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Dr. Leon Kass

NEH Lecture (edited)

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Chairman Watson, members of the National Council on the Humanities and staff of the National Endowment for the Humanities, ladies and gentlemen. I am profoundly grateful to the Endowment for the great honor you have bestowed upon me. And I thank you all for your honoring presence here this evening.

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Now that this hour has arrived, I must finally accept the fact that tonight’s lecture is really mine to deliver. When Chairman Bruce Cole called last autumn to invite me to give the next Jefferson Lecture, my stunned silence covered a barely stifled “Who, me?” I knew well the roster of humanist giants who had gone before. Whilst a member of the NEH Council, I had helped to select six or seven of them, and I even had the honor of introducing Gertrude Himmelfarb and Leszek Kolakowski for their Jefferson Lectures. What in the world could the Endowment be thinking? The fields for which I have trained, medicine and biochemistry, I neither practice nor teach. For the fields in which I teach and practice, I have no formal training. I am but an amateur humanist, not only without great scholarly distinction but also without a license.

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It is true that I have long been devoted to liberal education, and along with my wife, Amy Kass, and a few other colleagues at the University of Chicago, I helped found a successful common core humanities course, “Human Being and Citizen,” as well as an unusual B.A. program, “Fundamentals: Issues and Texts,” that emphasizes basic human questions pursued through the intensive study of classic texts. I have also raised high the oft-abandoned banner of humanistic inquiry, and have tried in my teaching and writing to show its indispensable value for living thoughtfully and choosing wisely in our hyper-technological age. Finally, perhaps because I am an unlicensed humanist, I have pursued the humanities for an old-fashioned purpose in an old-fashioned way: I have sought wisdom about the meaning of our humanity, largely through teaching and studying the great works of wiser and nobler human beings, who have bequeathed to us their profound accounts of the human condition...

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The seeds of such reflection, bearing fruit only years later, were planted at the University of Chicago. There, in the still living remains of the college created by Robert Hutchins, I first encountered philosophical questions beyond the domain of ethics, as well as some of the competing answers to questions about human nature and human good. I was introduced to the idea of learning as an end in itself, fulfilling our human capacity for understanding. I acquired an educational prejudice in favor of discussing the great questions and reading the Great Books, though it would take several years before I learned why these prejudices were justified. I witnessed up close the dignity of the life of teaching, for we were taught by an exemplary faculty, tenured not for their record of publications but for their devotion to devising and teaching an integrated course of study that could place young ignoramuses on the path of becoming liberally educated men and women. In Socratic spirit, they insisted that we examine all our intellectual assumptions and starting points, and they encouraged us to put fundamental philosophical questions even to the natural sciences: What is the relation between matter and

1 form? What makes an organism a unified and living whole? What is the nature of the psyche or soul?

5 These sorts of questions lay dormant as I entered upon a brief career in medicine, in retrospect another important station on the path to the human. Preclinical studies left me in awe of the marvel that is the human body and the stunning events beneath the surface that sustain our existence and enable our remarkable interactions with the world. Clinical experience left me in awe of the privilege—and the peril—of offering a helping hand to fellow human beings in times of crisis. Although I could not then articulate it, I was also mindful of the rare privilege, given solely to physicians, to be admitted to the inner sanctum of the patient’s world. There we are allowed to bear witness as human beings, stripped of pretence and sustained only by hope, trust, and the love of kith and kin, attempt to negotiate sicknesses, suffering, and the anxiety of coming face-to-face with their own mortality. Not for nothing were medieval textbooks of medicine entitled, *De Homine*—“On Man,” or “On the Human Being.” Not for nothing was medicine once an honored branch on the humanistic tree.

