by the moralism of my home, the  
195 kind of peculiar psychosocial consequences of being one of these first-born  
196 Americans who identifies with the parents and the parents are fifteen or twenty  
197 years older. Then the kind of philosophical education that I was exposed to here  
198 in Chicago, especially at the hands of this man, Schwab. Those are the formative  
199 things that in retrospect make it unlikely that I would have a conventional life as a  
200 scientist or physician.

201                   There's one other thing too, come to think of it. Robert Hutchins had left  
202 here in 1951 but his legacy was still fairly strong and being contested. There was

**Leon Kass**  
**Acadia Institute Project on Bioethics in American Society**  
**page 11**

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

219  
220 Swazey: I certainly now understand a lot more about your extraordinary career than when I  
221 walked in the door.

222

**Leon Kass**  
**Acadia Institute Project on Bioethics in American Society**  
**page 12**

223 Kass: It's funny, you know, one's debts are absolutely enormous. There are lots of other  
224 things but let this be.

225

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

228

229 Kass: Well, there were people who encouraged me to do that even while I was a student  
230 here. In fact this was a place that pushed people into PhD programs before it was  
231 fashionable. I resisted it. I worked in the laboratory here already in college. It's  
232 really a weird coincidence -- on my way bicycling here today, I passed my boss,  
233 the guy who's laboratory I worked in and I haven't seen him in years! I had a job  
234 as a technician in the lab at the age of 15, and I worked there part-time through  
235 college, and all my summers, and even during medical school. I was encouraged,  
236 in fact, to do a PhD and it would've served the purposes of a career in academic  
237 medicine but I was just resistant to it, in part because it seemed to me to be  
238 credentials' hunting at the time. When I was a medical student here, we tried to  
239 form a student organization that would discuss some of the social issues in  
240 medicine which, for me then, probably would've been questions of health care for  
241 the poor, racism, things of that sort. I remember I got into big trouble for  
242 publishing an article in the Maroon, the campus newspaper, under a pseudonym,

**Leon Kass**  
**Acadia Institute Project on Bioethics in American Society**  
**page 13**

243 pointing out the fact that in the entire history of the University of Chicago Medical  
244 School there had only been four blacks who'd graduated. I went down the halls  
245 and counted on all the photographs, this was in the 1960's. I tried to found this  
246 student organization, but we couldn't get ten people who would sign their names.  
247 Just fear...1959.

248

249 Swazey: Fear of retaliation?

250

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

252

253 Swazey: Right around then.

254

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

**Leon Kass**  
**Acadia Institute Project on Bioethics in American Society**  
**page 14**

263 of God and all the rest of that garbage. I couldn't believe what was being said  
264 about the place!

265  
266 Swazey: But that book was not just about Beth Israel. It was sort of a generic muckraking  
267 of the worst of academic medicine. I remember I had a discussion about it with  
268 Mitch Rabkin. He wanted to ban it for sale on the hospitals premises and I said,  
269 "Mitch, that's a mistake. You'll just call attention to it." It's just as true of  
270 virtually any teaching hospital I can think of. They are drawing out the experience  
271 that you know goes on." It was an instant underground classic. But as you said,  
272 Beth Israel was a wonderful place.

273  
274 Kass: I stood in the bookstore and read the thing, and I was livid! I was absolutely livid!  
275 I was an intern from 1962-63. This was written when? The late 1960's or 1970  
276 maybe?

277  
278 Swazey: Yes.

279  
280 Kass: I would bet an arm and a leg that nothing that this guy said went on when I was an  
281 intern...nothing! Maybe things had changed, maybe this was part of a counter  
282 cultural attack on authority, but one doesn't wash one's professional dirty laundry

**Leon Kass**  
**Acadia Institute Project on Bioethics in American Society**  
**page 15**

283 in public like that. In fact, I remember a conversation ( when I was a medical  
284 student ) in our library with a guy who was a graduate student in sociology. He  
285 was writing his doctoral dissertation on some sort of sociological study of the  
286 medical profession and I remonstrated with him that he ought not to be doing this  
287 kind of stuff. You'll excuse me, Judith, but it seems to me that to analyze the  
288 medical profession was to demystify it and to destroy it. I'm not sure I had the  
289 right words then, but my reaction to it was it's like looking on the nakedness of  
290 your father. You just don't do things like that! Why would anybody want to go  
291 around and look over the shoulder of our own venerable profession and carve it  
292 up?

293  
294 Swazey: Would you have felt that way about any of the professions? Law?

295  
296 Kass: Yes! I guess, in some ways, I still do. Let me put it another way. I feel even  
297 more that way to the extent to which our academics reward irreverence and  
298 cynicism. Its like killing your father, which is what so many of these people do. I  
299 hate psychobiographies. I just can't stand it! These institutions are precarious. In  
300 fact, part of the reason I became a conservative was when I saw how the kids  
301 turned on the university. They took out their frustrations, if you want to put a nice  
302 construction on it, or their youthful rebellion, on the authorities nearest at hand.

**Leon Kass**  
**Acadia Institute Project on Bioethics in American Society**  
**page 16**

303 That's an important turn later down the road, but I want to go back to the question  
304 you asked about how I ended up going back and doing a PhD. This is not quite so  
305 honorable. I thought probably I would go back and get some scientific training so  
306 I could go into academic medicine, but the army was interested in me. This was  
307 1962. I hadn't really thought past the internship. I was headed for neurology, but  
308 I got called for a physical during my internship. It seemed that pursuing a PhD  
309 would be a prudent course for staying out of the army. I was motivated mainly by  
310 an aversion to wasting two years of my life and taking orders from people I didn't  
311 respect. I say this now with embarrassment, but that's the truth of the matter  
312 under those circumstances. So I scrambled around and I was told that there was a  
313 chance that if I went to a PhD program I could get a 2S deferment as a student,  
314 which I did. I went to see Jim Watson, who was chairman of biochemistry and  
315 molecular biology at Harvard, it was a merged department. I discovered he'd had  
316 my draft board; he was from the south side here, and they wanted to send him to  
317 Korea when he wanted to go to Cambridge and work on DNA. He, at the last  
318 minute, managed to get a deferment out of them. I was astonished because to look  
319 at him you'd think he barely knows how to tie his shoes, but he was fairly savvy  
320 about these things and he wrote a letter to the draft board.

321

322 Swazey: It's hard to picture him in basic training!

**Leon Kass**  
**Acadia Institute Project on Bioethics in American Society**  
**page 17**

323      Kass:            Exactly! But he did write a letter to the draft board and I was accepted at Harvard.  
324                            In the fall of 1963 I was back in the classroom and then two or three very  
325                            interesting things happened. I forget what the trigger for this stuff was; I guess it  
326                            must've been the civil rights movement. Amy and I went to Mississippi in 1965,  
327                            not the terrible summer of 1964, but the year after. I went with the Medical  
328                            Committee for Human Rights and Amy came along. We went ostensibly to do  
329                            community organizing around issues of health in the Delta. Jack Geiger, whom  
330                            you may know, organized this, and Al Pouissant who's now a psychiatric expert  
331                            on these and other subjects, was a young physician in Jackson, Mississippi. Right.  
332                            We went to Mississippi for five weeks and it became pretty clear when we got  
333                            down there that health was a marginal issue and politics was the real issue. Amy  
334                            and I lived with a black farmer and his wife in Holmes County, no hot water in the  
335                            house, the toilet was an outhouse. I took a bath outdoors once a week by filling  
336                            up an iron tub, built a fire and boiled water outside and jumped into this thing.  
337                            They watched television, however, inside with spic and span kitchens. I couldn't  
338                            figure out what the hell they made of this. It was a very important experience, and  
339                            when we came back to Harvard at the end of the summer, we wrote a seven-page,  
340                            single-spaced letter for fund raising for the Mississippi Freedom Democratic  
341                            Party, which was trying to get seated and challenge the Democratic Party. But this  
342                            time in Mississippi would change my entire worldview. I came back from that

