

Love, Yiddish, and the Problem of Bioethics

Darren J. Beattie

A mother and her son were traveling on a bus in Israel. The child chattered away in Hebrew while the mother admonished, "Yiddish, Yiddish, speak Yiddish!" The son continued to talk in Hebrew while the mother kept insisting that the child speak Yiddish. A man who was sitting nearby piped up, "Excuse me, lady, but why do you insist that your son speak Yiddish?"

"I don't want him to forget that he's Jewish," answered mama.

To think about ethics necessarily involves thinking about where lines should be drawn—which actions are right and which are wrong. For bioethical inquiry, which considers the moral questions raised by biomedical science and biotechnology, it might seem that a natural place to start would be to draw a line around action itself, dividing science into a theoretical and contemplative component on the one hand, and an experimental and applied component on the other. Such a distinction would aim to respect the liberal democratic value of free inquiry, while reserving the right to intervene at the point at which inquiry seeks to employ unethical practice.

Of course, separating scientific theorizing from experimentation is hardly simple. Theoretical advance tends to be intertwined with experimentation, rather than strictly prior to it. Furthermore, one of the distinguishing features of modern science is its tendency to depreciate traditional distinctions between theory and practice, knowledge and power, speech and deed. Knowledge, according to modern science, becomes know-how, in the precise sense that one does not have knowledge of *what* something is unless one knows *how* to make it. An ethics that takes its bearings from the putative distinction between theory and practice is therefore bound to prove unsatisfactory in addressing ethical problems unique to the modern scientific age.

Bioethics at its best is not, in any event, concerned primarily with actions themselves, but rather with the meaning of actions—that is, with the kind of thinking about the world that actions both reflect and

Darren J. Beattie is a graduate student in political theory at Duke University.

SPRING 2012 ~ 55

reinforce. For instance, in the case of embryonic stem cell research, bioethics seeks to address not only the potential injustice done to embryos destroyed, but also the damage done to the soul of the destroyers: what might be the effects on how we regard human life (at any stage), not only from such destruction, but from our convincing ourselves that it is a morally weightless act?

While ethics typically focuses on conduct, it follows that bioethics, and scientific ethics more broadly, must especially be concerned with thoughts and ideas—in a word, philosophy. This is due not only to the meaning of actions conducted in the name of science, but also to the fact that science (unlike the law, business, and most other fields that invite specialized ethical scrutiny) is driven by the pursuit of knowledge—it is inherently inquisitive. Before we seek to determine and enforce the appropriate limits of scientific inquiry, we ought first to understand *why* men inquire scientifically.

Yet bioethics tends not to explore the question of what motivates scientific inquiry. Many of the most serious commenters on bioethical questions, including those who write in the pages of this journal, seem content to take modern science at its word, accepting that its inquiries are aimed at “the relief of man’s estate.” Accordingly, while conservative bioethicists often argue that some advances in modern science and technology could undermine human dignity and end up doing more harm than good, these arguments generally do not consider the possibility that there may exist deeper motivations for scientific inquiry that might conflict with or even supersede the fear of death, the desire for good health, and the longing for material comfort. Curiosity, deadly not only for cats, would appear to be one example; a certain species of erotic love (*eros*) may be another.

In what follows, we shall examine curiosity and *eros* in detail, drawing upon their prominent (though distinct) roles in the major philosophical, Biblical, and mythological accounts of human inquiry, in the hope that this might shed some light on what (if anything) lies beneath the self-professed goal of science to “relieve man’s estate”—and in the belief that if this does provide a bit of illumination, it might in some modest way contribute to a richer and more effective ethics of science.

What we will find points to perhaps surprising dilemmas inherent in science and philosophy, though more particularly in bioethics. Could it be that the task of bioethics is somehow akin to that of the mother in the joke, admonishing her child to speak Yiddish? And might this task prove as difficult as persuading someone to fall out of love?

A Curious Creature

From the first sentence of Aristotle's *Metaphysics*—"All human beings by nature stretch themselves out toward knowing"—we have it on high philosophical authority that curiosity is of primary importance for human beings. Other perhaps even higher authorities also suggest that curiosity may be the primary human problem. Three of the most famous cases are found in Hesiod's accounts of Prometheus and Pandora, the Biblical account of Adam and Eve, and Aristophanes' account of the birth of erotic love in Plato's *Symposium*.

