



Ethics in Conversation

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The Concept of Limitation in Emil Brunner's Ethics Cody M. Chambers

In this edition of *Ethics in Brief*, Chambers draws on the theological ethics of Emil Brunner to remind us that we find true freedom in embracing our creaturely, God-given limits. Emil Brunner (1889-1966) was a major Swiss theologian who also wrote extensively on ethics. Much of his work is available in English and remains a fertile source for Christian ethical reflection, as Chambers demonstrates.

Introduction

Contemporary ideas of freedom often emphasize the removal of human limitations for the sake of human empowerment and the advancement of all things related to the human spirit. In contrast, Emil Brunner emphasizes that limitations and boundaries actual define who we are as people and that this is necessary for successful human life. By looking at Brunner's anthropology and its implications for ethics, we can see that specific boundaries in a field such as medicine do in fact help us be fully human. These boundaries come into play in both medical practice and the new technology of gene editing, and by re-evaluating these areas we may gain new insight into applied ethics.



Emil Brunner and Karl Barth

"Personal Being Is Ethical"

To many readers, Emil Brunner is known for his response to the problems of 20th-century Liberal Theology alongside that of his friend, though sometimes opponent, Karl Barth. Brunner did specifically address the field of ethics in his *Das Gebot und die Ordnungen* (published in English as *The Divine Imperative*), but his classic of theological anthropology *Man in Revolt* provides some of the best insight into ethics thanks to its careful analysis of human nature. In particular, in his chapter "The Problem of Freedom" Brunner discusses the problems related to the human spirit's longing for freedom and its inherent "unfreedom" resulting from alienation from God.

Brunner spends much of his time discussing our humanity in terms of the Word of God and our Origin in God. When we understand inter-personal relationship—something existing in the Godhead in the Trinity and then extended by God to the people he has created—then we begin to understand human interactions and what is ethical:

[Limitation on] freedom, which marks the boundary between the Creator and the creature, does not spell loss for man; rather it is this limitation which alone gives his life its human meaning ... This limitation gives shape and form to life. Through it the human "I" is set over against the divine "Thou" and it receives at the same time its boundary and independence over against the human "Thou." Freedom in responsibility, freedom for love is the personal meaning of human existence.¹

¹ Emil Brunner, *Man in Revolt* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1939) p.266

In a very real way, limitation brings definition to relationships and fullness to being human. Human ambitions to create and extend influence come in conflict with others if inter-personal relationships are forgotten:

Personal being is ethical, but the man who simply wants to be creative regards the ethical simply as a tiresome restriction. The claims of his neighbour cut across his creative activity, responsibility in the sight of God narrows the circle of that which is aesthetically possible, brings an "Either-Or" into a life of possibilities in which all is still fluid, and turns the vague possibility of doing "This" or "That" into the plain demand that something definite should be done. ... This "narrow-mindedness" is precisely the personal element, the limitation of my otherwise unrestricted possibilities by the "Thou."²

Brunner uses the example of creativity and aesthetics to show that the impulses of the human spirit tend to disregard the importance of the "personal element" and lead us into an offense against our neighbour. This is at its heart unethical. By remembering that our relationship with God is first about God-defined boundaries reflecting the Creator-creature relationship, we then are able to understand inter-personal relationships with other human beings defined by ethical principles.

Some Implications for Medical Ethics

In order to understand Brunner's idea that limitation makes us human, we might look briefly at end-of-life care in the field of medicine. Physician and author Atul Gawande in his *Being Mortal* explores questions concerning our humanity brought to the fore by modern medicine. In relating his early experience as a surgical resident treating an elderly man with incurable cancer, he reflects on the success of a medical procedure within the larger context of the failure of medical practitioners in their obligation to the patient:

His oncologists, radiation therapists, surgeons, and other doctors had all seen him through months of treatments for a problem that they knew could not be cured. We could never bring ourselves to discuss the larger truth about his conditions or the ultimate limits of our capabilities, let alone what might matter most to him as he neared the end of his life.³

Even as a young doctor, Gawande knew that the success of one procedure might conceal the overall failure to understand a man in need of human relationship, particularly in his time of incurable disease. Gawande contrasts this case with the experience of his grandfather, a farmer in a small Indian village who lived to be almost a hundred and ten years of age with the help of his extended family. The inter-personal relationships with children, grandchildren, nieces and nephews not only helped him survive in old age but also provided a human context which made his final years of life full.

