



## Utilizing Moral Imagination in Bioethical Issues

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Examining various scenarios from the beginning and end of life, this article weaves a picture of the role and function of the moral imagination in selected problems in Bioethics. Utilizing moral imagination enables one to transcend immediate sensory data and go beyond, to see an 8 celled embryo as not merely “a bunch of cells” but to catch a glimpse of the truth of *imago Dei* – that we are all made in God’s image and likeness (Genesis 1,26). Such an understanding directly influences medical decision making and helps one grasp the grave error of embryo destruction in In-Vitro Fertilization (IVF). For end of life issues, the advice given and decisions made by a medical practitioner are often strongly influenced by attitudes towards death. A moral imagination imbued with Christian hope in the resurrection can give direction and meaning to what can otherwise be dark hours. The author, a priest-physician, highlights the importance and role of a well formed moral imagination in affronting bioethical issues.

**Keywords:** *Moral imagination, Imago Dei, Ethics, decision making, Bioethics*

**M**oral imagination can help us in our search for solutions to increasingly complex problems that we face each day in the world of bioethics. Perhaps a good question to ask before proceeding further is “What is moral imagination?” Pamela Smith writes that “Moral imagination allows us to envision better lives and better worlds. It helps us to project potential outcomes of our choices and actions. Moral imagination presents us with alternatives and creative adaptations.”<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Pamela Smith, “Thinking with the Church and its moral theology”, in *Moral theology: new directions and fundamental issues: festschrift for James P. Hanigan*, edited by James Keating, (NJ:

Another way to help us delineate the concept of moral imagination is to illustrate its function with the help of practical examples. Looking at the human embryo, how can our moral imagination help us? What we see, at first sight, is a bunch of cells, a human embryo at the beginning of its development. But here also is where our moral imagination starts to function in helping us to see beyond appearances, to go beyond the superficial, or beyond the data presented to our eyes. To see with the “eyes of our heart” as St Paul would say (Ephesians 1:18).

### *Imago Dei*

What can be the danger if we just stay with appearances? Well many bioethical problems today arise from a distorted vision of what man is, of whom he or she is and what she or he is called to be. As Christians we believe in the doctrine of *imago Dei*, that we are created in the image and likeness of God. As Ashley and O’Rourke comment, “The Christian view of the worth of the human person is based on the biblical teaching that each person is created by God in his own image and likeness.”<sup>2</sup> Pope Benedict XVI also stated “Indeed, the human person has been endowed with a very exalted dignity, which is rooted in the intimate bond that unites him with his Creator: a reflection of God’s own reality shines out in the human person, in every person, whatever the stage or condition of his life.”<sup>3</sup> The doctrine of *imago Dei* is amply covered in the document from the International Theological Commission “Communion and Stewardship: Human Persons Created in the Image of God.”<sup>4</sup> In number 7 of said document we read, “For the Bible, the *imago Dei* constitutes almost a definition of man: the mystery of man cannot be grasped apart from the mystery of God.”<sup>5</sup> These words remind us of the famous expression in *Gaudium et Spes* no. 22, “In reality it is only in the mystery of the Word made flesh that the mystery of man truly becomes clear ... Christ fully reveals man to himself and brings to light his most high calling.”<sup>6</sup>

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Paulist Press, 2004), 119-120. Lucia D. Wocial comments that “Moral imagination is the ability to ponder and wonder about the inherent rightness or wrongness of decisions, choices and behaviors. It is the act of considering the possibilities of things one cannot see or hold.” In “Nurturing the Moral Imagination: A Reflection on Bioethics Education for Nurses”, in *Diametros* nr 25 (wrzesień 2010): 92-102. See [www.diametros.iphils.uj.edu.pl/pdf/diam25wocial.PDF](http://www.diametros.iphils.uj.edu.pl/pdf/diam25wocial.PDF)

<sup>2</sup> Benedict M. Ashley & Kevin D. O’Rourke, *Ethics of Health Care*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition, (Washington D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2002), 34.