Before closely examining these accounts, we should take note of three broad similarities between them. First, each account seeks to explain the origins of the human condition—including much of its unpleasantness—by appealing to primordial man's initial grasp at some kind of dangerous or forbidden knowledge. Second, each portrays man as unable by himself to overcome whatever powerful forces are at work driving him toward the forbidden knowledge; some kind of divine intervention is required in each case to stop or correct him. Finally, each account portrays a psychic or corporeal division within human beings, the emergence of sexual counterparts, and the imposition of disease and physical hardship as punishments for, consequences of, or natural concomitants to the acquisition of forbidden knowledge.

In the account appearing in Hesiod's *Theogony* and *Works and Days*, Prometheus is a Titan, one of the immortal gods; his name means "fore-sight" or "forethought." He is a clever challenger to the power of Zeus. In a sacrificial meal meant to settle a dispute between mortals and immortals, Prometheus decides to try to trick Zeus, setting before him and offering him a choice between two meals: one a portion of beef from a cow, concealed within the unappetizing container of an ox's stomach; the other the cow's bones, concealed within an appetizing cover of fat. Zeus, angered at this deception, "From then on...always remembered this trick," and would not give the gift of fire to mortal men.

It is clear from the outset that Prometheus, distinguished for his craft and intelligence, is a troublemaker. Indeed, there seems to be something about intelligence that is inherently troublesome. The trouble is not primarily that cleverness deceives—as Prometheus deceives by offering Zeus a falsely decorated sacrifice—but rather that in its capacity to deceive, cleverness supposes that it is itself immune to deception. While he disguises the heap of bones under a thin layer of flesh, Prometheus seems confident that *his* fire would illuminate all the truths hidden beneath mere appearances.

Whether as an act of philanthropy or simply another affront to the gods, Prometheus steals the secret fire from Olympus so that man too might be similarly enlightened. But the benefits of fire, at least for man, turn out to be questionable. Nowhere is this clearer than in the arrival of Pandora, the first woman, who is sent by Zeus supposedly as a gift but in fact as the price for man's acquisition of the stolen fire. In an obvious nod to the original deception by Prometheus, the gods disguise Pandora's danger beneath an intoxicating layer of beauty and feminine charm.

Despite the warnings of Prometheus, his brother Epimetheus takes the bait and accepts the gift of Pandora, apparently on behalf of man. Epimetheus—whose name fittingly means “hindsight” or “afterthought”—only realizes after the fact that Pandora is a bringer of woe. For in addition to her many very attractive attributes, Pandora is also given a jar with mysterious contents within. Perhaps because she believes that the cleverness the gods instilled in her made her immune to being fooled, she opens the jar. And in this quintessential act of curiosity, in this morbid compulsion to *uncover* and *see for herself*, she unwittingly releases illness, toil, sorrow, and countless other evils into the world, closing the jar in time to prevent only hope from escaping.

The punishment here certainly fits the crime. By deceiving man into accepting this “lovely evil,” Zeus exposes as folly the notion that man's newly acquired fire is capable of uncovering all truths. And by providing clever Pandora her jar, Zeus exposes the still more dangerous conceit that just being capable of uncovering a truth makes one capable of handling it without getting burned. The putative infallibility of fire, at least in mortal hands, turns out to be a double deception.

We will soon meet another woman, Eve, who is similarly compelled to see for herself, and in turn similarly deceived. Both Eve and Pandora get vastly more than they bargained for. And while these archetypal human beings may have been the first to experience the dangers of curiosity, the relationship between Prometheus and Epimetheus suggests that they will not be the last. Just as Epimetheus (acting on behalf of man) is unable to heed Prometheus' warning about Pandora, who in turn is unable to keep herself from opening her jar, so are we mortals unable to appreciate the dangers of the Promethean fire until it is too late. Ever blinded and emboldened by the gift of fire, we are unable to learn from our mistakes, and so are doomed to repeat them. The very fact that the story of Pandora continues to resonate with us today indicates that each successive generation continues to open its own respective jars, perhaps confident that the contents might be different.

This in turn may help to explain a striking ambiguity in the story—namely, whether the containment of hope in the jar is meant to signify that man *retains* it or *lacks* it. Perhaps it is precisely because man is hopelessly curious that he remains curiously hopeful.