**Leon Kass**  
**Acadia Institute Project on Bioethics in American Society**  
**page 18**

343 trip with this pressing question: how come there was more dignity and honor, and  
344 decency, and general reverence in these ignorant black farmers in Mississippi with  
345 whom we lived, than in my privileged fellow graduate students at Harvard? If  
346 everything I'd been taught was true, namely that the more people become  
347 educated and the more they become prosperous, they throw off superstition and  
348 poverty and the various things that beat people down, the more you will see them  
349 flowering into the kind of perfect creatures that they are by nature, made worse  
350 only by faulty society. I didn't learn this view from books, but it was the tacit  
351 Enlightenment view of my home and my rearing. But if the trouble with human  
352 beings were only external by caused, say by prejudice and oppression, and if they  
353 would disappear once you fixed those things, it didn't scan that among all these  
354 privileged people at Harvard. There wasn't one who you want your sister to  
355 marry, if you had a sister. I hung out with a bunch of left liberals. We had a  
356 regular Sunday softball game, Marty Peretz, Sam Bowles, Mark Ptashne, Fox  
357 Butterfield, all the right people. We played softball every Sunday morning and  
358 these guys were limousine liberals before the term was invented. They sat and  
359 simply drooled over the advertisements in the Sunday New York Times  
360 Magazine, but they had all the right opinions. Ptashne was doing his terrific work  
361 on the lambda repressor. He'd come over to Bloch's lab to use our scintillation  
362 counter, and a more arrogant, fellow you'd never want to see! "My work is

**Leon Kass**  
**Acadia Institute Project on Bioethics in American Society**  
**page 19**

363 important, get your stuff out of the machine!” I just began to wonder...this really  
364 goes back to the kind of sentiments of my home. I had always had a kind of  
365 suspicion of wealth and prosperity. I believed in personal integrity, and I thought  
366 that holding yourself to high standards and holding yourself to account mattered,  
367 and that you didn’t make excuses for yourself. And that’s the way I saw these  
368 farmers in Mississippi. At this point, my closest friend from this college, a fellow  
369 named Harvey Flanmenhaft, who had studied political philosophy -- he’s been at  
370 St. John’s in Annapolis since 1968, he’s now the dean on the Annapolis campus --  
371 he studied political philosophy here. He said, “There’s something I’ve got for you  
372 to read.” And he gave me Rousseau’s First Discourse on the Arts and Sciences,  
373 which argues that - not only in his time, but as a kind of permanent law - progress  
374 in the arts and sciences, or enlightenment, necessarily brings in its train the  
375 debasement of taste and the decline of morals. If you are interested in morality  
376 and character, you’re not a friend of progress, and you certainly are not a friend of  
377 popular enlightenment. That’s too crude for Rousseau’s Final view, but that’s  
378 certainly the surface picture of the Discourse. Boy, was I ready for that! I was  
379 just fresh from this experience. If it wasn’t really true that there is a certain  
380 friendship between progress and morals, between scientific and moral progress,  
381 then I faced a real question, whereas up until this point, I had held what I thought  
382 were just self-evident answers. This is the summer of 1966; Harvey gave us this

**Leon Kass**  
**Acadia Institute Project on Bioethics in American Society**  
**page 20**

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

**Leon Kass**  
**Acadia Institute Project on Bioethics in American Society**  
**page 21**

403 the realm of the flesh.

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

418 I finished my dissertation in the spring of 1967, our first child had been  
419 born the December before, the army was interested in me again. I got into the  
420 public health service with a station at NIH a day or two ahead of my draft notice.  
421 In retrospect, this is again not something I'm especially proud of, but that's the  
422 way it was. I wound up working for Gordon Tomkins. At Harvard I was a

**Leon Kass**  
**Acadia Institute Project on Bioethics in American Society**  
**page 22**

423 student of Konrad Bloch's and Bloch was of the old school. Unlike these  
424 molecular biology hot shots who were setting the world on fire, Bloch was  
425 temperamentally conservative. I liked him enormously. I had just great regard for  
426 his person and his human way. But at NIH I ended up in the company of the hot  
427 shots. Gordon I liked but I was relatively unhappy in the lab during the first  
428 months. I missed Harvard. At the very end of my time there some research had  
429 gone very, very well and I wanted to carry it with me, but there wasn't much  
430 opportunity to do so. Then a funny thing happened shortly after I arrived. After  
431 about six months I changed labs and worked for Michael Yarmolinsky, I was  
432 much happier there. Joshua Lederberg had a weekly column in The Washington  
433 Post on science and society, I think it ran on Saturdays. These columns used to  
434 infuriate me. Lederberg was enormously smart, but he was willing to think the  
435 unthinkable about human affairs with no regard for what he would've called  
436 conventional, and other people would've called traditional, moral sensibilities.  
437 This just generally rankled me. Then in the fall of 1967, he had a column on  
438 human cloning called "Unpredictable Variety Still Rules Human Reproduction,"  
439 in which he imagines how we might be able to do better through cloning human  
440 beings than we now do through the chance of sexual union. This was shortly after  
441 the frog cloning experiments, by J.D. Gurdon in England. Lederberg was  
442 spinning out what this could mean for us humanly speaking. This particular

**Leon Kass**  
**Acadia Institute Project on Bioethics in American Society**  
**page 23**

443 column really set my teeth on edge. So I went around the lab and I tried to  
444 arrange for a group of people who would be willing, on a regular basis, to write  
445 columns for The Post to answer Lederberg. Three or four guys volunteered to join  
446 me. So I wrote a reply to The Post. I wrote a letter to the editor, which they  
447 printed, attacking Lederberg. I accompanied it with a little note to the then  
448 manager of the “Outlook” section, Howard Simons, saying, “Look, a bunch of us  
449 at NIH are willing to join issues with Lederberg, on a regular basis. Don’t you  
450 think it would be a nice idea to have these scientific things debated?” They  
451 invited me to lunch. It was Howard Simons and, I think, Ben Bradles was the  
452 other. They were very interested in this and said, “Let’s do it!” In December of  
453 1967, I think I’ve got the dates right, there was the first heart transplant, by  
454 Christian Barnard. Lederberg rushes to the “Outlook” section with the front page,  
455 full-page story on how wonderful heart transplants are going to be. So I went  
456 around the lab and asked, “Anybody want to respond?” And it turned out that no  
457 one was really interested, their research was too interesting. It was a matter of  
458 shame, it was put up or shut up. I’ve made this bravado offer to The Post and here  
459 this is. So I wrote what (apart from this short letter on cloning) was my first  
460 venture. It was called “A Caveat on Transplants,” it appeared in January of 1968  
461 in the “Outlook” section. The first draft was abysmal! My friend Flaumenhaft  
462 went over it with a blue pencil, somewhere in the files I have his corrections. I’d

**Leon Kass**  
**Acadia Institute Project on Bioethics in American Society**  
**page 24**

463           been a lousy writer in college. I never thought I'd have to write. My language  
464           was Latinate and Harvey just beat the bejeezus out of this article! It went through  
465           several drafts. The Post did publish it.

466                       Right after that there was an article that appeared in the Post, a little, tiny  
467           article that said, "Princeton Professor of Ethics to Visit Georgetown." This  
468           would've been sometime early in 1968; there was a picture of Paul Ramsey, he's  
469           coming to Georgetown to work on his books. He was going to conduct seminars,  
470           so I called Georgetown to ask if it would be possible for me to attend these things.  
471           I had read some things by Ramsey's before. I got turned down. So I wrote  
472           Ramsey a letter saying that I saw that he was coming to Washington, to be at  
473           Georgetown, I had read something of his that had impressed me very much, and I  
474           would very much like the opportunity to meet him during his time in Washington.  
475           And I sent him a copy of the transplant paper. The next thing I know I'm invited  
476           to the first luncheon meeting with Ramsey at Georgetown. He had called Andre  
477           Hellegers and told Andre to invite me. I got a nice note back from Ramsey saying  
478           that someone else had, in fact, sent him my column from the "Outlook" section  
479           and he was looking forward to getting together. I think I have got the dates right, I  
480           think this was the spring of 1968. These were wonderful seminars. What would  
481           happen was some doctor or researcher would come in and make a kind of  
482           presentation on science or the clinical situation as he saw it, and Paul would then

**Leon Kass**  
**Acadia Institute Project on Bioethics in American Society**  
**page 25**

483 lead the conversation, raising these ethical questions. There were about ten or  
484 twelve people in the room. He was wonderful! He had this desire to simply  
485 understand things, and to learn things. He was a good polemicist but he wanted  
486 no cheap shots. I always complained to him later that, in his writings, he treated  
487 people much better than they deserved. He wanted to understand medical ethics  
488 and bioethics from the practitioner's point of view before he had anything further  
489 to say about it. During this time - he came again the next year - he was working  
490 on two books. One was Fabricated Man, the three essays on reproductive  
491 technologies. The other was The Patient as Person. He once asked me, would I  
492 mind reading a chapter of what was then to be Fabricated Man? I don't remember  
493 which essay it was. I think it could've been the one on cloning, just to check for  
494 its scientific accuracy. This was the beginning of my education in this matter. I  
495 read this draft over with great care. I never really liked his English prose; it had  
496 something of a Southern itinerant preacher's mode. So I scribbled my notes in the  
497 margins. He resided in a rented coach house somewhere in Georgetown, and I  
498 went with great nervousness to visit him and discuss my comments. We talked  
499 for about four hours and there wasn't any comment that I had made in the margin  
500 that he didn't treat with absolute seriousness. As a result of this exchange I got all  
501 the other chapters in draft from both of those volumes, and each one became the  
502 occasion of a night at his apartment. We just talked and talked. I acquired a sense

**Leon Kass**  
**Acadia Institute Project on Bioethics in American Society**  
**page 26**

503 that it's possible about these matters not just to have intuitions but you can have  
504 arguments. That there is a way of developing a position on these sorts of things,  
505 and to defend it, and to ground it. We didn't exactly see eye to eye on certain  
506 foundational things.

