

Promethean Medical Temptations

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Superheroes attract us. From Greek gods to Superman and Spiderman, our fascination with the awesome deeds of superheroes beckons us to become Masters of our own destiny. Yet even as we enjoy the fantasy of acquiring Promethean powers to combat our enemies and conquer evil, we have legitimate misgivings about mere mortals taking on god-like powers in real life. We are concerned about those who play with fire just like Prometheus did, at the risk of harm and great destruction. Today, as modern medicine tries to rebuff death and control our humanity in ever more sophisticated ways, new temptations arise that challenge us to choose between life and death, between living in reality and living in a fantasy world where we elevate ourselves as “Masters of our own destiny.”

We encounter these Promethean temptations today in the expanding fields of reproductive medicine and infertility. We may be drawn to the idea of “manufacturing” children through *in vitro* fertilization and related forms of assisted reproductive technologies. By producing and manipulating our children in laboratory glassware, however, we cross a critical line and sever our obedience to the Giver of life. We assume the role of Masters over, rather than recipients of, our own

offspring. We allow our children to be mistreated as so many embryonic tokens — with some being frozen in liquid nitrogen and others being discarded as biomedical waste. We take on the seemingly divine role of creating another human being and reigning supreme over his or her destiny.

We are tempted toward this same type of Promethean mastery at the other end of life. While we recognize that we cannot avoid death, we may be troubled and vexed by the possibility of a protracted and painful dying process. We may decide that the best answer is to “take charge” of the situation and move into the driver’s seat, resolutely calling the final shots ourselves. By ending life “on our own terms” through physician-assisted suicide, we hope to steer around the sufferings and agonies of the dying process. Yet suicide clearly goes against the grain of the kind of creatures we are, creatures intended for life, not death.

The temptation that flashes before us when we consider suicide is the fantasy of becoming “Master” over our destiny by arrogating to ourselves direct power over life and death. We begin to accept the falsehood that we are uniquely in charge of our own destiny, and can remake or destroy ourselves as if we were gods. It is but a short step, then,

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for us to take further powers unto ourselves, lording it over the fate and destiny of others through activities like euthanasia, direct abortion, and human embryonic stem cell research.

Although we are creatures intended for life, we may not be entirely clear about how we came to possess that life. We sense how we have been cast headlong into existence without asking for it, and we know, with certainty, that we did not create ourselves or have any role in bringing ourselves into being. The fact that we were created entirely apart from our own will means that our existence has been intentionally chosen by Another. The goodness and beauty of our life has been independently conferred on us by One who has radically willed our personal existence. Because that existence is good and beautiful, it ought always to be treated as such, and never directly violated.

The goodness and beauty of the human life we have received is also connected to the gift of our masculinity or femininity. Yet here we also face the temptation of Promethean mastery as we imagine we can become the opposite sex, or that we needn't be either male or female, but can be any of dozens of different

“gender identities.” We engage in the fantasy that our embodied nature is fluid and malleable, and that we can vanquish our birth sex, remaking ourselves through the gender bending powers of medicine and science. But the damage that this fantasy can wreak in a short space of time — the hormones, the surgeries, the irreversible decisions and mutilated bodies — is not trivial. The lives of many thousands of individuals, convinced they have become Masters of their own identities, have already been irretrievably altered or ruined, often with the assistance of other medical or political Masters.

The ever-expanding powers of biomedicine call us to careful ethical reflection and discernment, so we do not fall prey to the temptation of seeing ourselves as Masters, rather than collaborators with God, our inalienable Source of life and being.

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