



BILL MOYERS' WORLD OF IDEAS

Leon Kass - Part I

Associate Producer: Andie Tucher

Executive Producer: Jack Sameth

Executive Editor: Bill Moyers

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Leon Kass — Part I

BILL MOYERS: *Jon camera!* Good evening. I'm Bill Moyers. We've been hearing a lot of rhetoric from the political candidates about values. In the first presidential debate this Fall, George Bush used the word "values" six times in his two-minute opening statement alone. But, there are other voices to be heard on the matter of values. There's the voice of the philosopher, the teacher, the scientist, the physician, who must make those hard decisions about life and death. Tonight and tomorrow night you'll hear all those voices from one man. Join me for a conversation with Leon Kass.

(voice-over) Leon Kass puts body and soul together uniquely as a physician and philosopher. He was trained as a doctor, earned a PhD in Biochemistry from Harvard, studied the classic texts of social thought, and now teaches at the University of Chicago. He found that his study of science raised questions science couldn't answer, that it often throws icy waters on the human spirit. So he wrote a book to explore the moral implications of biology in the modern world. It is rich in a vocabulary not often found in a scientific text, including the idea of soul.

(Interviewing) Do you believe we have souls?

LEON KASS: I think if one means by a soul some kind of center of organized power, of desire, of feeling, of awareness, of freedom of choice, I certainly think we do. Whether this is something which survives the body, whether it's got my own—whether my soul has my name written on it, whether when I die it goes someplace else, about that I'm much less certain, and certainly wouldn't pretend to know. But there's something that happens when perfectly ordinary, elementary chemicals are organized in a certain way, that particular organization evinces and manifests powers that the parts don't have on their own. Where this came from to begin with, I have no idea. But you could take every chemical in the human body, you could put it together in some certain way, but it wouldn't add up yet to the powers to do what living things do—and I mean not just cerebration and consciousness, but I mean in these lowly powers of metabolism, excretion, respiration and digestion—these things which we do, in a way, automatically. For example, people are at work on the human emotions, studying various chemicals in the hypothalamus part of the brain. One of my colleagues boasts that in a few decades we will be able to provide a biochemical explanation of human love. Now one, I'm sure, might be able to find various kinds of chemicals that if injected into the brain, might produce various kinds of feelings. But I think one could say as a matter of principle, from the beginning, that no motion of, no chemical, is going to be adequate to do justice to the experience of human love, or anger, or shame, or any of the things that we as human beings alive in the world know best. For that reason, it seems to me, this very classical notion of soul is useful.

MOYERS: You certainly don't find evidence of the soul when you are numbing around in the nuis of human life, a cadaver, a body.

KASS: No, and on the other hand, I find every evidence of it I need when I'm sitting here talking to you. That is, I mean, I see in your face and in your eyes that there is concentration, that there is a certain desire to understand. In some kind of mysterious way we more or less are understanding one another, and although I'm making my effort to be intelligible, I also have the feeling that something is also working through me. That may sound mystical to my scientific colleagues, but it's not just molecules in motion that make up intelligibility. Nor is it the experience—does it somehow explain the experience of grief, or even appetite. It seems to me that there is a kind of center of inwardness in all living things, more complex and richer as one goes up the evolutionary scale, and obviously fullest—as far as we know—in ourselves, where that inwardness can be an object of its own beholding, that is where we can become conscious of ourselves.

MOYERS: Doesn't this suggest that whatever the history of evolution, of natural selection, mere survival does not seem to be its only aim, its only purpose?

KASS: No, I think this is a very hard case to make, but I think it's crucial. I think one of the least appreciated beauties, if one could call it that, of the evolutionary process, is that powers emerge which, to begin with, might be mere means of increasing survival, but which acquire a kind of life of their own, separate from their being merely in the service of survival. And they

become part of the life of the organism, for the sake of which the organism seeks to survive. For example, sensation, the power to see and to perceive the world. It's certainly useful for survival, but its meaning to an organism is not exhausted by the contribution it makes to survival. Witness what human beings do in the visual arts and their appreciation of beauty.

