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# Introduction of Leon R. Kass, 2009 Jefferson Lecture

*Wilfred M. McClay*

It's a great honor for me to introduce Leon Kass. There is no one in contemporary American life who better embodies the fundamental mission of the humanities. This may seem a surprising assertion about a man whose resume is so heavily tilted toward the life sciences: an M.D. from the University of Chicago, a Ph.D. in biochemistry from Harvard, and years of employment at the National Institutes of Health and the National Academy of Sciences. And yet, as the author of a dazzling array of books and essays on topics ranging from the philosophy of science to the philosophy of eating, from the wisdom of the Bible to the morality of euthanasia and the intricacies of courtship and love, Leon Kass has proven himself an exemplar of the great humanistic motto: *Homo sum: humani nil a me alienum puto*. (I am human, nothing human is alien to me.)

Indeed, perhaps the only thing alien to Leon Kass is our general tendency to treat science as a realm apart, a form of knowledge entirely distinct from the realms of literature, philosophy, history, and other venerable forms of human inquiry about human things. This is the pathology of the "two cultures," lamented by the British writer C. P. Snow in an influential lecture given at Cambridge University almost exactly fifty years ago: May 7, 1959.

This is not the time or place to revisit Snow's critique. But the general condition he identified remains one of the central problems of our civilization. And no one in our day has addressed it with more subtle wisdom and enduring insight than Leon Kass.

The problem is not merely that we need to be "better-rounded," so that humanists know the second law of thermodynamics, and scientists know Shakespeare. We need to recognize, first, that science is a profoundly *human* activity, which reflects the very best of which we humans are capable; and second, that there are crucial things that

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science simply cannot do. Science cannot tell us what it means to live a good life, or where we should go to find one. And it cannot replace those elements of our civilization, notably our great religious and literary texts, that *do* tell us about those things, however imperfectly.

Leon Kass's work is dedicated to the proposition that we need *both* ways of knowing. He addresses directly a fear we all share, that our scientific conquest of nature, even while expressing many of the most impressive features of our civilization, may have the paradoxical effect of undermining the dignity and sustainability of human life. How can we avert this fate, and see to it that our discoveries and innovations serve ennobling ends rather than degrading ones? How can we devise a fuller account of nature, one that does justice to the wholeness of human existence as we experience it?

Such questions are at the core of Leon Kass's lifelong quest, including his many years as a distinguished teacher, mainly at the University of Chicago—although I would also include under that rubric his magnificent service to the nation as the founding chairman of the President's Council on Bioethics. In that capacity too he has been a dedicated teacher.

The Council on Bioethics under Leon Kass's direction was an entity utterly unique in American history. Unlike the usual presidential commission, it never sought to promote a laundry list of "solutions" to national "problems." Instead, Kass designed it to be an ongoing contribution to public education, and an expression of faith in the possibilities of democracy. It aimed to provide us with the materials we need to engage, as a society, in serious democratic deliberation over these crucial matters. That is why all the Council's work, including transcripts of every meeting, is posted on its website, a rich deposit of intelligent reflection and discussion about the knottiest and most troublesome issues of our time—and an enterprise clearly bearing the impress of Leon Kass, the public-spirited teacher and "unlicensed" humanist.

Perhaps it is because Leon Kass came to the humanities by way of the sciences that he sees the humanities with such freshly appreciative eyes, and insists upon recalling them to their central mission. Perhaps it is because he was raised an entirely secular Jew, and came to the study of the Hebrew Bible uncoerced by anything other than his own honest search, that he is able to open this oldest of texts to us in such astonishingly fresh ways. Perhaps it is because he loves science, with a

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fully “licensed” intimacy of which humanists may not be capable, that he can acknowledge its limitations without rancor or defensiveness, and can show how much it stands in need of a corrective to its deficiencies, both for the sake of our democracy and for the sake of our souls.

But whatever the ultimate source of his gifts, I know that I, and all Americans, are deeply in debt to him—for his uncommon and timely insights, for his efforts to clarify our thinking and ennoble our discourse, and for his incomparable example as a man of high integrity and lavish generosity. And so it is a great honor, and even greater pleasure, to welcome him to the podium, for this year’s Jefferson Lecture, “Looking for an Honest Man’: Reflections of an Unlicensed Humanist.”