<sup>3</sup> Benedict XVI, Address to participants at the 12<sup>th</sup> General Assembly of the Pontifical Academy for Life and Congress on “The Human Embryo in the Pre-implantation phase”, Rome, 27 February 2006.

<sup>4</sup> International Theological Commission, “Communion and Stewardship: Human Persons Created in the Image of God.” See [www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti\\_documents/rc\\_con\\_cfaith\\_doc\\_20040723\\_communion-stewardship\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20040723_communion-stewardship_en.html)

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>6</sup> Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et spes*, Pastoral constitution on the Church in the Modern World, (7 December 1965), n. 22.

## Scripture Informs the Imagination

The challenge for our moral imagination is to see the hand of the Creator in all that is created, to discover the *imago Dei* in “just a bunch of cells.” The bioethical teachings of the Catholic Church help us to go beyond appearances, to discover the truth. In this small bundle of cells life is present, a life willed by God, loved by him, and sustained by him. Sacred scripture reminds us of this in Psalm 139, “You formed my inmost being; you knit me in my mother’s womb. I praise you, so wonderfully you made me; wonderful are your works!” The Scripture enlightens our imagination; as Revelation reveals to us the truth about man. Often I use images when I am giving classes in bioethics because it is important to provoke the moral imagination, to form it and mold it. Many times, in scientific journals and books of bioethics, the raw biological facts are presented in an abstract, rational, and technical manner. We lose sight of man as *imago Dei* amidst all the facts and figures.

## Don’t Forget to Touch the Heart

It reminds me of the teaching of Aristotle in his work, the “Art of Rhetoric,” on rhetoric and persuasion. He talks about ways how we can convince others. He discusses *logos*, logical persuasion, but this is only one aspect of persuasion. The other two are *ethos*, the moral character of the speaker, and *pathos*, the ability to provoke an emotional reaction in the listener. In order to provoke the moral imagination of the listener, it is not enough to use *logos*, although of course well formed arguments are vital. We must not forget *ethos*, the life we lead. In fact, for Aristotle, this way is the most eloquent mode of moral persuasion. He comments; “We believe the speaker through his being a certain kind of person.”<sup>7</sup> *Pathos*, the emotional effect of our words on the hearer, is also important as often we make decisions not only based on the head but also on the heart as Blaise Pascal eloquently reminds us “The heart has reasons that reason cannot know.” Aristotle clearly recognizes that the emotive state of the audience is a decisive factor in persuasion; “The orator persuades by means of his hearers, when they are roused to emotion by his speech; for the judgments we deliver are not the same when we are influenced by joy or sorrow, love or hate.”<sup>8</sup> To assist us, especially those involved in teaching, images and videos can be used in our bioethical presentations as a well-chosen image can move the heart as well as the mind and help us go beyond mere appearance.

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<sup>7</sup> Aristotle, *On Rhetoric: A Theory of Civil Discourse*, translated with Introduction, Notes, and Appendices by George A. Kennedy, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 74 (1366a).

<sup>8</sup> Aristotle, *The Art of Rhetoric*, The Loeb Classical Library, with an English translation by John Henry Freese, (London: Harvard University Press, 2000), 5 (1356a).

## Challenge to Go Beyond

Pope Benedict XVI commented that it is a great challenge to move beyond appearances, to see beyond. “It always seems too arduous for human intelligence to realize that in looking at creation, we encounter the impression of the Creator... Beyond the limits of experimental methods, beyond the boundaries of the sphere which some call meta-analysis, wherever the perception of the senses no longer suffices or where neither the perception of the senses alone nor scientific verification is possible, begins the adventure of transcendence, the commitment to ‘go beyond’ them.”<sup>9</sup> There is always the call to push out into the deep, a deeper vision, of the human person.