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

521

522 Swazey: We've had a number of people say to us that Patient as Person has no trace of Paul

**Leon Kass**  
**Acadia Institute Project on Bioethics in American Society**  
**page 27**

523 Ramsey, the Christian Protestant ethicist.

524

525 Kass: I don't think that's right.

526

527 Swazey: As you said, it doesn't say in every other sentence, "I am a Christian...blah, blah,  
528 blah," but it's in there.

529

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

**Leon Kass**  
**Acadia Institute Project on Bioethics in American Society**  
**page 28**

543 hands and eventually pronouncing the ethicist's blessings upon the inevitable.  
544 That's my gloss on it, but the first part is his. I admired that greatly, it resonated  
545 with my own moral sensibilities as a child where there were certain things...this  
546 you didn't do!

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

556  
557 Swazey: They were probably having a better time than you were!

558  
559 Kass: Yes! Anyhow, he had suggested that I read this essay by Hans Jonas called, "Is  
560 God a Mathematician?" It's the third essay in The Phenomenon of Life. And in  
561 addition to the kind of moral questions that were being raised by the new  
562 technologies, the reductionism of the science was interesting me. I remember

**Leon Kass**  
**Acadia Institute Project on Bioethics in American Society**  
**page 29**

563 trying to provoke conversations at NIH about whether they called viruses alive,  
564 questions of what actually makes for aliveness, and I found absolutely nobody  
565 interested in these things. So Flaumenhaft said, “Hey, have a look at this essay by  
566 Jonas, ‘Is God a Mathematician?, On the Meaning of Metabolism.’” This  
567 would’ve been the summer of 1968 or 1969. I took The Phenomenon of Life with  
568 me for vacation. Boy, was it hard reading for me at that time! I stood on my  
569 intellectual tiptoes trying to make sense of what was going on here, but the result  
570 of it was just exhilarating. This was a guy who was able to philosophize about  
571 biology, not so much about the moral questions, but about what a living thing  
572 was. He did so with due regard for hierarchy; he didn’t simply call some things  
573 more complicated than others but some things were genuinely fuller and richer  
574 and higher than others. He talked about teleology, he talked about form. It wasn’t  
575 a return to Aristotle, but it was a more philosophical foundation that was perfectly  
576 compatible with the findings of modern science. In the fall of 1969 I organized  
577 what was to have been the first annual, but was in fact the first and last, NIH  
578 Symposium on the Ethical Implications of...I guess it was on neuro- and  
579 psychobiology. I should really dig this out because this was quite an event; part of  
580 my purpose in doing this was that I wanted to invite Jonas. He came to be the  
581 moderator of the whole thing. B.F. Skinner came, and I invited a man from  
582 Chicago named George Anastapo who is a maverick political philosopher, and he

**Leon Kass**  
**Acadia Institute Project on Bioethics in American Society**  
**page 30**

583 mopped the floor with Skinner. He just destroyed him by cross questioning him  
584 in a kind of Socratic way. It was perfectly clear to the meanest intelligence  
585 Skinner just couldn't think his way out of a paper bag. We had Gardner Quarten  
586 from the University of Michigan, and Herbert Vaughn, who was the neuroscientist  
587 from Einstein involved in the Hastings Center from the beginning, but who later  
588 dropped out. Walter Mondale came to do the public policy talk. Also Goddard,  
589 was that the guy that was the head of the Food and Drug Administration?

590

591 Swazey: Yes, Jim Goddard.

592

593 Kass: It was a big, big meeting in Building 10, the big auditorium...I think over two  
594 days. I was very excited by this, and I'm a young squirt, it's the fall of 1969.  
595 Very, very exciting discussions and it was the beginning of a long association with  
596 Jonas, who although I never took classes from him, we became quite close. I  
597 guess I'm missing some dates because I think the organizational meetings at  
598 Hastings had already started. I think they began in the beginning of 1969, earlier  
599 that year. I was at those first meetings on Paul's recommendation. The meeting  
600 at NIH was in the fall. But around that time, on behalf of the Hastings Center, I  
601 went to the National Research Council to find out what the committee on the Life  
602 Sciences and Social Policy was doing. I think Dan had asked me to go find out

**Leon Kass**  
**Acadia Institute Project on Bioethics in American Society**  
**page 31**

603 what these guys are doing. I went down there and, at the end of the 45 minute  
604 conversation in which I discovered they weren't doing anything because the staff  
605 person had been promoted, the fellow offered me the job to run this committee as  
606 the staff person. I said no. My friends said, don't leave science. But I'm kicking  
607 myself, and kicking myself, a couple of months pass by and I ask them if the job is  
608 still open. They said yes. So on April Fool's Day of 1970 I left the lab with a  
609 one-year leave of absence to go work as the Executive Secretary of the  
610 Committee. There's actually a good story to be told about this Committee and its  
611 report, a story on which I've sat for twenty five years. Milton Katz of the Harvard  
612 Law School was the chairman, Robin Williams, the sociologist from Cornell,  
613 Tom Schelling at Harvard, Gardner Lindsey from the University of Texas, David  
614 Hamburg from Stanford. Arthur Galston, and Everett Mendelsohn were members  
615 of the Committee, and Arnold Motulsky, and Marian Pearsall at Kentucky.  
616 Anyhow, I went around and interviewed all these various members of the  
617 Committee. The antecedent to this Committee was the Committee on Technology  
618 Assessment; the staff person of that committee was Larry Tribe, and Milton Katz  
619 had been a member. Milton's view was that the main purpose of the Committee  
620 on the Life Sciences was the education and training of Leon Kass. He thought  
621 that what I would do with my career was much more important than the impact of  
622 this report. He wanted to get the report done, but he saw this as an opportunity for

**Leon Kass**  
**Acadia Institute Project on Bioethics in American Society**  
**page 32**

623 a career change for me. I was taking a one-year leave. The original committee  
624 was somewhat detached from the project, and so, what I wound up doing, with  
625 Milton's help and advice, was recruiting an intensive summer study group that  
626 met at Dartmouth, a two week conference in August 1971 in Hanover. It included  
627 some of the members of the original Committee and some additional people that I  
628 wanted to bring in: Herb Vaughn, Andre Hellegers, Ted Cooper, Raymond  
629 Bowers, Bob Morison, with whom I'd become fairly close at Hastings. We spent  
630 two weeks at Dartmouth working on this stuff. I wrote this report with two hands  
631 tied behind my back. We had to write it in such a way that not only would the  
632 working group sign off on it but the original committee would sign it.

633  
634 Swazey: Bill Carey used to say that it was easier getting something out of the Vatican than  
635 out of the Academy.