10 Yet precisely around the subject of our humanity, I found something missing. The science was indeed powerful, but its self-understanding left much to be desired. It knew the human parts in ever-finer detail, but it concerned itself little with the human whole. Medicine, then and now, has no concept of the human being, of the peculiar and remarkable concretion of psyche and soma that makes us that most strange and wonderful among the creatures. Psychiatry, then and even more now, is so little chagrined by its failure to say what the psyche or soul is that it denies its existence altogether. The art of healing does not inquire into what health is, or how to get and keep it: the word “health” does not occur in the index of the leading textbooks of medicine. To judge from the way we measure medical progress, largely in terms of mortality statistics and defeats of deadly diseases, one gets the unsettling impression that the tacit goal of medicine is not health but rather bodily immortality, with every death today regarded as a tragedy that future medical research will prevent. And, coming down from theory to practice, I found that I loved my patients and their stories more than I loved solving the puzzle of their diseases; where my colleagues found disease fascinating, I was fascinated more by the patients— how they lived, how they struggled with their suffering. Above all, I hated the autopsy room, not out of fear of death, but because the post-mortem exam could never answer my question: What happened to my patient? The clot in his coronary artery, his ruptured bowel, or whatever diseased body part that the pathologist displayed as the putative explanation of his death was utterly incommensurable with the awesome massive fact, the extinction of this never-to-be repeated human being, for whom I had cared and for whom his survivors now grieve....

20 According to C. S. Lewis, the dehumanization threatened by the mastery of nature has, at its deepest cause, less the emerging biotechnologies that might directly denature bodies and flatten souls, more the underlying value-neutral, soulless and heartless accounts that science proffers of living nature and of man. By expunging from its account of life any notion of soul, aspiration, and purpose, and by setting itself against the evidence of our lived experience, modern biology ultimately undermines our self-understanding as creatures of freedom and dignity, as well as our inherited teachings regarding how to live, teachings linked to philosophical anthropologies that science has now seemingly dethroned.

1 Pursuit of these questions would require a change of direction and a different approach to human affairs. In 1970, I put away scalpel and microscope to take up directly Diogenes' search for *anthrôpos*, hoping by studying not the hidden parts of the human being but the manifest activities of the whole, visible in broad daylight, the better to understand his honest-to-goodness humanity and to help promote his true flourishing. Without realizing it, I became a humanist...

5 As I look back over the nearly forty years since I left the world of science to reflect on its human meaning, three distinct but related pursuits stand out: First, addressing the conceptual danger, stressed by Lewis, of a soul-less science of life, I have worked toward a more natural science, truer to life as lived. Second, addressing the practical danger, stressed by Huxley, of dehumanization resulting from the relief of man's estate, I have worked toward a richer picture of human dignity and human flourishing. And third, addressing the social and political dangers, stressed by Rousseau, of cultural decay and enfeeblement, I have looked for cultural teachings that could keep us strong in heart and soul, no less than in body and bank account. Let me, in the time remaining, share with you a few high points from these three inquiries.

10 Finding a "more natural science" would serve two important goals. First, by doing justice to life as lived, it would correct the slander perpetrated upon all of living nature, and upon human nature in particular, in treating the glorious activities of life as mere epiphenomena of changes in the underlying matter or as mere devices for the replication of DNA. Second, and more positively, by offering a richer account of human nature faithful both to our animality and to the human difference, it might provide pointers toward how we might best live and flourish. Toward both goals, a "more natural science" examines directly the primary activities of life as we creatures experience them; and it revisits certain neglected notions, once thought indispensable for understanding the being and doing of all higher animals.

15 Against the materialists who believe that all vital activities can be fully understood by describing the electrochemical changes in the underlying matter, I saw the necessity of appreciating the activities of life in their own terms, and as known from the inside: what it means to hunger, feel, see, imagine, think, desire, seek, suffer, enjoy. At the same time, against those humanists, who, conceding prematurely to mechanistic science all truths about our bodies, locate our humanity solely in consciousness or will or reason, I saw the necessity of appreciating the profound meaning of our distinctive embodiment. So, for example, I learned from Erwin Straus the humanizing significance of the upright posture: how our standing-in-the-world, gained only through conscious effort against the pull of gravity, prefigures all our artful efforts to overcome nature's indifference to human aspiration; how our arms, supremely mobile in our personalized action space, fit us for the socializing activities of embracing, cradling, pointing, caressing, and holding hands, no less than for the selfish activities of grasping, fighting, and getting food to mouth; how our eyes, no longer looking down a snout to find what is edible, are lifted instead to the horizon, enabling us to take in an entire vista and to conceive an enduring world beyond the ephemeral here and now; how our refashioned mammalian mouth (and respiratory system) equips us for the possibility of speech—and kissing; and how our expressive face is fit to meet, greet, and sometimes love the faces that we meet, face-to-face, side-by-side, and arm-in-arm. From Adolf Portmann, I discovered the deeper meaning of the looks of animals, whose intricate surface beauty, not fully explained by its contributions to protective coloration or sexual selection, serves also to communicate inward states to fellow creatures and to announce, in the

