

Biotechnology and Human Destiny

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Study Guide

The questions asked during the exam will be taken literally from the following list:

I. About the book by Leon Kass, *Life, Liberty and the Defense of Dignity. The Challenge for Bioethics*:

1. What does it mean to produce human life in the laboratory? What is the human and personal significance of the lines of descent? How are these confused through the techniques of artificial procreation?
2. Could it be useful to know one's genetic patrimony? How could knowledge of our genetic patrimony imperil our freedom and spontaneity? Why does Hans Jonas speak of "right to ignorance" in this context?
3. In which sense could genetic technology lead to the commodification of human life? Are there any standards that could help us to evaluate genetic enhancement?
4. Which is the possible impact of biotechnology on our self-understanding?
5. What is cloning? How to evaluate it?
6. Is there a "right to die"? What does it mean to speak of "dignity of death"?
7. Why is immortality not a desirable goal of biotechnology?

OR ALTERNATIVELY:

I. About the book by Hans Jonas, *The Phenomenon of Life. Toward a Philosophical Anthropology*:

1. What are some of the philosophical aspects of Darwinism? How is it related to Cartesianism? What is the status of "ends" and why does Darwinism spell the final victory of nominalism? What is the new form of dualism that Darwinism introduces? How come it turns out to have been a "thoroughly dialectical event" (p. 58)?
2. Is God a mathematician? Why or why not?
3. What does the science of cybernetics study? Is it a science that is able to explain human or animal behavior? Which central aspect of the movement of living beings is completely missed by the cybernetical model?
4. Why is it that Jonas sees an indication of the human being's specific difference in the faculty of image making?
5. What does Jonas think of the practical uses of theory? Which knowledge is for him the supremely useful and much needed one?

II. The lectures (cf. the slides)

1. What is the self-declared goal of biotechnology? Which are some of its promises, but also some of its limits?
2. When it comes to reflecting on biotechnology, one of the fundamental questions to ask is the one about health: how is health defined by the World Health Organization? What are the deficiencies of this definition? How does H. G. Gadamer deal with the question of health?
3. Another fundamental question for biotechnology is the question of life. How can one approach this question? In particular, what is an organism? Which characteristics define it?
4. What is the metabolism? How is a metabolizing organism different from a machine that burns fuel?
5. How is the organism related to freedom and necessity?
6. What is understood by “final causality” or “natural teleology”?
7. Which is the ideal of knowledge for modern science? Why does this ideal ignore final causes?
8. Why is teleology so important? What does it have to do with individuality? Is it possible to speak of an individual without considering its ends?
9. What does teleology have to do with freedom? Can we speak of freedom without there being at least some given ends? Could freedom ever be freedom *from* nature? In this context, explain Sartre’s example of the young Frenchman and Taylor’s response.
10. Hans Jonas observes that the “materialist is like the Cretan that calls all Cretans liars”. What does he mean by that? In which way is materialism inconsistent with itself as a philosophical theory?
11. Which were, according to Jonas, the theoretical presuppositions of the technological and scientific revolution that had its beginnings in the 17th century? What was the role of astronomy and what were the implications of the era’s cosmological discoveries?
12. The cosmological discoveries required a new physics and a new metaphysics. Which were some of the principal attributes of the new science?
13. What does the new science say about miracles? Can one criticize this attitude? How so?
14. From the point of view of bioethics, which danger is implied when the new science turns into a full-blown ontology, becoming pan-mechanism? What does pan-mechanism no longer see?
15. For Cardinal Ratzinger, how is faith reasonable and indeed the foundation of reason, understood not as a calculating faculty but as a faculty that is open for and in search of meaning?
16. Why can meaning not be produced by us? Why can it only be received?
17. What does Ratzinger mean when he says that for a Christian ontology the supreme principle of the world is not necessity but freedom?
18. Over the last decades our knowledge about genetics has greatly increased. In which ways (hypothetical or actual) can this knowledge be applied to the dream of having better children?
19. What are some of the technical limitations of “traditional” prenatal diagnosis (amniocentesis and chorionic villus sampling)? What is the moral evaluation that one will have to give?

20. What is meant by “preimplantation genetic diagnosis”? What are its technical limits? What kind of moral considerations need to be made?
21. Imagine that preimplantation genetic diagnosis or the genetic manipulation of embryos were to become generally accepted practices. What kind of impact on society and on the relation between parents and children could this have?
22. Is the administration of psychoactive substances to children perhaps just a continuation of education by other means? Is it a safe practice? What does it mean for the human context of growth? What idea of education is implied?
23. What are some concrete techniques that could prolong life?
24. Why did the average life expectancy in the West in the 20th century increase so significantly (USA: from 48 years in 1900 to 78 years in 1999)? Which role did biotechnology play in this?
25. What would “ageless bodies” mean for our personal commitment, for our aspiration and our desire to have children?
26. Which effects could a significant increase in the average life expectancy have for society as a whole and for the relationship between the generations?
27. About doping in sports: Julian Savulesco suggests that drugs and technology are means to introduce equality into a field that is naturally unequal. What can one respond to him? Which are some of the main problems with doping?
28. Could biotechnology ever produce happy souls? How would one have to understand happiness?
29. What is the relation that exists between memory and happiness. In which way is it possible already today to manipulate the human capacity to remember?
30. Is it always a good idea to administer beta-blockers to victims of horrible events to avoid the posttraumatic stress disorder?