636  
637 Kass: But this was terrible, this was very badly timed. Just before our report was to  
638 come up, just before, someone had leaked the report on the SST to the press and it  
639 was a huge embarrassment to the Academy. As a result, they established the  
640 Report Review Committee to review and approve all reports issued under The  
641 Academy's auspices. There hadn't been such a body before and ours one of the  
642 first documents to come up for review. I'd finished the report in September of

**Leon Kass**  
**Acadia Institute Project on Bioethics in American Society**  
**page 33**

643 1972, but the publication date is 1975. It was censored, it was censored by the  
644 Academy. This was a wonderfully ironic suppression of much vaunted freedom  
645 of inquiry about which scientists have prided themselves and for which they have  
646 looked down their nose at the persecutors of Galileo. At this time there were two  
647 such cases cooking in the Academy. There was our report, I have all the  
648 documents, and someday I really should get it out and write it up. The Report  
649 Review Committee was saying, "If this thing gets out, Congress will never  
650 appropriate another penny for biomedical research," that kind of naive, self-  
651 serving mentality. At the same time, Mr. Shockley was interested in getting the  
652 Academy to do a study on race and IQ, and they appoint Dobzhansky the  
653 chairman of a small committee to decide whether this is a question that the  
654 Academy ought to allow to be researched. The Dobzhansky report was really  
655 quite brilliant. It, in effect, said that there is nothing good that can come out of  
656 this. If you are interested in this case, you should look Dobzhansky's report up.  
657 It's a statesmen-like, wonderful treatment. But here you have the vaunted  
658 Academy censoring one kind of research because it's potentially explosive -  
659 culturally, racially, politically. And they sit on our report because it's going to  
660 look bad for science to raise questions about where science is taking us. At the  
661 same time there is a dissent at the end of my report. Two members of my  
662 committee, who never did me the courtesy of sending me any written comments

**Leon Kass**  
**Acadia Institute Project on Bioethics in American Society**  
**page 34**

663 on the drafts through the whole time I was sending them stuff back, when the  
664 thing is finally done write a dissent. Joe Goldstein, who recently died, and Arthur  
665 Galston, who is still active at Yale, dissenting by saying, “This is the most mealy-  
666 mouthed...this doesn’t tell you anything.” So on the one hand you’ve got the  
667 scientists of the Academy complaining that this is terrible stuff and it’s killing  
668 science. And these other guys saying, “This doesn’t say anything. It’s milk toast  
669 light.” I’m struggling in the middle. I had a really good book in me to write at  
670 that time. There are four chapters in here: on in vitro reproductive technologies;  
671 on choosing the sex of children, that Tom Schelling and I wrote together; on  
672 retardation of aging, the conquest of mortality; and on behavior control through  
673 drugs, behavior modification and psychosurgery. What eventually got published  
674 is a mutilated form of the original. And even the original is not the book I  
675 would’ve written had I been able to write it in my own name. It just killed me,  
676 this whole process. I eventually wrote pieces on this and that topic. But I had  
677 wanted to do a book. I really had the zeal for it, I had the data for it, but because I  
678 had to write for other people I lost a good chance. I’m not sorry, but it was a very  
679 important learning experience. By the way, there is a guy that’s done an oral  
680 history of this stuff, Charles Weiner at MIT. I sent him a box of all of my stuff  
681 which he kept for two or three years or something like that, I got it back from him  
682 about two years ago. He was more interested in the part that I played in the

**Leon Kass**  
**Acadia Institute Project on Bioethics in American Society**  
**page 35**

683 Asilomar business, which is sort of an accidental thing. I think it was while I was  
684 working for the Academy that I met Paul Berg at a dinner at Maxine Singer's. He  
685 was just starting on the recombinant DNA research and I sent him a four-page,  
686 single-spaced letter analyzing the issues. Somewhere in the files I have it.  
687 Apparently that played some important part in his own thinking.

688           Anyhow, I stayed at the Academy for two and a half years. My friends  
689 told me, don't leave science. It was really as if...it would be the equivalent of  
690 what the Rabbis would've said if I told them I was becoming Catholic, it was that  
691 kind of sense of betrayal. Eventually, by the way, the report got published,  
692 because the Academy had received NSF funding for part of our project and NSF  
693 finally said to the Academy, "Look, you publish it, or we will." And so the  
694 Academy didn't publish it, they printed it. They printed, I think, 300 copies. It's  
695 an interesting story. I have all the letters, the letters back from the Report Review  
696 Committee. My sense was that this was the way the process worked and it was  
697 improper of me to run to the newspapers. I joined this organization and this is the  
698 way they do things. Eventually, if all the people are dead, it's an interesting  
699 vignette about the scientific mind set. I also, during the last year I worked at the  
700 Academy, was offered a part-time teaching job. I gave a couple of public lectures.  
701 One of the things Milton Katz didn't mind my doing during this time was to write  
702 in my own name. So while I'm working on this report, two things of mine are

**Leon Kass**  
**Acadia Institute Project on Bioethics in American Society**  
**page 36**

703 published in Science. One is an overview essay, which in fact was.... Now it  
704 becomes clear to me! I wrote a position paper for my Academy/Research Council  
705 Committee, laying out the issues as I saw them. It became the essay, "The New  
706 Biology: What Price Relieving Man's Estate."

707

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

709

710 Kass: It was an attempt to somehow organize the issues as I then saw them. I was also  
711 asked to give a public lecture at St. John's College at Annapolis in January of  
712 1971. I gave that lecture. Robert Goldwin, who was then the dean, asked if I  
713 would be interested in teaching part-time there, which I started doing in 1972. I  
714 think Jim Gustafson nominated me for a Guggenheim, which I won, one of those  
715 years. And Irving Kristol had the ear of the chairman of NEH, Ron Berman and  
716 NEH got me a one-year, I had to apply for it, but I got funding for a year to do  
717 research on philosophy of organism. That would've been 1972-73 and 1973-74,  
718 so having finished with the Academy I had two years to study and do part-time  
719 teaching at St. John's and we moved to Annapolis in 1971, when my second  
720 daughter was born. So I'm now sort of soaking up the culture of Annapolis,  
721 hanging out there an awful lot. In some ways the real broadening of my education  
722 began there. I had to teach the great books of Ancient Greece, reading most of

**Leon Kass**  
**Acadia Institute Project on Bioethics in American Society**  
**page 37**

723                   them for the first time the day before I had to go to the seminars. Teaching is not  
724                   the right word, you're not really responsible for teaching those books, you are  
725                   responsible for trying to be the occasion of the students' learning, asking good  
726                   questions.

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

738  
739       Swazey:       I was on that one.

740  
741       Kass:         Dan did the population stuff and I did the death and dying stuff. The meetings of  
742                   that group were really outstanding. Paul Ramsey, Hans Jonas, Eric Cassell, Bob

**Leon Kass**  
**Acadia Institute Project on Bioethics in American Society**  
**page 38**

743 Morrison, Bob Veatch, who was the staff of that committee. We recruited Alex  
744 Capron, there was a fellow named Bob Stevenson who worked out at American-  
745 type Culture Collection, who had been at NIH, who was connected with the  
746 Uniform Anatomical Gift Act. The Sadler brothers were active, although they  
747 didn't do very much. We recruited Bill May.

748

749 Swazey: I always wished I had opted for that group instead of the behavior modification  
750 group.

751

752 Kass: Those were wonderful, wonderful meetings! And Henry Beecher was also a  
753 member. So the first projects were something on the definition of death; the  
754 people who called that a new definition of organ donor eligibility were absolutely  
755 right. We did an assessment of the Harvard Committee's report, which was  
756 ethically a junk heap, the reasoning in that was really pretty bad. Then we did  
757 something, shortly thereafter, on the statutory definition of death where Alex and I  
758 wrote a paper that was published in 1972. So that was a very, very important  
759 time. I think I was getting more stimulation out of Hastings than out of the  
760 Academy group. Between the work at Hastings and the kind of great books  
761 reading though St. John's, that was a terribly exciting and important formative  
762 time for me.

