

## **Bodily Knowledge: Medicine, the Human, and the University**

**Todd A. P. Best**

*Editor's note: In April, Todd Best delivered a paper on the concept of human personhood in the practice and teaching of medicine at the School of Medicine at the University of Missouri-Columbia. The following is an abridged version of that lecture.*

It is difficult to conceive of significant academic conversations that do not touch on or make assumptions about what we humans are and how academic work is related to us. Notions about what it means to be human are perhaps the most fundamental ideas in the academic disciplines in the university. Sometimes these views are latent, and sometimes they are stated more clearly. In some disciplines, though, we get a highly focused attention on the human, and in these places we are pressed with issues that call for our reflection. The humanities immediately come to mind, obviously, but so do the social sciences and medicine. It is the latter that has gotten our attention recently through ever-increasing and ever-important bio-technical questions like cloning, stem cell research, and end-of-life ethics. While these issues have rightly turned certain people to focus on ethical analysis in order to figure out the way to proceed in particular situations, these situations demand something more in the science, teaching, and practice of medicine. What we need prior to ethical pathways is something more foundational – we need a more comprehensive understanding of what we take human beings to be. Medicine, then, is a discipline where the concept of the human calls for reflection, not only for the sake of medicine, but more importantly for the sake of humans.

However we conceive of medicine, its practitioners, students, recipients, and commentators all agree that one thing is in view: the health of human persons. But is it really that easy to understand what this phrase means? In medicine, we face a problem at the onset in that it

is likely that we all have slightly different notions of what health is or should be. Behind these disagreements, however, lies the more fundamental disagreement in the university and in medicine over what it means to be human persons. To say it another way, we have a difficult time comprehending 'human personhood' and, consequently, we have difficulty defining 'human health'. Yet, it is in medicine, perhaps more than any other discipline, where we are pressed with the reality of the human and the desire for health. Medicine is a place where understanding these terms is vitally important – it is here where we find ourselves either assuming definitions about both or we fumble around trying to define something for which we have few resources.

Any inquiry into these issues, though, has to do with our inclination to recognize the existence of meaning beyond our material bodies, and when we begin to look for resources beyond medicine or science to supply meaning, we find ourselves in the realm of wisdom traditions and spirituality – more simply put, religious ideas. And if we are trafficking in religious ideas, we need religious resources. Could it be possible that a discipline such as medicine pushes us to seek and offer understandings that are fundamentally religious, whether or not we attach ourselves to a particular religious tradition? I want to suggest that in the university and in medicine our current understanding of human personhood is inadequate for human health, and that a particular religious understanding of human personhood can revitalize whatever disciplines involve the human in their subject matter.

Sadly, in the modern academy there is no room for much of this kind of discussion. Perhaps a certain amount of avoidance is justified. Often when religion finds its way into the conversation here, the spiritual gets scientized, for example, all the commotion lately over whether our brains are hardwired to believe in God; or the spiritual ends up being some kind of far-out mystical psychobabble, which is often by nature anti-intellectual and unable to address genuine questions in a thoughtful way. As a result, we tend to settle for explanations through science alone. Yet, the best science tells us it does not offer meaning, but merely describes what it sees. Our predicament, then, is that our tendency toward a certain narrow approach to knowledge ends up being woefully inadequate to address our deeper concerns. But if we are in search of a compelling understanding of the human, we must first come to terms with the context which makes it difficult even to propose meaningful ideas about the human: the modern university.

In the university, almost every discipline, including medicine, assumes certain things to be true about human personhood. At the same time, when pressed, each discipline has a fairly difficult time articulating a definition of the human. But why is this the case? Human nature has not always seemed so elusive. Today we find ourselves in an intellectual context that has nearly made it impossible to have the kind of discussion that is needed to think about the human. To think about humanity, we basically need religious resources from which to draw. Our modern system of higher education, however, holds that genuine knowledge is not possible or is reduced to a narrow scientific knowledge. This view does not allow for explanations from extra-scientific sources that are required to supply knowledge about something like human nature.

The particular framework through which things in the university are viewed is often referred to as naturalism. The modern university and its naturalistic approach to knowledge present us with a significant limitation in trying to think about human nature. As one of the defining marks of the modern university, naturalism is the basic outlook we assume whereby everything that exists and happens does so within a closed physical system. In a closed system, the natural order is all that there is. What we can know, then, is what we discover through the processes

and entities that we see and measure through the empirical sciences. The closed-ness of this way of thinking refers to the way things are set up as unalterable and unaffected by anything outside the natural order. In fact, there is nothing outside the natural order, and everything happens according to the law-like and determinative processes of this system, making all that happens necessary and having only physical causes. With this as the intellectual backdrop of the modern university, frequently the only claims that are taken to be possible are things that can be empirically observed, measured, and tested.