## Short-sighted Vision

When man’s vision remains superficial there are serious consequences. If one on considering the human embryo merely sees “a bunch of cells” then of course one can practically do what they want with them; experiment on the embryo, extract cells from it, freeze the embryo or simply throw it away. Professor Lisa Jardine, the head of the controversial Human Fertilization and Embryology Authority (HFEA) in the United Kingdom insisted that it was justified to screen and destroy problematic embryos as “they are just three days old and made up of about eight cells.”<sup>10</sup> It was the same HFEA that gave permission for scientists to create hybrid embryos, composed of human and animal genetic material despite the fact that two-thirds of the United Kingdom population were against this. In his Easter homily of 2008, Cardinal O’Brien spoke out against the hybrid embryo experiments stating “We are about to have a public government endorsement of experiments of Frankenstein proportion - without many people really being aware of what is going on.”<sup>11</sup>

Many scientists are using their imagination in their investigations but perhaps not in a moral way. In the Church document *Donum Vitae* we are reminded that we cannot use our imagination in any such way we wish. In front of our human embryo it helps to remember that “the human being is to be respected and treated as a person from the moment of conception.”<sup>12</sup> Where others may see “just a bunch of cells” a well formed moral imagination will see a human being to be treated with dignity and respect, to be loved and welcomed, to be cared for. A lively moral imagination

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<sup>9</sup> Benedict XVI, Address to participants at the 12<sup>th</sup> General Assembly of the Pontifical Academy for Life and Congress on “The Human Embryo in the Pre-implantation phase”, Rome, 27 February 2006.

<sup>10</sup> Prof Lisa Jardine, Human Fertilization and Embryo Authority, Letter to the Sunday Times, 28 January 2010. See [www.hfea.gov.uk/5745.html](http://www.hfea.gov.uk/5745.html)

<sup>11</sup> Cardinal Keith O’Brien, Easter Sunday homily 2008. See [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk\\_news/scotland/7308883.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/scotland/7308883.stm)

<sup>12</sup> Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Instruction *Donum Vitae*, (1987), I, 1.

will seek ways to protect human life, and faithful to the prophetic task entrusted to all baptised will imaginatively seek out ways to speak out in defence of the poor and voiceless like the human embryo. A lively moral imagination, informed by love will see the face of Christ in the neighbour, seeing a reflection of God's own presence in every person, a brother, even in the least of our brothers and sisters.

If we lose sight of this vision then terrible things can be done in the name of science. The imagination is a gift that can be used in an immoral way. A quick glance at the field of reproductive technologies is enough to convince anyone of this truth. In the challenges of bioethics today such as infertility many scientists are using their imagination to come up with innovative treatments. In seeking a cure for infertility a Doctor can use his imagination in a scientific way, come up with a new technique to produce life and yet the very same technique can also destroy many lives.<sup>13</sup> Dr Edwards used his imagination to produce the first live birth through In Vitro Fertilization (IVF) in 1978, Louise Brown. He had this to say when interviewed: "I wanted to find out exactly who was in charge, whether it was God Himself or whether it was scientists in the laboratory." And what did he conclude? "It was us," he smiles triumphantly.<sup>14</sup> To use the imagination cut off from the very source of morality is at best reckless and at worst immoral. While a child is always welcomed into the world the glaring contradiction with IVF is that so many embryos are destroyed in the process, presumably justified as they are "just a bunch of cells."

*It is not only at the beginning of life that our moral imagination can help us but also in front of end of life issues too*

I remember feeling hopelessness and even shame when as a surgical resident I approached a young woman who was dying of metastatic ovarian cancer. I felt that as our surgical team could not offer her a cure then we could offer her nothing. I felt we had failed her and I tried to avoid her because I had nothing else to offer. One day I had to go and see her to take some blood and I understood from her that she was not expecting a cure from me or my team. She knew she was going to die. She did not expect cure but care - to be treated with compassion and to be listened to. I felt my training had not prepared me so well for this. Now I am called at various times to visit patients who are dying. I go there as a priest first and a doctor second. It is different to approach a patient with the words of Jesus alive in your heart "I am the Resurrection and the Life. Those who believe in me will never die" (John 11:25). That death is not the end of the story but the end of the introduction! It is like St Theresa of Child Jesus. She was told by her sisters that she was dying and she replied "I am not dying I am entering into life."