**Leon Kass**  
**Acadia Institute Project on Bioethics in American Society**  
**page 39**

763 Swazey: Let me jump ahead and talk about what led to your disenchantment with Hastings.

764

765 Kass: Well, I guess I would have to say that I was on the losing end of some of the  
766 arguments at the beginning of the Hastings Center about how it should develop. I  
767 don't think I was right in those arguments, in terms of the success of the Center. I  
768 think had I prevailed the Center would've not gone to develop the reputation and  
769 influence, such as it is, that it has. I was more interested in the Center's doing  
770 more fundamental work on questions of human nature and its normative  
771 implications. It seemed to me that the challenge of the scientific discoveries to  
772 our basic ethical notions were deeper and greater than the practical problems  
773 caused by the technologies and that the Center ought to devote a fair amount of its  
774 attention to those things, the stuff that Jonas would've been interested in, the stuff  
775 that I was interested in, and Ramsey in his own way. But lots of the people who  
776 joined early were eager for making a public policy difference. Dan, himself, I  
777 think while saying that the important questions were more fundamental, thought  
778 that the right stance was somehow as a bridge between the truly fundamental  
779 things and the everyday practical things. Partly for the need to attract funding, and  
780 partly I think because of the accident of who the players came to be in the early,  
781 and especially in the not quite so early, days. In the next phase I think that the  
782 Center moved too rapidly for my taste into playing the tune that those who paid

**Leon Kass**  
**Acadia Institute Project on Bioethics in American Society**  
**page 40**

783 the piper were calling. I'm not sure that I can recover all of these sorts of things  
784 but my political sensibilities became...certainly relatively more conservative. On  
785 some questions I haven't changed my mind at all. My thoughts about the racial  
786 questions are the same as they were, but if you believe in integration you're now a  
787 neanderthal. If the cutting edge is multi-culturalism, I'm not there. But it seemed  
788 to me that the standard operative notions in the Hastings Center were the notions  
789 of a certain kind of strictly secular, highly analytic, and rather left wing, left-  
790 liberal. It reflected the academy. The generation that came into ascendancy in the  
791 field (after the old-timers who helped start it) were not attracted to bioethics by  
792 the same concerns that moved those that got it started. I would regularly complain  
793 to Dan, "Where are you getting these guys from?" on the staff. He said, "Look,  
794 I'd like to hire different people but they're just not showing up! They are coming  
795 from the universities in these and these ways." I remember an application for a  
796 fellowship, when the Hastings Center got some money for year long fellowships,  
797 and I remember they were circulating the vitae and recommendations. The Rabbi  
798 J. David Bleich, who now writes in bioethics was a candidate for a fellowship for  
799 one summer. Jim Gustafson was on the committee, I was, and it was passed  
800 through the hands of the staff. One member of the staff wrote a comment, "What  
801 does this Orthodox Rabbi have to offer on the subject of contemporary bioethics?"  
802 Jim Gustafson in a kind of wonderful response said he ventured to say that the

**Leon Kass**  
**Acadia Institute Project on Bioethics in American Society**  
**page 41**

803 tradition represented by this Rabbi will be around a lot longer, when all of the  
804 current readings in bioethics have been forgotten. I can no longer remember, but I  
805 think he did get a fellowship.

806           There was another very important thing, and if Renée were here I would  
807 like her to hear this from my mouth! This part is for her! Renée was an outsider  
808 at those early meetings for her insistence on the importance of the cultural  
809 questions. Dan had something of a feel for this. This is worth a long discussion  
810 on a substantive matter, not so much for oral history. I was one of those who  
811 thought that social science had nothing to offer us on this subject. I don't think I  
812 would've said it quite so nakedly, out of politeness, but it seemed to me the  
813 questions were philosophical and ethical, and they were matters of reasoning  
814 things through from first principles. And certainly cross-cultural questions were  
815 interesting in some way but they didn't decide any matters. That cultures differed  
816 about these matters was not the end of the discussion, that was the beginning of  
817 the question: "Who had it right?" Which was a question not for sociology or  
818 anthropology but for maybe philosophy and for ethics. I was wrong. I was  
819 wrong. It seems to me that philosophy that is deaf to cultural matters can't be any  
820 beacon to touch these things. In fact the foundations of morals are much more  
821 deeply imbedded in culture, and that also means in religion, than any of the people  
822 at Hastings in the beginning, with the exception of Renée, would've said. Now, I

**Leon Kass**  
**Acadia Institute Project on Bioethics in American Society**  
**page 42**

823 didn't understand her to think that one was somehow going to look at these things  
824 to help to discover the truth; I still think that there was a certain sort of relativizing  
825 professional cast. I wish she were here. Renée, this is also for you. We had  
826 conversations in those early days, Renée was part of the Death and Dying Task  
827 Force too. How could I forget her! She would say wonderful things in the  
828 meetings and attribute them to her discipline. I would say, "Renée, you're all wet!  
829 This has got nothing to do with your discipline, this has to do with you!" In those  
830 days my hunch was that she was so defensive that she didn't want really to take  
831 any kind of credit. To say that this was somehow her intuitive intelligence would  
832 have been offensive to her, whether it was because she was a woman, or because  
833 she was bucking that view of her profession. She wanted it to look as if it came  
834 out of Talcott Parsons and the profession. It always seemed to me that I knew lots  
835 of people in this profession that couldn't shine her shoes!

836  
837 Swazey: I think that's right. I think some of it clearly is her training in sociology and an  
838 awful lot of it is Renée, who is deeply perceptive, and also deeply spiritual.

839  
840 Kass: Absolutely right! The last time we were together was at a Hastings meeting, I  
841 don't remember which it was, but she talked about the absence of religious  
842 perspectives in bioethics and I realized what a long distance I'd come. Because

**Leon Kass**  
**Acadia Institute Project on Bioethics in American Society**  
**page 43**

843           apart from her and Gil Meilaender, who I'm very close with, and Bill May...in a  
844           way the people in the field of bioethics now to whom I would immediately turn,  
845           turn out, I think not accidentally, to be the students of Paul Ramsey. David Smith,  
846           Bill May, Gil Meilaender, and it has everything to do with the fact that there is a  
847           kind of spiritual depth to these men, and Renée has it too. On that occasion I'm  
848           saying to myself, "You know, she's talking about the heart of the matter." My  
849           own changes on this came about when I realized that I'm sitting worrying about  
850           the effect on our self-conception about what happens to a few spare embryos  
851           when the culture's sexual and family mores are self-destructing right and left.  
852           True, technology plays a part in it, but a tiny part. The history of the influence and  
853           importance of the Pill is yet to be properly written I think.

854  
855   Swazey:    Was this a fellows meeting? Was this a couple of years ago, or longer?

856  
857   Kass:       My memory for the 70's is good, my memory for the 90's is terrible! The meeting  
858           honoring Dan, it was that meeting. It was the talk she gave then in which...my  
859           sense was that this was a voice of wisdom. She always had wise things to say.  
860           I'm not sure whether she thinks her thinking has changed or developed on these  
861           matters. I never got the sense when she used to talk about religion in the early  
862           days that she was talking from the inside; it was mostly you have to sort of pay

**Leon Kass**  
**Acadia Institute Project on Bioethics in American Society**  
**page 44**

863 attention to these things. Maybe if I had, myself, been more attuned to those  
864 matters I would've seen it as less a sociological...less the taxonomist's description  
865 of the scene and more a kind of humanly sensitive, even an insider, but not  
866 necessarily an insider to a particular tradition but a recognition that religion and  
867 culture are intertwined and are the foundations of these matters.

868

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

871

872 Kass: Oh yes. Partly I think it's the impoverishment of the analytic philosophical  
873 tradition when it tries to speak about human matters, partly it's the only, at best,  
874 partial moral truth of the two dominant schools. Utilitarianism and Kantism are  
875 not wrong, but they're wrong in so far as they present a claim to be the whole  
876 thing. Partly it's the view that religious views are sectarian and therefore don't  
877 have a place at the table. Of course, the mainstream "universalists" are unaware  
878 of their own sectarianism. You could've seen it beautifully in the way in which  
879 the Hastings Center handled the AIDs business. Will Gaylin is denounced by the  
880 members of the committee for seeming to raise questions about the moral  
881 responsibility of people who are HIV positive to behave themselves. Matilda  
882 Krim attacks him in print, Ron Bayer attacks him. There was a kind of monolith

**Leon Kass**  
**Acadia Institute Project on Bioethics in American Society**  
**page 45**

883 of opinion. If there had been some people at Hastings who did religious bioethics,  
884 and if we had some regular garden variety conservatives present, there wouldn't  
885 have been this homogeneity of opinion. The Hastings Center goes lock, stock,  
886 and barrel to work for Mrs. Clinton in the health reform, all of those guys are  
887 there.

888  
889 Swazey: Yes, with people like Bill May who I gather was treated terribly by a lot of people  
890 in that group. Pat King talked to me about that. She refused to go to their final  
891 reception and she said she actually stopped going to the meetings because she was  
892 so appalled at how people reacted to Bill trying to get a religious voice in there,  
893 with Art Caplan being about the only philosopher-bioethicist who was arguing  
894 that Bill was right and those views have to get in there. I guess what fascinates  
895 me is the implicit assumption that religious voices in America are too  
896 heterogeneous to sort of bring to the table, which says somehow we think secular  
897 views are homogeneous in this country, which is a bizarre view to begin with.

898  
899 Kass: But it is in those circles.

900  
901 Swazey: Well, if you're in analytic philosophy.