Gawande concludes that modern medicine with its technological advances can be harmful in that it distracts us from what is important, such as human relationships:

Modernization did not demote the elderly. It demoted the family. It gave people—the young and the old—a way of life with more liberty and control, including the liberty to be less beholden to other generations. The veneration of elders may be gone, but not because it has been replaced by the veneration of youth. It's been replaced by veneration of the independent self.⁴

When modernity and its trappings cause us to ignore our human limitations and encourage us to disregard human relationships, our lives become impoverished and even inhuman. When it encourages the triumph of the human spirit in one small area at the expense of human well-being in the larger context of human interactions, it is a deception and even a "delusion" according to Gawande.⁵ I think by understanding that we humans are actually created for limitation and that this is a necessary part of human relationships, then we will understand ethical practices in a field like medicine as well as the fullness of human life.

² Brunner, *Revolt*, p.267

³ Atul Gawande, *Being Mortal* (New York: Picador, 2014) p.5-6

⁴ Gawande, *Mortal*, p.22

⁵ Gawande, *Mortal*, p.6

The Limits of Genetic Thinking

As we try to understand our humanity in terms of its limits, Brunner makes another important point concerning how we think about things. Modern scientific endeavours are characterized by reductionistic thinking in many respects, and genetic research is a good example of a field which reaches conclusions based upon tracing the causes of a problem back to a narrow, originating source. However, Brunner warns us that such “genetic thinking” puts our understanding of what it means to be human in jeopardy. While it is true that we can understand the origins of a disease such as cystic fibrosis by examining the genetic material of a person’s chromosomes, there are other aspects of the human being which are unrelated to the DNA code. Brunner puts it this way:

For the perception of the meaningful as full of meaning, of that which is in harmony with the norm as normal, of the understanding of the beautiful as beautiful, of the Good as good, of the True as true, of the Holy as holy, *the genetic idea cannot help us.*⁶

Without meaning—which originates in God but also includes other human beings who all have their origin in spiritual relationship to God—life is not really human.

A Contemporary Issue: Gene Editing

The technological ability to edit the human genome is at hand, and the journal *The New Bioethics* recently addressed the topic in its first issue of 2018 (Vol. 24). To quote contributor Christoph Rehmann-Sutter:

What was practically inconceivable – modifying just one detail in the whole DNA sequence of an organism in a near perfect way, and without causing serious side effects (off-target mutations and other unwanted effects) – has now come within reach. The obvious lack of safety at the present time is no longer a convincing ethical argument for rejecting human germline gene editing (hGGE) *in principle*. It is only an argument *for the present time.*⁷

This issue features an article by the pioneering researchers at Newcastle University, Craven, *et al.*, and also comments from James Davison, an expert in metabolic diseases at Great Ormond Street Hospital for Children in London. Dutch philosopher Hub Zwart covers some of the existential questions concerning our humanity and develops his argument as a complement to Francis Collins’s conception of DNA as “the language of God.”⁸ While the genetic code may be one “text” which makes up our humanity, Zwart states that there is a second “text” as well, namely the religious-cultural influence of sacred writings, such as the Bible for the Christian.

Using Aristotle and Jacques Lacan, Zwart shows that “our basic ability to be addressed”⁹ indicates that being human involves more than just biological abilities rooted in the genome. I think this is due to the fact that personal being originates in the One who created humanity in His image.