Fruit of Forbidding

The Biblical account begins with humanity in a state of ease and tranquility. The first human being appears to be contented, spontaneous, and psychologically uncomplicated, experiencing “little gap between desire and its fulfillment,” as Leon R. Kass puts it in *The Beginning of Wisdom: Reading Genesis* (2003). (The following discussion of human linguistic and psychological development as depicted in Genesis borrows liberally from Kass’s masterful study, although it departs from Kass in its conclusions.) Man is a creature of simple needs, living off of nature almost by instinct; the divine prohibition of the forbidden fruit seems initially not even to register in his innocent mind.

Perhaps recognizing a danger in leaving man alone with nothing to occupy his latent rational faculties, God creates animals and brings them to man “to see what he would call them” (Gen. 2:19). The activity of naming turns out not to be a wholly innocuous distraction, however, as it requires that the person who names determine not only whether one thing is sufficiently distinct from another to deserve a separate name, but which qualities of the thing to be named are sufficiently important (or useful or good for man) to be reflected in the name chosen. Naming therefore marks man’s first step toward an independent concern for what is good—and thus, however remotely, his first step toward becoming a creature of moral choice.

Naming the animals also awakens in man an awareness of loneliness. God then fashions the first woman out of the man’s rib. Though the first man does not fully appreciate the implications of sexual complementarity until he eats the fruit of knowledge, the introduction of another human being immediately broadens the possibilities of language and self-reflection. Treating us to a perfect example of the acquisitive (rather than merely inquisitive) qualities of human speech, the man proudly proclaims, “this one shall be called woman [*’ishah*], because from man [*’ish*] this one was taken” (Gen. 2:23). In so doing, the man has not only named both the animals and his fellow human being, but he has given himself a new name—not just *’adam*, a generic human being, but *’ish*, an individual male—thereby declaring his independence from the name the Lord gave him, and perhaps even from the path the Lord set out for him.

However, it is the first woman who first declares independence from God, though not without a little help from her conversation with the serpent. That the woman is able to have a conversation at all signifies an important threshold capacity for reason and self-reflection, and therefore a heightened propensity toward independent thinking and disobedience. The serpent capitalizes on this expertly, assuring the woman that in eating the fruit she “shall not surely die,” as God had warned, but rather that “your eyes shall be opened, and ye shall be as gods, knowing good and bad” (Gen. 3:4-5). Such talk is more than rhetorical—it is coercive, in the limited but important sense that to comprehend it is unavoidably to reflect on the possibility that it might be true. This is because to comprehend the serpent’s speech is to doubt God’s speech (consider the famous saying, “don’t think of a pink elephant”—which cannot be both understood and obeyed). The woman’s doubt, however briefly entertained, fundamentally and irreparably alters her (and so humanity’s) relation both to God and to herself. For even if, in light of her doubt, she were to continue to abstain from the fruit, she would no longer be doing so unreflectively, but by choice—that is, not simply because it is forbidden, but because she had determined on her own that God’s was the better course. It is no longer possible for the woman *simply* to follow God; but by *choosing* to follow His way, it is now possible for her to obey Him.

Upon eating the forbidden fruit, the eyes of the woman and man are opened and they recognize their nakedness. This first discovery leads directly to the first technology and craft, as they sew themselves clothing from fig leaves. For their transgressions, God punishes woman and man—she to the painful labor of childbirth and to be ruled over by man, he to the painful labors of the field and ultimately to death. Then, in what Leon Kass calls “one of the most beautiful and moving sentences” in the Bible, the man gives his wife the name Eve “because she was the mother of all living.” And so we see how speech, reason, and taxonomy are bound up with discovery, knowledge, and self-knowledge; how technological creation is tied to human procreation; how man’s moral and rational freedom emerge from a largely passive, if not totally involuntary, process.

But this account points to some difficult conclusions for those (like Kass) who argue that the forbidden fruit represents the independent concern for, rather than the actual knowledge of, good and bad. As we have seen, whether Eve likes it or not, she *must* make *some* choice after listening to and understanding the serpent’s speech. Furthermore, she does not choose to be spoken to in the first place—meaning that she does not choose for herself the conditions under which a moral choice becomes

necessary. This point applies even more strongly under the metaphorical view that the serpent is really, as Kass suggests, “an externalized embodiment of certain essentially human, rational capacities.” For one could deliberately avoid a literal serpent, but not one that is a figurative part of oneself; covering one’s ears does not protect against a siren song from within. In short, Eve does not choose to choose at all; her “transgression” is not then the result of a free choice, but free choice is the result—rather, the *instantiation*—of the transgression.