902

**Leon Kass**  
**Acadia Institute Project on Bioethics in American Society**  
**page 46**

903 Kass: Or if you've come out of Harvard, Yale, Princeton, Dartmouth, those places. My  
904 public arguments, even to this day, are not religiously founded. I still am speaking  
905 to the skeptics. But I find that some people simply suspect that I am a  
906 crypto-theologian. Or, they'll say that my concerns are symbolic. The only  
907 important harms are dangers to the body or violations of the will, and therefore  
908 people can't willingly degrade themselves, that's not a category. To go to be a  
909 witness at the National Bioethics Advisory Commission and have the people who  
910 are making the case for the goodness of cloning, people like Ruth Macklin and  
911 John Robertson, on bioethical grounds, says to me that mainstream bioethics is  
912 weird. It's just very strange. It would be worth something perhaps for me to  
913 unearth this paper on "Practicing Ethics, Where is the Action?" because that really  
914 argues that ethics is not a theoretical subject that begins with abstract principles  
915 which you then imply and practice. That's really what's wrong with the way in  
916 which the Childress-Beauchamp thing works. The other school of ethics is that  
917 ethics is reflection on practice and the heart of ethics is not rules, but mores and  
918 habits and sensibilities. It's this latter view of ethics which really thinks about  
919 how opinions are formed, how characters are shaped. It winds up, therefore,  
920 being really a cultural matter in which the moral sensibilities and teachings have a  
921 large part to play. If you think ethics is a branch of philosophy first and foremost,  
922 if you figure things out in an abstract way and then you get down to cases and you

**Leon Kass**  
**Acadia Institute Project on Bioethics in American Society**  
**page 47**

923           apply your principles, that's just not the way the world runs. It's not the way  
924           people live their lives, it's not the way their intuitions are formed, it's not where  
925           their beliefs come from, it's not where their characters are formed. This paper  
926           was, in effect, a critique of the entire abstract rationalist way of doing bioethics,  
927           which I don't think was designed that way to keep the religious sensibilities out,  
928           but if that's what you think ethics is this other kind of stuff just doesn't cut it.

929

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

935

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

940

941       Swazey:       When you're told, directly or indirectly, that social science isn't "useful," then you  
942                       know you don't have a place at the table. That was what happened with me and

**Leon Kass**  
**Acadia Institute Project on Bioethics in American Society**  
**page 48**

943           Renée at Hastings, which is why we resigned as fellows, there was no role for us  
944           to play.

945  
946   Kass:       I think there would've been a time when I would've been a member of the  
947           offending outlook. This is a long argument about the describing what is, not to  
948           say what should be. On the other hand, you'd be an idiot to try to think about  
949           what *should* be in any kind of practical way without paying attention to what *is*. I  
950           suspect that I was not at that particular time sufficiently thoughtful about those  
951           matters. I really thought the urgent thing was to somehow figure out human  
952           nature, in this chaotic time when human nature was on the table for dissection and  
953           remaking, and where the basic values that we would rely on to make the  
954           judgements were, themselves, under assault. That the urgent task was a problem  
955           of philosophical anthropology and that the moral foundation was not of the  
956           principlist sort, because the principlism descends from Kantianism and from a  
957           certain analytical logical mode. I only thought that if you could figure out the  
958           nature of the human, that would have normative pointings. I still think to some  
959           extent you can do that. I don't know that you know this, I'm working on a book  
960           on Genesis. I've changed sides.

961  
962   Swazey:     How long have you been working on it?

**Leon Kass**  
**Acadia Institute Project on Bioethics in American Society**  
**page 49**

963 Kass: Off and on for probably five or six years. This probably warms the heart of some  
964 deceased grandparent, or great grandparent who I never knew. I describe it as a  
965 laid-on rabbinic gene!

966  
967 Swazey: Didn't you say one of your grandfathers was highly observant?

968  
969 Kass: He was observant; he died when I was three.

970  
971 Swazey: Is there a point where you characterized yourself as a bioethicist?

972  
973 Kass: No. The word "ethicist," I use it but I don't like it. There were probably times  
974 when I would correct people and then I just out of fatigue....

975  
976 Swazey: You give up after a while. I have, Renée has, Alex has.

977  
978 Kass: Yes. I've done much less in the field, too though I'm somewhat tempted to have  
979 another go-round. I took my own advice to heart when I really concluded that the  
980 practical problems of what you do with organ transplants or in vitro fertilization  
981 are somehow less important than the search for ethical foundations and to look for  
982 a more natural science. So the Genesis book was a search to try to do that, to

**Leon Kass**  
**Acadia Institute Project on Bioethics in American Society**  
**page 50**

983 build bridges between a richer understanding of nature that might have some  
984 moral pointings, not in the sense that it would give you specific rules of conduct.  
985 I can't read the bioethics literature, I hate it. I just can't read it. You probably  
986 have to as a profession.

987

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

991

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

998

999 Swazey: Yes.

1000

1001 Kass: This is Trinity University. This is a different stripe. Very explicitly religiously  
1002 grounded. There is a real gravity, and I have a feeling that some way they knew

**Leon Kass**  
**Acadia Institute Project on Bioethics in American Society**  
**page 51**

1003 what was at stake in this business. Whereas, my sense that the main field of  
1004 bioethics is content really to do the fine tuning around the edges, yell and scream  
1005 about certain kinds of issues of distributive justice or violations of autonomy.  
1006 But, on all of the other large things they are willing to say, “Well, these are  
1007 dangers of abuse here and we’ll write good regulations and we’ll keep things in  
1008 line.” But that’s partly because I don’t think that most of the people who practice  
1009 bioethics worry about the abolition of man. I don’t think they worry about the  
1010 question of what this means, or if they do, they don’t want to be on the losing side  
1011 of history. An interesting story can be told about the role of bioethics experts and  
1012 the various government panels that have pronounced on fetal research, or embryo  
1013 research, or the National Bioethics Advisory Commission, including present  
1014 leadership at Hastings. Art Caplan recently had a conference on extended life and  
1015 eternal life at Penn, sponsored with the Templeton Foundation. Here are these  
1016 Templeton people with gobs of money and interested in religion but they don’t  
1017 want to say anything religious that would offend science, so they’re looking for a  
1018 kind of marriage on the cheap in which science is good and religion is good, so  
1019 there can’t really be any problem between them. We’re going to have both sides  
1020 meeting, and you get a bunch of theologians pronouncing God’s blessings on  
1021 bodily immortality on the grounds that if people live longer they would become  
1022 more pious. You sort of scratch your head and you wonder who’s been buying

**Leon Kass**  
**Acadia Institute Project on Bioethics in American Society**  
**page 52**

1023 these people off? A guy named Peters from the Berkeley Graduate Theological  
1024 Union, a fellow named Cole Turner. I came home from this meeting and was  
1025 actually inspired to do something as a result of it. I'm thinking maybe much of  
1026 my stuff on this was premature. I didn't develop it all that well. As I said, I lost  
1027 one book in the Committee on Life Sciences report. So I'm tempted, maybe after  
1028 this Genesis project, to come back and re-educate myself on the science, much of  
1029 which I've not been up to speed on and revisit the question of the meaning for our  
1030 humanity of all this stuff that we're doing. Dan was at the Templeton-Penn  
1031 meeting. I made an argument that in effect the decision to choose to be immortal  
1032 is not just one decision amongst many, it's to choose to become a different kind of  
1033 being altogether. I went on to talk about something about humanity. Dan and I  
1034 were on the same side of the debate against this snake oil salesman, Lee Silver  
1035 from Princeton, and Cole Turner. Dan said to me afterwards, "You know, I've  
1036 never understood this argument you've made all these thirty years about  
1037 humanization, dehumanization." I scratched my head and said, "Dan, for God's  
1038 sake, that's why we started this business!" His arguments are always in terms of  
1039 social consequences. Dan started the Hastings Center hot on the heels of the  
1040 abortion book. I don't know what he thinks of the abortion book now, but that  
1041 was in fact an attempt to use cross-cultural studies to reach a moral conclusion  
1042 that was a betrayal of his beginnings, whether he would regard it that way or not.

**Leon Kass**  
**Acadia Institute Project on Bioethics in American Society**  
**page 53**

1043 I thought it was an intellectual cop out. A serious bit of hand wringing but for a  
1044 conclusion that was unprincipled. The Hastings Center might have been different  
1045 not been founded by a man who was making his break with his Catholic origins,  
1046 and the other leading person was a man who was culturally Jewish and some of  
1047 his moral sensibilities come from there, but neither of them, it seems to me, really  
1048 with a fine ear for the religious sensibilities, but vastly more than the people that  
1049 they hired as staff down the road.