The Word of God and Being Human

While the DNA code tells us remarkable things about the body and how it works, Hub Zwart makes the insightful point that our humanity may be explained by more than just the letters and words of the nucleotides and their sequence. For the Christian, this is based on the words of Scripture, but this text is important primarily because it is God’s self-disclosure to people. This is seen in no better place than in Christ, as articulated in John’s Gospel:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made. In him was life, and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.¹⁰

⁶ Brunner, *Revolt*, p.397. Emphasis added.

⁷ Christoph Rehmann-Sutter, “Why Human Germline Editing is More Problematic than Selecting Between Embryos: Ethically Considering Intergenerational Relationships,” *The New Bioethics*, 24:1 (2108), p.10

⁸ H.A.E. (Hub) Zwart, “In the Beginning Was the Genome: Genomics and the Bi-textuality of Human Existence,” *The New Bioethics*, 24:1 (2018), p.27

⁹ Zwart, “In the Beginning Was the Genome,” p.35

¹⁰ John 1:1-5

This echoes Genesis chapter 1, as God speaks the world into being:
And God said, "Let there be light," and there was light.¹¹

However, John's emphasis makes it clear that God's action in the world has entered a profound stage because this word is embodied in the very Word of God, Jesus Christ. This line of thinking continues with the Apostle Paul as he refers to how God created humanity in his image, but that this is now fully disclosed in Christ:

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together.¹²

In his explication of the doctrine of humankind, Brunner shows that theories of human existence which ignore spiritual being—such as those only concerned with the physical reality of genetics—fall short:

The necessity for decision, an obligation which he can never evade, is the distinguishing feature of man. It implies therefore—in contrast to all sub-human existence—a form of being which at every moment posits itself, thinking-willing being, the kind of being which is being for self. ... It is a being for self it is true, but it is not self-originated; it is the creaturely counterpart of His Divine Self-existence, posited by God Himself; it is the being created by God to stand "over-against" Himself, who can reply to God, and who in this answer alone fulfils—or destroys—the purpose of God's creation.¹³

It's not hard to see from Brunner's mention of the distinctively human endeavour of decision that such notions are key for the field of ethics. A misunderstanding of our humanity because of the lack of a metaphysical basis for such a concept may lead us to an ethical framework that in turn is inhuman. Zwart alludes to this in his conclusion:

This requires a shift of focus from ethical issues in the applied sense of the term towards the broader cultural ambiance of the science-society debate, for instance by reflecting on the impact of genomics on human self-understanding. If such a dialogue would focus solely on applied ethics deliberations, we may easily fall into the trap of seeing science as liberating and progressive, while metaphysical and religious world-views are framed as conservative and restrictive.¹⁴

As we seek to cure disease and apply new medical technologies, let us not forget the context of our humanity, one which involves profound spiritual aspects related to God.

Conclusion

While safety is an important concern for medical research and practice, gene editing presents important challenges concerning what it means to be human and these may conceal dangers of more significance. In his *Man in Revolt*, Brunner comments on the peculiar nature of humankind and the implications for understanding what actually threatens us:

The peculiar element, the specific element of the species *homo sapiens* is this, that it is not a species in which the individual is an example, but *humanitas*, in which the individual is a person. It belongs therefore to the peculiarities of this "species" that the individual is able to abandon it and to deny it, that—at least within certain limits—he can become an "in-human" human being. That is the dangerous freedom which belongs to this independence.¹⁵

If we lose our understanding of how our origin is in God and how we are in reality finite individuals created for dependence on God, we may lose sight of the fact that disease is not our greatest threat. In turn, by neglecting human relationships and how they outweigh the physical maladies that concern us, we may chart new ground in terms of technical prowess but lose what makes us human.

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¹¹ Genesis 1:3

¹² Colossians 1:15-17

¹³ Brunner, *Revolt*, p.98.

¹⁴ Zwart, "In the Beginning Was the Genome," p.41.

¹⁵ Brunner, *Revolt*, 286.