If one understands the story of Adam and Eve as a “literary vehicle for conveying some permanent truths about the problem of human freedom,” as Kass proposes, one could hardly do better than to suggest that freedom is itself the forbidden fruit. Let us assume for a moment that this interpretation is correct. The problem is that it makes God’s prohibition against eating the fruit paradoxical and impossible. It is paradoxical because one cannot truly obey the commandment without disobeying it. It is impossible because freedom and free will are not things we do or could freely choose to acquire but things that develop in us without our say.

What are we to make of a God who speaks in riddles and commands the impossible? More importantly, what are we to make of ourselves in light of this interpretation—that is, in light of the suggestion not only that we have no choice but to transgress, but that our transgression is in the very fact of our being human?

Man is a creature of both dust and divine breath. But he is also a moral agent, that is, an agent of free choice, and so a creature of both God—who initiates man’s linguistic development by creating the animals—and the serpent—who, by tapping into man’s developed linguistic capacity, forces self-reflection and doubt, and thus the necessity for moral choice. (In this sense, the serpent’s role is much like that of his similarly clever counterpart Prometheus, who provides man with fire.) These dual origins underscore the moral ambiguity of moral man.

Freedom and Moral Responsibility

Moral ambiguity, however, while certainly problematic, is not *the* problem. Indeed, free choice is problematic precisely because of the problem of immoral, or bad choices. In order for the transgression to make sense *as a transgression*, it must be not only a choice, but a disobedient one.

Let us now consider what it would mean for the forbidden fruit to represent actual knowledge of good and bad, rather than only a concern for such knowledge. After conversing with the serpent, the first woman

is faced with two options: either listen to the serpent and eat the fruit, or obey God and abstain. Choosing to abstain would amount to an act of willful ignorance, as she would never know for sure whether eating the fruit would in fact have killed her or would instead have opened her eyes. Only by tasting the fruit can she be certain about its effects, and in turn about whether God has been truthful. (It follows that only by transgressing can she really trust God.) Accordingly, instead of faithfully heeding the divine voice, she decides to see for herself. What she sees after eating, however unpleasant and unexpected, does indeed remove all doubt as to her standing before God. Her new knowledge of good and bad—what God had known all along—is her shameful discovery of her (and humanity’s) own psychic and moral dependency. The problem illustrated here is not choice simply, but choosing to see (and know) for herself: it is not freedom, but curiosity that ultimately leads to man’s expulsion from the Garden.

Eve falls victim to the same double deception of “fire” illustrated in Hesiod’s account of Pandora. In looking at the forbidden tree and seeing that it “was good for food” and “was a delight to the eyes” (Gen. 3:6), Eve trusts that her newly emergent rationality is capable of seeing through mere appearance to the truth of things, despite God’s warnings. More dangerously, in deciding to actually taste the fruit and see for herself the knowledge it contains, Eve supposes that, just because by her rationality she is able to uncover the truth, she is also thereby able comfortably and confidently to endure it. As it turns out, Eve is wrong on both counts. The forbidden fruit is Eve’s Pandora’s Box—with interest.

The Genesis story of Adam and Eve, like its counterpart in Hesiod, illustrates the tremendous power of curiosity. Eve’s desire for knowledge supersedes even the fear of death. Though her decision to disobey is technically a choice, perhaps the larger lesson is that our developed rational capacities arrive with an overwhelming impulse to pursue inquiry indiscriminately, even unreasonably, and almost always against our better instincts.

For all their parallels, there are also differences between the Biblical and Hesiodic accounts that are worthy of mention. What, for instance, is the significance of the fact that the forbidden knowledge is technological in one case (fire) and moral in the other (knowledge of good and bad)? For present purposes, we should simply note that, however important a role curiosity plays in motivating Eve to eat the fruit, it remains only half of the story. After man’s transgression, he is overwhelmed not by curiosity, but by the meaning of his own nakedness. Curious desires give way to erotic ones. For a deeper understanding of this transformation, we turn to Aristophanes’ account of the birth of eros in Plato’s *Symposium*.