1050 I remember there were two theologians very active at the beginning,  
1051 Ramsey and Gustafson. Jim was much more influenced by the social sciences and  
1052 much less inclined to try to argue through a firm ethical conclusion. He once said  
1053 to me, when I was having a rather frank talk with him about his stuff and Paul's  
1054 stuff, "Well, somebody said to me Ramsey's right about ethics but Gustafson's  
1055 right about counseling." In effect, what he was saying was he was somehow more  
1056 in tune to the human dimensions to these things though Paul might have gotten  
1057 the arguments right. Jim's Christian identity was less in evidence in the bioethics  
1058 business than was Ramsey's, but it was still somewhat present. After that, even  
1059 their very students, and I would say in the beginning it was true of Bill May -- his  
1060 original contributions came less out of his theological background and more out of  
1061 a certain great insight into literature. He read things that nobody else read. He  
1062 would come at things out of novels and various sociological works, so you

**Leon Kass**  
**Acadia Institute Project on Bioethics in American Society**  
**page 54**

1063                   couldn't really tell that this was a Protestant theologian talking in the early days.  
1064                   But almost everybody else that came, and Jim Childress would've been the  
1065                   classical example, almost as if it were a matter of principle, hid his religious  
1066                   sensibilities at the door when he entered the conversation. It was as if somebody  
1067                   had tacitly set the rules and if you don't play on secular grounds you're self-  
1068                   declaring yourself as illegitimate. That to speak out of your own tradition was  
1069                   narrow, parochial. You had to find not only a universal language but, to some  
1070                   extent, the more abstract and desiccated the better, because you couldn't somehow  
1071                   be suspected, as I've always been suspected, of being a crypto-Catholic. When  
1072                   you start talking about nature and Aristotle it looks like you're the Pope's advance  
1073                   man. So I remember berating these guys. Jim came to Georgetown, before he  
1074                   moved back here to Chicago in 1976. I had two years at the Kennedy Institute and  
1075                   Jim Childress was there the second of those years. Even in the in-house  
1076                   conversations, I couldn't figure out why in the world this guy, this student of Jim  
1077                   Gustafson, talks as if he's the lowest common denominator logician. He's a very  
1078                   sober and a very rational, careful fellow. I like him, by the way, I like him a lot  
1079                   and I respect him. I don't know, it's partly temperamental, it's partly I think what  
1080                   he thinks the field requires, but partly for a long time that was the American way  
1081                   in these matters. It's only that since the fundamentalists decided that the country  
1082                   had been taken away from them and started to fight back that we haven't sorted it

**Leon Kass**  
**Acadia Institute Project on Bioethics in American Society**  
**page 55**

1083 out yet, how it's going to work out, but you now can sort of wander into a public  
1084 discussion with a religious perspective.

1085

1086 Swazey: Although if you look at the role of that perspective on policy, it seems to me that  
1087 the concerns about that fundamentalist perspective are more deeply entrenching  
1088 the secular rationalist voice. The concerns about that fundamentalist perspective  
1089 having a polity voice means that people are even more determined that it just be a  
1090 rational, secular voice. If you look at the NBAC reports on cloning and stem cell  
1091 research, they sort of said we had these people testify and this is what they said,  
1092 and here is our report. And certainly the cloning recommendation couldn't have  
1093 been more reduced and simplified, saying until we know the risks and benefits....

1094

1095 Kass: That was the most appalling thing. Or the job that this guy Ron Green played in  
1096 the embryo research. Talking about the respect that's owed this thing, using  
1097 words with almost a Clintonesque kind of double speak. It was embarrassing, just  
1098 really embarrassing!

1099

1100 Swazey: It did seem to me that NBAC didn't really need 90 days to come up with that as  
1101 their cloning recommendation.

1102

**Leon Kass**  
**Acadia Institute Project on Bioethics in American Society**  
**page 56**

1103 Kass: I think there might be some kind of other pockets springing up. For a while the  
1104 only alternative was the Pope John Center, which I think probably was not  
1105 intellectually strong enough to make a difference. I wonder how these guys with  
1106 Trinity's Center for Bioethics and Human Dignity are going to do. There's also a  
1107 book by Wesley Smith which is about to come out, which is published by  
1108 Encounter Books, a new press in California. I don't know. I'm the signer of a  
1109 letter of complaint to the Annals where they've published this consensus  
1110 document about the usefulness of terminal sedation, which is in fact to sedate  
1111 people to make them terminal rather than to sedate people when they're in pain.  
1112 They put together some kind of so-called consensus panel that had no pro-life  
1113 representatives and passed this off. It's a combination of Quill and his cronies  
1114 and Art Caplan and the Annals leadership. A bunch of people said this is hardly  
1115 the consensus of the medical profession, this is what you should be doing. So  
1116 there have been panels that have been put together at the federal level and various  
1117 other kinds of places that have pretended that there really is only one voice, only  
1118 one way of doing this. I guess one other thing that is probably worth a mention --  
1119 where some people at Hastings have played a role, Bob Veatch in particular,  
1120 although he was saying these things when I think it was culturally happening  
1121 anyhow -- is that the medical profession has lost its moral voice.

1122

**Leon Kass**  
**Acadia Institute Project on Bioethics in American Society**  
**page 57**

1123 Swazey: Do you agree with that?

1124

1125 Kass: I do. We were always a more decentralized profession than Britain. And I'm not  
1126 talking about just the AMA. The AMA has got its own things to answer for. That  
1127 there really is an ethic of a profession, as I would put it: you can choose to be a  
1128 physician but it's not simply up to you what being a physician means. But there is  
1129 this weird view of everybody sort of figuring out his or her own moral way. It  
1130 would be surprising if the cultural events of the sixties didn't show up in the  
1131 academy and the professions, and since you were a college president you know all  
1132 about it. What some of those people didn't win politically they have won  
1133 institutionally by the drip of water method. So we don't have robust profession of  
1134 medicine saying, "These and these are the boundaries, we call physicians to these  
1135 and these kinds of norms." Rather, it's gone entrepreneurial and it's gone to do  
1136 your own thing. In fact, you could say that the rise of bioethics is in part a  
1137 response to a kind of declaration of medical moral bankruptcy. There are some of  
1138 the bioethical issues that are not yet in the mainstream of medicine, but part of  
1139 what's helped to put bioethics on the map are these hospital ethics committees,  
1140 and the bioethics consultation services, and the appointments of bioethicists in  
1141 major medical schools, as if you need some outside expertise to solve medicine's  
1142 own medical ethical difficulties. What that's in effect saying is that medicine

**Leon Kass**  
**Acadia Institute Project on Bioethics in American Society**  
**page 58**

1143 doesn't have it's own internal ethic in which reflective practitioners and maybe  
1144 some patient advocates can sit down together and work this out. That you have to  
1145 call in an ethics expert, in effect, says the rest of the profession doesn't have it.  
1146 It's one of the reasons why I like Mark Siegler's program here. It in a way insists  
1147 that medical ethics ought to be done by clinicians who've been made reflective  
1148 about their practice, rather than get somebody a PhD in bioethics and then let him  
1149 come and apply his theories to the cases that come up in hospitals. That's a  
1150 caricature but in the direction of the truth.

1151  
1152 Swazey: Does bioethics have a future as it's presently constituted? I guess two questions:  
1153 does it and should it?