At least three inadequacies of this way of thinking come to mind when addressing human personhood. The first limitation of our naturalistic understanding is our incapacity to give a comprehensive account of knowledge by which we might think about the concept of the human. A purely physical analysis fails to provide an explanation for reality as a whole. What we are able to comment on is whatever can be discovered through the scientific method, and this ends up being only one kind of knowledge, about only one part of reality – that which can be observed by the senses. The effect is that we too easily and blindly rest on scientific knowledge alone when there has been knowledge recognized throughout previous centuries that comes from sources like the humanities, religious and wisdom traditions, and the arts. To say it another way, while we'd like our naturalistic perspective to be the all-encompassing system in which and by which all existence occurs, by its very nature it cannot support these magisterial claims. Our naturalistic ways of knowing, on this count, leave us silently twiddling our thumbs when asked to give account of human existence beyond the physical.

A second inadequacy in a naturalistic understanding of human nature is that our naturalistic perspective offers no account for concepts of virtue in the human experience, something that is vital for thinking about the pursuit of health. Things like goodness, justice, love, morality, and beauty are utter mysteries within a closed naturalistic system, if they are even acknowledged. For our purposes in thinking about human health, questions like “what is good for humans?” and “what is human flourishing?” remain unanswered, indeed they are unanswerable in a naturalistic view. At a very basic level, human health has to do with what is good for humans. It is impossible to think about human health, though, with only the resources of naturalism, even if we are committed to allowing only the most tested procedures and technology. The very notion of doing what is good for people requires us to have in mind the idea of what would be better than something else, and a naturalistic perspective can offer no capacity for evaluation (or values), but only “facts.”

This narrow approach to knowledge, in turn, points to a third inadequacy of our naturalistic view, namely, our inability to acknowledge humanity as the end purpose of the university. Cultural essayist Wendell Berry has offered several critical assessments of higher education in America in which he argues that over-specialization in the disciplines has led to the lack of common language for talking about any kind of unifying vision of what the purpose of the university is. As disciplines continue to subdivide and further specialize, we go deeper and deeper into jargon-filled, exclusive discourses where the only people with whom we are in conversation are those in our own sub-specialties. The disciplines become sealed off in their own linguistic worlds, and the result is a highly fragmented and intellectually segregated university which has no ability to communicate with other disciplines that might actually round out our knowledge. Berry says this reveals the much deeper problem of a loss of vision for “what is being made” through knowledge in the university, namely humanity. “The thing being made in the university is humanity,” he writes. “What universities, at least public-supported ones, are *mandated* to make or to help to make is human beings in the fullest sense of those words – not just trained workers or knowledgeable citizens but responsible heirs and members of human culture.”<sup>1</sup>

For the university, making humanity is no small task – it requires consideration on how to approach it, and it happens whether or not it is recognized. Humanity will be produced; the question is, what will guide the university in this work? Will a naturalist understanding be adequate? Or is something more required? Perhaps a religious framework can offer us a compelling account of the human in contrast to the inadequacies of our operative naturalism. In the biblical narrative of Creation, Fall, and Redemption, we see the trajectory of human history in relation to the Creator/God where the Creator brings the world into existence in its pristine, original, and perfect form; then, human beings, the only animals in the Creation who have moral responsibility, rebel against God, instigating the Fall of the human race and corrupting themselves and the rest of the created order; finally, through his own provision God promises to restore all of Creation – this is Redemption. God perfectly creates. Humanity falls, tainting all of Creation. And God redeems by offering restoration to all things. In the aftermath of this, and as participants in fallen humanity, all of us experience a bit of the beauty of Creation, overwhelming evidence of the fall, and to some degree the promise of restoration. By embracing each of these elements, a more satisfying understanding of humanity, and therefore of human health, can be found.

First, Creation provides us with an inherent notion of ‘ideal essence’, so that we sense the way things are supposed to be, including an optimal humanity. The doctrine of Creation affirms that everything was created as “good” and with divine purpose, in its ideal state. The Jewish/Old Testament notion of *Shalom* perhaps best captures what the original goodness of Creation was like. *Shalom*, often translated simply as peace, carries with it the idea of health, wholeness, and flourishing. When we contemplate the world and ourselves, we can see remnants of this goodness and we can imagine the way things are supposed to work, in wholeness and harmony. As we reflect on our humanity, we are often struck by the thought of how things ought to be for us, in spite of our difficulty experiencing this reality.