Eros by Any Other Name

It is a common misconception to think of the *Symposium* as the Platonic dialogue about love. Properly speaking, *all* of Plato's dialogues, insofar as they deal with philosophy, are about love; what distinguishes the *Symposium* from the rest is that it alone alerts us to this fact. The *Symposium* uniquely justifies philosophy as philosophy—that is, wisdom-seeking as an erotic enterprise. (Eros here, as in the rest of this essay, refers to the philosophical meaning of the word, encompassing not just sexual desire and love but an other-directedness, a longing for wholeness or completion.) Those of us interested in exploring the motivations for human inquiry would therefore do well to examine this important dialogue in detail, considering in particular what the speeches of Aristophanes and Socrates say about the power of love, the nature of love, and the nature of its power. For only then can we truly appreciate what an ethics of inquiry is up against.

In order to understand the power of eros, one must know its origins in the ancient afflictions of man. According to Plato's Aristophanes, these primeval human beings were "as a whole round, with back and sides in a circle. And each had four arms, and legs equal in number to his arms, and two faces" that "were set in opposite directions." And since each also had a double allotment of genitals on opposite sides of the body, there were three sexes: male (that is, male-male), female (that is, female-female), and androgynous (male-female). These primeval humans were mighty and prideful: "They were awesome in their strength and robustness, and they had great and proud thoughts," so they "attempted to make an ascent into the sky with a view to assaulting the gods." The gods scratched their heads trying to figure out how to stop the humans from behaving so "licentiously."

Much like in the Biblical and Hesiodic accounts, Plato's Aristophanes seeks to explain our present human condition as resulting from an original transgression against the gods. It is unclear from the text what the humans' motivation is and what exactly they do to the gods. A passing allusion to a Homeric story suggests that the aggression was born not out of curiosity but out of an abundance of strength and spiritedness, and the language of "assault" and "licentiousness" suggests that the offense is physical in nature. In any case, the offense certainly carries with it a sense of prideful, blasphemous independence similar to that found in the curious motivations of the other accounts we have considered.

Zeus responds to the human beings' insolence by weakening them. He slices the primeval beings into two pieces, reversing their faces and otherwise reshaping them into our present form, but leaving the genitals on

the backsides. Following bisection, the resulting halves were distraught, desiring so strongly to be reunified that they would neglect food, water, and shelter, never wanting to do anything apart from their other half. As they began to die out from starvation and self-neglect, Zeus took pity and turned their genitals frontward so that, by way of intercourse with one another, they might not only sexually reproduce but also find satisfaction and rest. Eros, then, is “the bringer-together of their ancient nature, who tries to make one out of two and to heal their human nature.”

Whatever the reasons that lead to man’s initial assault on the gods, it is clear that his soul is not only humbled but utterly and irrevocably transformed by the punishment. The more ambitious designs he may have entertained in his original state give way completely to an overwhelming urge to reunite into his original whole. We see that man’s erotic nature encompasses not just the desire for sex and procreation but also a deep and inarticulate longing for restored completeness.

While this erotic transformation is perhaps most obvious in Aristophanes’ account, it is by no means unique to it. In Hesiod’s story, the gods send the first woman, a sexual counterpart to man the transgressor—not to humble man, but certainly to direct his newly emergent faculties elsewhere. In the Biblical account, the woman who is man’s companion only becomes his sexual and procreative complement after they eat the forbidden fruit. All these accounts vividly affirm the primacy and power of man’s erotic nature; we can see that erotic motivations both precede and predominate over man’s fear of death.

Dehumanizing That Humanizes

It is important to reemphasize that the emergence of man as an erotic being, though an unintended consequence of (or punishment for) a choice, is not itself chosen. Just as in everyday experience one does not choose to fall in love, so man himself chooses neither his erotic status nor the object of his erotic affections; these are both predetermined, largely or entirely, by his nature.

Since one does not choose to fall in (or out of) love, then to the extent that man is a philosophical being—a lover of wisdom—it follows that in some fundamental sense his philosophical status itself is not susceptible to philosophical argument. Put another way, philosophical man did not simply choose to be philosophical. This point poses considerable limitations for ethicists who employ rational argument to question the danger of certain avenues of rational inquiry.