<sup>13</sup> Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Instruction *Dignitas Personae* on Certain Bioethical Questions (2008), Footnote 27. Even in the best centres up to 80% of embryos are sacrificed.

<sup>14</sup> See [www.gene.ch/genet/2003/Aug/msg00011.html](http://www.gene.ch/genet/2003/Aug/msg00011.html)

## Approach to Death and Eternal Realities

If our moral imagination is enlightened by a lively vision of faith we would approach suffering and death in a different way. Richard Gula the noted moral theologian states “How differently we would approach the hopelessly ill if we imagine death as ultimate catastrophe or as the final stage of growth.”<sup>15</sup> When I was in medical practice I remember once sharing my faith in an explicit way to a young man who was dying of burns. He had 75% burns and after 25 operations contracted an infection. As he lay dying he was agitated and asked me if I was in his position, about to die, how would I feel in front of death? I told him that I believe in the eternal life, that death is not the last word, that Christ loves us and calls us to be with him forever. The next day I met the mother outside his room early in the morning. She said “Thank you Doctor. My son died last night but he died in peace. Thank you for what you shared to him.” Those in healthcare ministries need to keep very alive the gift of their faith because when our medicine reaches its human limits, it is important to remind ourselves that we are in God’s hands. One of my old professors used to tell me “Man cannot live on antibiotics alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.” Neither can a Doctor live on antibiotics alone. He cannot simply keep busy, he needs to keep alive his relationship with Christ, “the Good Doctor”. If we are united with the source of compassion, we will be compassionate. If we are united with the fountain of patience, we too can be patient with the patients.

In end of life issues in our world today there is a growing tendency to lose respect for the dying person. The calls for euthanasia to be made freely available are growing louder each day. Physician assisted suicide, for many centuries considered against the *ethos* of a caring Doctor, is now legal in various countries. When there is no vision of eternity, then suffering and death have little or no meaning. Thankfully we have a crowd of witnesses who have gone before us (see Hebrews 12:1), courageous men and women who have announced with their words and lives the beauty of human life. One such person was Bishop Von Galen, the so-called “Lion of Münster.” He spoke out against the state policy of active euthanasia in Nazi Germany, where the so-called “unproductive” were put to death in their thousands around the time of World War II. Bishop Von Galen spoke out in three famous homilies. In one of them he said “Here we are dealing with human beings, with our neighbors, brothers and sisters, the poor and invalids...Unproductive - perhaps! But have they, therefore, lost the right to live? Have you or I the right to exist only because we are ‘productive’? Once we admit the right to kill unproductive persons then none of us can be sure of his life. We shall be at the mercy of any committee that can put a man on the list of unproductive.”<sup>16</sup> As Christians we are called to live out our prophetic calling too,

<sup>15</sup> Richard Gula, “Reason Informed by Faith: Foundation of Catholic Morality”, (NJ: Paulist Press, 1989), 297.

<sup>16</sup> Bishop Clemens August Count Von Galen, Excerpts from third homily, 3 August 1941. See [www.euthanasia.com/galen.html](http://www.euthanasia.com/galen.html)

to speak out against a modern culture of death. Let us pray for all the lions not of Münster but of Manila that we too can be courageous like Bishop Von Galen!

### **Call to Holiness!**

In front of the challenges in the world of bioethics today, I believe that we must take seriously the universal call to holiness for all the faithful. Be holy! The world needs holy Christians, holy doctors, holy nurses, holy priests, holy lay people to be salt and light for the world of today. It was amazing to once be at a Congress for the Clergy here in Manila with over 5,500 priests, bishops and Cardinals gathered together. There was a great sense of optimism about the Church and the people in the Philippines. It was really a faith filled gathering and we can help each other to transform that faith into action. As St James reminds us “Your faith will be made perfect through your actions” (James 2:22).