Furthermore, while the notion of Creation helps us affirm the goodness of the physical world, it also pushes us to seek meaning beyond the physical. When we think about human identity, we acknowledge that our personhood is deeply connected to our bodies, but at least in the Christian view of Creation, our physical bodies are not all there is. Creation supplies us with a metaphysical reality that many call the soul, that immaterial component of our existence. Recognizing an existence of the soul means that we need to consider care for the soul as well as care for the body.

Finally, as we consider human capacities in this good Creation there is something we must not miss: we are created beings and therefore, there is a Creator to whom we are obligated. This shows us that we are not the masters of our destiny as much as we like to think, and it should cause us to revere and respect the Creator as we seek to discover how to be humans as the Creator intended. The implication in our quest for knowledge is that inevitably because of our finite minds we will not be able to gain understanding into all that we'd like, and therefore we must leave room for mystery in our quest for knowledge. One of the necessary operating principles of medicine is that there are ways that the body works or is supposed to work, and this guides us in how we treat the body when it is sick. If some biological process is malfunctioning, we do not know that it is malfunctioning unless we know what it means to function correctly. This is the mark of Creation, and its residue runs throughout our bodies and our experience.

If Creation reveals an ideal of the human, thinking about the Fall reveals that we have lost the consistent experience of Creation's harmonious goodness. We now find ourselves in disrepair, both physically and morally. Through the Fall, we experience the breaking of Shalom. The very fact that we have medicine to bring about repair in the body and that we seek ethical guidance in this activity, reveals that on all accounts, material and immaterial, we are in need of restoration and healing. The implications for understanding the results of the Fall are significant for understanding human personhood and the concept of health. We see, primarily, that we are in disrepair, and we do indeed have limits. We are limited in what we can know and do, and when we push beyond these boundaries we often experience even more of our sickness. The seventeenth century French philosopher and physicist Blaise Pascal observed our sense of lack in his *Pensees* by pointing out that we experience lament over not having what our bodies might be missing. He says that we expect someone who has less than two eyes to be unhappy, but we do not find ourselves longing for three eyes. In other words, we have a sense of the way things are supposed to be through our disrepair. This, Pascal says, is a paradox of the greatness and wretchedness of human nature, whereby we realize the greatness of humanity in our ability to see our wretchedness.<sup>2</sup>

Our coming to terms with the brokenness that comes from our fallen human condition will lead us to long for restoration and wholeness. And that leads to our final point: that Redemption gives us hope for human health to be a possibility. Here in the work of Redemption we see that the Creator has not given up on the tainted Creation or its creatures, and we see hope for something like human health. To redeem means to buy back something that has been lost, and in the Redemption that the Creator offers, God goes to extreme measures to restore all of Creation to wholeness. If we see the original Creation as a state of Shalom, and we see our fallen world as a place of Shalom-breaking, in Redemption, we can now experience, at least in part, Shalom-restoration. In contrast to our fallen humanity, God becomes a human in the person of Christ, he accomplishes redemption through the mystery of the atonement, and he extends to creation his work of "making all things new". This renewal is a remaking of sorts in the original goodness of creation. Undeserved and due to no merit of our own, Redemption offers us the possibility to move towards restoration, and to return to harmony with God, with ourselves, with our fellow humans, and with non-human nature as well.

In the quest for clarity on what is meant by human health, we need understanding into what human personhood entails and into what it would mean to achieve health. While there is plenty of need for imaginative work on this topic, a framework of Creation, Fall, and Redemption, in contrast to our naturalistic tendencies, has the potential to invigorate the way we pursue knowledge in the university and the way we practice, teach, and learn medicine. To recognize that Created human existence is something more marvelous than we will know, that Fallen human existence is something more awful than we care to acknowledge, and that Redeemed human existence is something more promising that we can imagine is to have an understanding for human flourishing in which medicine and the university can celebrate and explore the mysteries that accompany our frail human experience.

*Todd A. P. Best is Program Administrator at the Christian Study Center. He has an M.A. in religious studies from the University of Florida.*

Used by permission. The preceding appeared in *Reconsiderations* Vol. 4.4, a publication of the Christian Study Center of Gainesville (Florida).

<sup>1</sup> Wendell Berry, "The Loss of the University," *Home Economics* (New York: North Point Press, 1987), p. 77.

<sup>2</sup> Blaise Pascal, *Pensees* (London: Penguin Books, 1995), p. 30.