Quite apart from possible limitations to ethical argumentation as such, many particular bioethical arguments encounter difficulties on their own terms. This difficulty applies especially to some of the most penetrating insights regarding the dehumanizing effects of various scientific pursuits—as we can learn from Socrates’ speech in the *Symposium*. Although Plato has Socrates agreeing with Aristophanes’ estimation of the power of erotic love, Socrates seems much more interested in a more basic question. Socrates responds to a speech by Agathon, a florid account of the things that erotic love *is*—youth, beauty, wisdom, and a source of many other admirable qualities. True to form, Socrates turns Agathon’s argument on its head, focusing instead on what erotic love is *not*—what it lacks. The desirer desires “what it is in need of, and does not desire unless it is in need.” Would a person want to be tall if he already were tall, or want to be strong if he already were strong? Socrates’ insight here is that eros is about want, in both meanings of the word: both a desire and a lack. That double meaning implies that to the extent that the lover acquires the object of his love, he ceases to be a lover. To the extent that the philosopher, the lover of wisdom, acquires wisdom, he ceases to be a philosopher. For the philosopher, then, the price of knowledge is death.

This high price of knowledge, notably, is the same as it is for Adam and Eve, who also pay for knowledge with the death of their former nature. But whereas “death” for the philosopher means the death of his erotic nature and therefore the end of his humanity, Adam and Eve’s “death” marks the end of their prelapsarian, innocent nature, resulting in the *birth* of their erotic nature. Adam and Eve’s “death” marks the beginning, not the end, of their humanity—and so, as Leon Kass argues, the story of the Garden of Eden can be understood to depict the rise, rather than fall, of man. (Whether the rise of man is simultaneously a fall from grace is another question, on which I happily demur.)

Yet there remains another, even more important difference between the Edenic death and the philosopher’s death. Adam and Eve’s realization of their nakedness and inadequacy before God is unexpected and certainly unintended; by contrast, the philosopher’s death, and the lover’s death in general, is not only intended, but is the very goal of his longing, and signification of his success as philosopher or lover. Though love may be suicidal, it is not *simply* tragic; indeed, it is both tragic and comic, precisely because its destruction is also its greatest triumph. Perhaps Socrates was thinking along these lines when, after a long evening of discourse and drink, he argued, to the puzzlement of his drowsy interlocutors, that “the

same man should know how to make comedy and tragedy... he who is by art a tragic poet is also a comic poet.”

Insofar as we humans are essentially incomplete beings, fundamentally animated by the erotic desire to restore an original state of wholeness, we strive and long for a result whose attainment would nullify our very existence as striving and longing beings—that is, as human beings in any recognizable sense. We human beings, precisely *because* of our erotic nature, cannot help but participate in the tragicomic character of love. Humanity, it would seem, is driven by impulses that are fundamentally dehumanizing, in that fulfilling our deepest impulses would extinguish them.

Love, in the sense described here, might be thought of as a state of exile from a cherished but lost condition of wholeness. As the quintessential language of exile, Yiddish might be justly thought of as the most erotic—and thus the most philosophical—of languages, and so the most aptly suited to express the paradoxical strivings of our erotic natures. Just as the lover, to the extent that he acquires his beloved, ceases to be a lover—and the philosopher, so far as he becomes wise, ceases to be a philosopher—so the exiled, once finally arrived in his longed-for promised land, changes fundamentally as well.

Consider the Jewish custom of concluding the Passover Seder with those long-suffering words, “next year in Jerusalem!” What are Jews to say once they have reached Israel—once they live in Jerusalem? Can they remain Jews in the same sense? Perhaps the fact that the Jews continue to wait for a messiah helps to preserve their essentially erotic character. Yet the dilemma remains: to the extent that we speak Hebrew, we must forget how to speak Yiddish.

Eros and a Richer Bioethics

The accounts of the Bible, Hesiod, and Aristophanes all portray man as fundamentally shaped by the loss of some initial state of wholeness. In this, they agree on the primacy, importance, and power of man’s erotic nature. But there is decidedly less agreement on the object or ends toward which this nature is oriented. There is still agreement, however, that man himself does not fully understand what that orientation is—that he is to some extent oblivious as to what exactly would constitute fulfillment of his erotic longings.