### **Faith and moral imagination**

The moral imagination we have been given as a gift helps us connect the images and symbols of our faith such as the parable of the Good Samaritan into the “what to do here and now” with this bioethical problem in front of me. As Richard Gula comments:

If we are to be disciples today and live faithful to Jesus, then our actions ought to resemble, rhyme with, or harmony with, the pattern we find in His story. The call to discipleship and to the imitation of Christ is the call to let our imaginations be stirred by his parables and actions. In what ways does our character harmonize with the good shepherd, the good Samaritan, or the merciful father of the prodigal son? [...] The challenge before us now is both to be faithful to Jesus back then, as mediated by the Gospels, and to be creative in our response to the challenges of life today.<sup>17</sup>

Of course this means that as Christians we should be contemplative in action, that prayer should not only be reserved for the moment of crisis or the night before exams. Instead prayer should mold our moral values, our imagination. Sometimes the imagination can be a little wild and not so moral. In fact St Theresa of Avila called the imagination “la loca de la casa” - the crazy woman in the house. Through prayer, the imagination can be filled with helpful images to mold and direct our conduct, such as that of the Good Samaritan. The Good Samaritan did more than put oil and wine on the wounds. He complicated his life for that “patient,” bringing him on his own mount and paying for his treatment.

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<sup>17</sup> Richard Gula, *The Shifting Landscape of Moral Theology*, Church Magazine, Spring 2009. See [www.churchmagazine.org/issue/0903/upf\\_shifting\\_landscape.php](http://www.churchmagazine.org/issue/0903/upf_shifting_landscape.php)

## **Inform and Form our Moral Imagination**

To strive for solutions the moral imagination needs to be well nourished and informed. I find it a little disconcerting that the major textbooks of medical ethics used in many universities in the Philippines are not written by Filipinos or Asians but come from abroad. Foreign imports are fine for basketball but I don't know if they shed too much light on the structuring of healthcare systems or the specific bioethical problems of the Philippines. Of course it is good to be informed about what is happening in the world today. The common saying "Think globally, act locally" has a certain relevance here. However I wish more Filipinos would write good textbooks on these issues! The Filipino healthcare system is very different from the models in the USA. In an American textbook you won't find much on watchers or how to manage so many visitors! I went to the Intensive Care Unit here in a major hospital and the waiting area was just huge to accommodate so many relatives! There is a great love for the sick person here in the Philippines in general as witnessed by the family members who will happily spend night after night on a mattress on the floor next to a loved one to keep them company and care for them. The virtue of compassion and selfless care of sick loved ones is a beautiful sign of the Filipino faith and love.

How I wish really Filipino elements would find their way into the textbooks the students are using and to find Filipino solutions to Filipino problems, to find the answers in Filipino ways. The moral imagination of the Filipino is so creative. The people here are very creative and resourceful. I understood this clearly when I saw the iron of an old man who lived next to us in Cebu. It fell on the floor and I thought that it was the end for the poor appliance as it had already been repaired many times. But no, he obviously had a strong faith in the resurrection and sure enough next time I saw it, it had been wired together to fight another day.

## **Don't Lose Sight of the Kingdom**

In front of our world today we do well also to take the good advice of the former Archbishop of El Salvador, Oscar Romero. He reminds us that every so often it is good to step back and take the long view. What does this mean? It means that we are here not only to build up a career in medicine or theology, or to build up my department but to think bigger than that. Not to only think about building up my bank balance either! Before I entered religious life I was a medical doctor. I specialized in Plastics and reconstructive surgery. I was focused on my work, on being paid, on advancing up the career ladder. That was my dream but one day Jesus showed me His. It is a bigger dream and it inspired my imagination! To build up people's lives, to help reconstruct their identity in the image and likeness of God. In a word it was to help build up the Kingdom. Each one of us here in some way or another is part of this great enterprise, to build the Kingdom of Heaven.