1154  
1155 Kass: I think what's coming, both scientifically and technologically, is terribly  
1156 important. Computer-human interactions, brain implants, neuro and psycho  
1157 biology, and the way this interacts with all kinds of other cultural things -- an  
1158 addition that I would not have said when I first got started -- those are terribly  
1159 important things and we need the best thinking we can about what this means and  
1160 what to do about it. We have people blindly talking about increasing the human  
1161 life span by 50 or 100 years. You've got other people talking cheerfully about  
1162 somatic germ line interventions. Pharmacology of the brain is kid stuff today

**Leon Kass**  
**Acadia Institute Project on Bioethics in American Society**  
**page 59**

1163 compared to what we're going to have in 20 years. These are important things  
1164 and they deserves serious and thoughtful attention. I don't think they will get that  
1165 kind of attention if the field continues in its present way; won't be adequate to the  
1166 gravity, the magnitude of the subject. For my money, when people tell me that  
1167 they are going to medical school and they're interested in ethical questions, and  
1168 they want to know where they can go that they can actually study bioethics on the  
1169 side, I tell them, "don't do that. If you want to actually become thoughtful about  
1170 the deep human matters that you are going to be dealing with, find somebody  
1171 good to read The Iliad with, and read War and Peace. Steep yourself in the best  
1172 that people have written and thought about the human condition, because despite  
1173 all of the changes, those are the things that are dear and the things one has to  
1174 preserve and fight for." I'm not simply despairing, I think that one's up against  
1175 the terrible juggernaut if you combine the general infatuation with technology,  
1176 free markets, and globalization and the belief that there should be no restrictions  
1177 on scientific inquiry and almost no restrictions on technological application. I do  
1178 think that the road runs all by itself left to its own devices in the direction of  
1179 Brave New World and that evils that we are accumulating are not freestanding  
1180 evils but are the accompaniments of things that people want, and that if there were  
1181 a cheap way to add fifty years to the life span and you didn't prevent it, and I don't  
1182 see how you could prevent it, you know pretty well what people are going to

**Leon Kass**  
**Acadia Institute Project on Bioethics in American Society**  
**page 60**

1183 choose. You'll find some way to enhance people's performance by genetic or  
1184 pharmacological means, and even the people who don't want to do it are going to  
1185 be compelled to think about doing it for their children if other people are doing it.  
1186 One sees the cultural dynamics and one doesn't know exactly how to set about  
1187 changing them. But I think it's also the case that the culture is just barely  
1188 beginning to see the implications of all of this, that those of us who got into this  
1189 field thirty years ago maybe had a clear vision of where it was headed, perhaps  
1190 somewhat prematurely, culturally speaking. I certainly feel that way about my  
1191 own work. I think I would get a much better hearing amongst biologists today  
1192 than I got at the beginning. There's nobody around who would say what the  
1193 Academy's Report Review Committee said of the report I wrote, that these are  
1194 fictitious problems.

1195  
1196 Swazey: We've never been really willing, especially culturally, to engage in prospective  
1197 thinking, that we need to think about these before they're upon us.

1198  
1199 Kass: Yes, that's not our way. That's partly because the decisions that produced the  
1200 quandaries are invisible publically, nobody's asking these guys to put brain  
1201 implants, to wire people to the Internet...but some guy is doing it off in the private  
1202 place. That's the way, and fifty years from now we're going to have a problem

**Leon Kass**  
**Acadia Institute Project on Bioethics in American Society**  
**page 61**

1203                   figuring out what to do with this.

1204

1205       Swazey:       Renée and I thought a lot about that perspective when we were in China and they  
1206                   were getting ready to open China's first chronic dialysis facility at the hospital  
1207                   where we were working. They had four machines. We kept asking, "how are you  
1208                   going to decide who gets dialysis?" And they kept saying, "No problem." So  
1209                   we'd go on to something else and then we would come back to it. "No problem."  
1210                   What that meant for the Chinese was that because the unit hadn't opened there  
1211                   was not a problem because they didn't have to make a decision.

1212

1213       Kass:           That's really what that meant?

1214

1215       Swazey:       Yes, that's really what that meant. It was later explained to us by a Chinese  
1216                   scholar. I think some of us thirty years ago were trying to do that "what if" for  
1217                   science and medicine, but it was almost that Chinese "We're not there yet so...."

1218

1219       Kass:           It's a daunting matter. There's a funny anecdote. When I first changed jobs,  
1220                   when I first left the lab, I happened to be in Canada and was conversing with my  
1221                   father's cousin, a man who's still alive, he's in his 80's. He said, "What are you  
1222                   doing?" I told him, I explained. He said, "And you think you can do something

**Leon Kass**  
**Acadia Institute Project on Bioethics in American Society**  
**page 62**

1223 about this? This is a job for the Messiah.” I wrote it off to his provincialism.

1224 I’ve now concluded that he’s right, which is another way of saying, on the

1225 question of should bioethics continue?: It’s going to continue. It’s like all kinds

1226 of things, they have their own momentum and perpetuate themselves. I’ve felt for

1227 some time that the Hastings Center should declare itself a success and close its

1228 doors. I do think that the interesting questions are not so much the bioethical

1229 questions but the larger cultural questions. The real issue of this generation and

1230 the next is whether there can be a kind of cultural moral renewal around the

1231 fundamental things which the bioethics business impinges on. But if we can’t

1232 somehow figure out a better answer to the meaning of our sexuality, to the

1233 questions of family structure and what it means to care for children and make the

1234 way for the next generation, if we don’t fix the problem of social order and

1235 education, just very fundamental sorts of things, the rest of this stuff is trivial.

1236 That’s really where the problem is. My activities in the ethics business have

1237 shifted to another project on the ethics of everyday life. We’ve put out five

1238 volumes in a series that Notre Dame is publishing. Amy and I did one on courting

1239 and marrying, an anthology of readings. Gil Meilaender has one on working.

1240 There are also volumes on dying, on teaching and learning in everyday life, and on

1241 leadership and leading. This is an attempt to say to the whole ethics business,

1242 “Look, the interesting questions are not the questions about when do you pull the

**Leon Kass**  
**Acadia Institute Project on Bioethics in American Society**  
**page 63**

1243 plug.” There are so many neglected area of discourse on the moral dimensions of  
1244 ordinary life. All of our human interactions are ethically charged. Those things  
1245 are not the subject of moral reflection; much of the moral wisdom about those  
1246 things is in disarray. The religious communities are trying as best they can to  
1247 restore something of their moral capital, although truth to say I think a lot of  
1248 what’s mainstream Protestant is in big trouble but trying to stay with it as much as  
1249 bioethicists have tried to sort of stay with it. But I think that if we don’t somehow  
1250 restore -- lets speak simply in the language of the past -- if we do not acquire a  
1251 strong moral bearing with respect to the ordinary dimensions of life, we’re not  
1252 going to do very well with these other sorts of things. The attempt at some kind  
1253 of rationalist and rule making solution will float as an unanchored, bit of dressing  
1254 on a sea of chaos.

1255

1256 Swazey: In some ways it is a luxury of an developed society to pay attention to most things  
1257 bioethics has paid attention to. In turn, it’s interesting to reflect on why they  
1258 haven’t really dealt with some of the more macro issues like what does it mean to  
1259 have just health care and those issues, which Paul Ramsey, decades ago, said  
1260 seemed almost intractable to moral reasoning. But they are so important.

1261

1262 Kass: One of the things that’s different, I think, if you teach undergraduates, which I

**Leon Kass**  
**Acadia Institute Project on Bioethics in American Society**  
**page 64**

1263 continue to do and Amy and I do some teaching together, and you stay close to  
1264 them, you find there's still a kind of hungering for a life that has meaning. In fact,  
1265 the major difference on this campus in the 25 years we've been here is that in the  
1266 last 10 years people are interested in religion. Not just in spirituality of the sort  
1267 you peddle in California. There's been a return to the major religious traditions  
1268 and that's partly because of various things. I think that positivism and other  
1269 things our generation thought might take the place of it have been shown to be off  
1270 a pretty thin gruel at best. So the kids are serious but in many ways they're lost.  
1271 This is a whole other subject. About half of them are children of divorce; they  
1272 don't even enter into a conversation in a classroom the same way. They'll sit  
1273 more guarded, they're watching out for themselves, the basic trust in ordinary  
1274 human relations is not the same as...you can walk in a classroom and you can  
1275 practically tell something like that now. And that means that they don't have  
1276 confidence. About certain sorts of things they are very quick to moralize, but  
1277 even those things are just on the tip of their tongue. They've imbibed the kind of  
1278 politically correct things in certain matters. But they don't really have ingrained  
1279 in them, as a matter of rearing, a certain kind of moral sensibility and moral  
1280 compass. That seems to me where the real action is, and I suspect it is

1281

1282 Swazey: You're very lucky to have Amy teach with you, you both and people like Renée,

**Leon Kass**  
**Acadia Institute Project on Bioethics in American Society**  
**page 65**

1283                    who are real teachers committed to undergraduates, that's too rare too.

1284

1285    Kass:            The kids are good. We just did a course on courtship with them, before we went  
1286                    on leave.

1287

1288    Swazey:          You're beaming, you must've enjoyed it.

1289

1290    Kass:            It was interesting, it was very interesting.

1291

1292    END OF INTERVIEW