1 language of visibility, each animal's unique species dignity and individual identity. I even found evidence for natural teleology in, of all places, *The Origin of Species*, in which Darwin makes clear that evolution by natural selection requires, and takes as biologically given, the purposive drives of all organisms for self-preservation and for reproduction—drives the existence of which is a mystery unexplainable by natural selection.

5 But the greatest help came, most unexpectedly, from studying pre-modern philosophers of nature, in particular Aristotle. I turned to his *De Anima (On Soul)*, expecting to get help with understanding the difference between a living human being and its corpse, relevant for the difficult task of determining whether some persons on a respirator are alive or dead. I discovered to my amazement that Aristotle has almost no interest in the difference between the living and the dead. Instead, one learns most about life and soul not, as we moderns might suspect, from the boundary conditions when an organism comes into being or passes away, but rather when the organism is at its peak, its capacious body actively at work in energetic relation to—that is, in “souling”—the world: in the activities of sensing, imagining, desiring, moving, and thinking. Even more surprising, in place of our dualistic ideas of soul as either a “ghost in the machine,” invoked by some in order to save the notion of free will, or as a separate immortal entity that departs the body at the time of death, invoked by others to address the disturbing fact of apparent
10 personal extinction, Aristotle offers a powerful and still defensible holistic idea of soul as the empowered and empowering “form of a naturally organic body.” “Soul” names the unified powers of aliveness, awareness, action, and appetite that living beings all manifest.

This is not mysticism or superstition, but biological fact, albeit one that, against current prejudice, recognizes the difference between mere material and its empowering form. Consider, for example, the eye. The eye's power of sight, though it “resides in” and is inseparable from material, is not itself material. Its light-absorbing chemicals do not see the light they absorb. Like any organ, the eye has extension, takes up space, can be touched and grasped by the hand. But neither the power of the eye—sight—nor sight's activity—seeing—is extended, touchable,
15 corporeal. Sight and seeing are powers and activities of soul, relying on the underlying materials but not reducible to them. Moreover, sight and seeing are not knowable through our objectified science, but only through lived experience. A blind neuroscientist could give precise quantitative details regarding electrical discharges in the eye produced by the stimulus of light, and a blind craftsman could with instruction construct a good material model of the eye; but sight and seeing can be known only by one who sees.

Even the passions of the soul are not reducible to the materials of the body. True, anger, as ancient naturalists used to say, is a heating of the blood around the heart or an increase in the bilious humor, or, as we now might say, a rising concentration of a certain polypeptide in the
20 brain. But these partial accounts, stressing only the material conditions, cannot reveal the larger truth about anger: anger, humanly understood, is a painful feeling that seeks revenge for perceived slight or insult. To understand the human truth about anger and its serious consequences, we must instead listen to the poets, beginning with Homer's *Iliad*: “Wrath, sing, o goddess, of Peleus' son Achilles, and the woes thousand-fold it brought upon the Achaians, sending to Hades strong souls of heroes but leaving themselves to be the delicate feastings of dogs and birds.” And to understand how we come to know this or any other truth, we can never stop wondering how—marvel of marvels—Homer's winged words carry their intelligible and

1 soul-shaping meanings, hitched to meaningless waves of sound, from the soul of genius to the hearts and minds of endless generations of attentive and sympathetic readers...

The search for our humanity, always necessary yet never more urgent, is best illuminated by the treasured works of the humanities, read in the company of open minds and youthful hearts, together seeking wisdom about how to live a worthy human life. To keep this lantern lit, to keep alive this quest: Is there a more important calling for those of us who would practice the humanities, with or without a license?

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