Aristophanes describes man’s intense erotic yearning as a mysterious and inarticulate force of which the lover has only doubtful presentiments. What the soul wants “it is incapable of saying, but it divines what it wants

and speaks in riddles.” It is understandable that the ambiguity of man’s erotic character should invite more than one explanation of it. Such various states of original wholeness might be generally described as psychic, on the Biblical account; corporeal, on the account of Aristophanes; and noetic (or rational), according to Socrates. These ancient accounts point to different states of original wholeness to make competing normative claims for the appropriate longings of man’s divided soul.

In a similar fashion, modern thinkers point to the conditions of various “states of nature” to make claims about the just ends and limitations of government. And so too do they imagine both idealized states in which these ends are fulfilled and limitations upheld, and fallen states in which we see the grave consequences of failing to secure those limitations and ends.

These utopias and dystopias resoundingly echo their ancient forebears. The “relief of man’s estate,” in Francis Bacon’s words—the *raison d’être* of the modern scientific enterprise—in fact relies on a predominantly Christian understanding of a former state of wholeness: it is a call to restore our lost Paradise through science and technology. (And indeed, Bacon’s whole phrase refers not just to the relief of man’s estate but also “the glory of the Creator.”) It is no accident that Bensalem, Bacon’s scientific utopia in his story “New Atlantis,” is a Christian society. Similarly, it is no accident that the denizens of Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World*, a society that takes modern science to a dystopian extreme, bear a striking resemblance to naïve, psychically undivided, prelapsarian man. Through science, they too are able to forget the meaning of nakedness, and all the complications that go with it. Theoretically and empirically, modern science has the appearance of being driven by an ancient erotic longing for the psychic wholeness of Edenic man, and perhaps also the corporeal wholeness of Aristophanic man.

If this be the case, conservative bioethicists err not in taking modern science’s self-proclaimed purpose of “relieving man’s estate” at its word, but rather in not fully appreciating the implications of the erotic nature of this purpose. For if philosophical and scientific inquiry are in fact expressions of deeper erotic impulses, then we engage in these pursuits not despite but *because of* their dehumanizing effects. And so the ethicist who would seek to limit inquiry on the grounds that it is dehumanizing is in the same difficult—perhaps futile—position as the mother in the joke, who constantly and unsuccessfully admonishes her son to speak Yiddish. It is somewhat like the position of a hopeless romantic who, refusing to settle on and strive for a particular object of love, instead prefers to wander interminably in erotic exile, content to be in love with love itself.

Though the philosopher might become a wise man, the wise man as wise man—that is, as contemplator—can never *be* one with that which he beholds. The act of contemplation requires a certain distance between the contemplator and the thing contemplated. Is it then the case that in a certain crucial sense the contemplator must remain erotically unfulfilled? That is, must he remain a perpetual lover, and therefore perpetually human? Might he then be a perfect match for that other hopeless romantic, the bioethicist?

There remains the third possibility that, rather than achieve completion or permanent prolongation, the erotic basis of inquiry would simply implode and do away with itself. Nietzsche, for instance, argues that science is merely the last stage of development of the quest for truth initiated by Socrates. Once science, broadly understood, turns its captious gaze upon truth itself, truth unravels as a kind of illusion, and the Socratic quest presumably dies with it. Science then begins to function as a mere instrument of power, whose motivations perhaps better resemble the prideful assaults of the original, circular Aristophanic humans than the halved, erotic beings they become as a result of their assaults.

With such considerations, we are left, as always—perhaps even more pressingly than ever—with the question of whether the erotic fulfillment of modern science is desirable, what it would consist of, and whether it is even possible. Pursuing these questions will help to clarify just what we mean by “human” when we speak of our concern about “dehumanization.” If the erotic longing of man cannot itself be suppressed or ignored, perhaps there can still be justification for channeling it away from certain means and toward certain avenues of research. We must find a way to articulate our concern about specific kinds of potentially dehumanizing effects of the scientific project, even while acknowledging that a certain sort of dehumanization is inevitable. For example, we might articulate an objection to at least some forms of troubling research as inhibiting or interfering with even the erotic impulse itself.

But bioethical questions will remain sharpest, and most difficult, when it is not the means but the very ends of science that are dehumanizing: What if modern biotechnology, and modern science more generally, is taking us on a path away from our human nature—and it is in our nature to want that? By scientifically striving for the psychic tranquility of the Bible’s first man, are we destined to become instead like Nietzsche’s last man? And what, come to think of it, is the difference?