CHAPTER TWENTY

ON MAKING PERSONS:
PHILOSOPHY OF NATURE AND ETHICS

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At the conference on “Judaism and the Phenomenon of Life—The Legacy of Hans Jonas,” we were fortunate to have been provided three excellent papers, laden with meaty issues that actually nourish one another and advance our appreciation of Hans Jonas. Strachan Donnelley illuminates Jonas’s general organicist worldview—his ontological foundations—by exploring tensions and linkages with the intimately related Darwinist worldview of Ernst Mayr; Bernard Q. Prusak offers a subtle ethical analysis of how such an ontology, leading to a distinctive philosophical anthropology, might shape attitudes toward current biotechnological possibilities of human cloning; and Lawrence Vogel sensitively juxtaposes Jonas’s own bioethics with the extensions and corrections offered by Jonas’s most prominent Jewish student, the powerfully influential Leon R. Kass.

My own effort, in what follows, will be to highlight the links between these articles, moving from metaphysics, to ethics, to faith-based policy making; and, as I go, adding yet another voice to the clamor on cloning.

1. Ontology of Persons

Strachan Donnelley has laid down the ideal foundation for this discussion. The deep questions of the nature of nature, and, within this largest picture, the nature of human nature, are utterly fundamental to answering any further questions of ethics and policy. The deep, primary questions include the following:

1. Are people made entirely of matter? If not, what is the “extra” nonmaterial ingredient? If so, what is matter’s ultimate character?
2. Is everything material fully determined by its prior states under causal laws? Or are material things, at least in some configurations, capable of initiating causal sequences?
3. Is matter inherently lifeless? Or is matter at some levels of complexity capable of vitality, spontaneity, and creativity, without aid from nonmaterial supplementation?
4. Is matter completely “dark” within itself, lacking even a trace of subjectivity? Or is matter shot through with subjectivity, on a qualitative range from extremely dim but rising to the clarity of self-awareness, recognition of interests, concern for alternative outcomes?
5. Is matter indefinitely divisible into solitary bits? Or is matter inherently connective, interactive, even social?

The outstanding result of Donnelley’s sensitive examination of Ernst Mayr’s and Hans Jonas’s independent approaches to the ontology of matter is that—for all their differences—the two, one non-Jewish and the other Jewish, joined forces to reject the popular modern portrait of matter, dominant since Descartes, as inert, void of subjectivity, and fully determined. In this they allied themselves with the continuing tradition of Alfred North Whitehead, which flows down to the present day and even to the present writer, who supports the conception of what might usefully be called “neomatter.” Materials scientists have forced us to look far beyond the theoretical assumptions of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as they forge practical twenty-first century adhesives and plastics that demand models of matter as dynamic, interactive, and spontaneous. Beyond this, the stunning theoretical advances of quantum physics and the life sciences, importantly including ecology and ethology, underline the urgency of reforms demanded in the fundamental ontology of matter for any adequate contemporary philosophical approach to the nature of nature.

Jonas and Mayr were fully justified, then, in pushing ahead with their reasonable speculations, widely recognized today as far from groundless,

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