## Sensitivity to the poor

Having a sensitive moral imagination can help us in front of the healthcare challenges faced by the Philippines today. Who of us is not moved by the plight of the poor, who often have little access to good healthcare, or are not able to afford it. A moral imagination, inspired by love, will not settle for complacency. A moral imagination that is alive and kicking will urge us to strive to go the extra mile, to seek to invest our talents to the maximum, to bear fruit in charity for the life of the world.<sup>18</sup> For one Doctor to make an accurate diagnosis and write the prescription may fulfill his medical duty but the duty of love will urge him to do more. Once I was in a government hospital in Cagayan de Oro, Mindanao as one missionary had dengue fever. I sat in the corridor and an old man came and sat down beside me. He was crying and holding a piece of paper in his hand. It was the prescription for antibiotics that he could not afford. I was reflecting about the doctor who had written the prescription. Technically speaking he had done all he could but morally speaking there is room to excel. This is a challenge for us all to work for a more just economic order. The distribution of health care resources is a real challenge in the Philippines. It cannot be that in front of the ethical problem of many people not having adequate healthcare that our moral imagination does not provoke our conscience.

Many rich and well to do, even us priests, have access to medical treatment much more readily than around 90% of the Filipino people. It really means that we have to do a check up on our lifestyle choices. We cannot remain indifferent. As a missionary priest we have an option to go home to our countries only once every five years. It is a sacrifice but I believe it is worth it if we want to be serious about building the Kingdom here and now. I think the richness of many people here in front of so many poor is a bioethical issue! Let us ask the Lord for a genuine desire to use our moral imagination to come up with just healthcare provision for the poor Filipinos. I believe the words of Fr Gerard Francisco P. Timoner III, O.P. can be incisively applied in this context - "The hope for a better future begins with a clear picture of what that future might look like. This requires more than just day-dreaming or wishful thinking but a "moral imagination": a creative act that alters the present state of affairs to one that is desirable."<sup>19</sup>

The Holy Spirit will enlighten us in various ways. Who cannot be but a little scandalized by the way that drugs are advertised here in the Philippines. I may be wrong but I am sure the way they advertise here would be banned in most other

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<sup>18</sup> In *Optatam Totius* we are reminded of the goal of the moral life of a Christian. For each one to discover their vocation in Christ and to bear fruit in charity for the life of the world (Second Vatican Council, *Optatam Totius*, 28 October 1965, n. 16).

<sup>19</sup> Fr. Gerard Francisco P. Timoner III, O.P. in *Proceeding of the Symposium "Cheating in Schools": UST Center for Ethics, December 6, 2007*, Edited by Fausto B. Gómez, O.P., (Manila: UST Publishing House, 2008), 79

countries. Beside quite optimistic claims such as curing cancer or raising the IQ of children the product also has “No approved therapeutic results” emblazoned in big letters! One poor family I know that sells maize by the side of the road spent their hard earned money on Vitamin syrup for their epileptic son because the advert declared that the syrup helped “improve mental health.” Let us be vigilant and may our moral imagination strive not just to imagine which car I will buy next, or to dream of which international conference I will attend next but to use the moral imagination to seek real answers for the good of the health and welfare of many poor people here in the Philippines.

### **To See Jesus in the Patient**

What can help is a lively vision of faith and a moral imagination that is seeking to love and serve Christ. To see Jesus himself in the patients. This helps us to stop losing patience with the patients. Jesus himself said “I was sick and you cared for me” (Matthew 25:36). In every Eucharist we hear the words “This is my body.” Our moral imagination is dynamised when we listen to those very same words in front of a sick patient who is also poor - “This is by body too!” Seeing Jesus in the person in front of me changes the “problem” into an opportunity to love and serve the Lord. Recognizing the call of Jesus to go beyond, to not be complacent in front of the bioethical problems of today, to push out into the deep will help us affront the bioethical challenges without losing hope. To take seriously the urgent demand of the Gospel to care for the poor especially when they are sick is a task that needs the combined moral efforts of each one of us.

May Saints Cosmas and Damian continue to inspire us to work for the good of many people and to grow more and more in selfless service especially to those who are sick and suffering. ■



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