MOYERS: You said something that's not going to endear you to your scientific friends. You said it to a friend of mine when you said that we have to turn less to science for the answers, and should start worrying about leading a moral life. What's your definition of a moral life?

KASS: Well, good. I know, I deserved that one. I mean, I do spend a lot of time waving the flag. One should be held to account. You know, I suspect—I've been thinking, trying to think on the spot, since you asked—I think it's some notion of human excellence, or human fulfillment that ties these things together. Too many people, I think, would be content to define the moral life in terms of these sort of basic rules that are constitutive for any decent society. I mean, taboos about incest and cannibalism, thou shalt not murder, thou shalt not steal. And I find with my students, in fact, when you get into a conversation about ethics, they want to run immediately to those things, and if someone is not a thief or a murderer, what else is there to say? Where it seems to me the moral life more broadly understood has to do with the question of ordering one's aspirations and trying to reach, both in one's individual life and one's family and communal life, for things that stir the heart and win the admiration of ourselves as human beings. And if one speaks about human aspiration, one has to confront the fact that we are, if aspiring creatures, only finitely so. And we are born with these inevitable tendencies toward decay and, finally, to death. And I know that there's much in our tradition that regards death as a colossal affront to any pretense of human dignity, and only if there is, in a way, redemption from mortality could one really hold one's human head erect. But I'm inclined to think that, like any dramatist's hands—five acts in which to have a good show. And to have those around one participate in a much better display of our humanity. So fulfillment is not the same thing as the last occasion, although by the way there are all kinds of people who reveal the dignity of their lives to the very end and, in fact, have much to teach us about how they have lived also by the way in which they die.

MOYERS: You think these powers within us, this inward inherent integrating power, yearns for something?

KASS: It seems that way. Well, there are lots of philosophers who try to say what it is—and I'm enough of an eclectic to be moved by many of them—whether it means sharing a life, sharing a soul with another human being that one loves, or whether it means that it craves understanding or whether it craves some kind of permanent deed in the great cosmic ledger, whether it craves some kind of participation in the divine. I don't know what it is, but I guess I would have to say I in some way feel it.

MOYERS: Do you think your students, when they cut up a cadaver, think about such things? I mean, there are the molecules, there are the chemical properties, there are the remains of an organic life, but nothing remains pointing toward the love, the emotions, the feelings, the passions.

KASS: Well, it's curious. I mean, I think the science that our medical students study is so powerful in its ability to analyze and predict and control the body, and so impoverished, if I may speak bluntly, in its understanding of the human aspect—an emotional and experiential aspect of human life. This science that the students learn doesn't really adequately prepare them for the first encounter with a dead body. If the living body is supposed to be understood in terms of molecules in motion, then the dead body ought to be no mystery whatsoever. I mean, it's just a heap of stuff, not doing very much of anything. And yet the medical students encounter this—most of them, I won't say all—with a kind of horror, or a kind of dread, a kind of recognition that though this is body, it's not body in the same sense of the physicist or chemist, but it is the moral remains of an individual human being which, in some respects, still bears the marks of the life that was lived. I mean, one can look at the hands, and as the hands in life are expressive of the difference between, let us say, an artist and a construction worker, or there are even— even ways in which the face is marked. The students are led to wonder about, you know, who was this person? And they make distinctions. And they show a certain kind of shame with respect to the genitalia. They have great difficulty looking on the face. And it really means that

these students about to be doctors still have a certain appreciation of the superficial, or of the profundity of what's superficial in human life that all of their analytic science hasn't — at least as yet — washed out of them. Now, whether they don't lose even more of it in the process of the technical training is a worrisome question, and one that I am very concerned about.

MOYERS: You tell a remarkable story about a man you knew, a man with an amazing mind — powers of memory, powers of understanding — who dies. Can you tell me that story?

KASS: Yes. This was really an extraordinary mind, and I don't think I feel particularly embarrassed to say that in his presence, or reading his writings, I always had the feeling that this was off the scale, that this was something —

MOYERS: Extraordinary.

KASS: —really extraordinary.

MOYERS: Genius?

KASS: Yes. And I knew him only at the end of his life, when he was a man of failing health and failing powers. He was hospitalized — and this was when we were still living in Annapolis — and I went to visit him in the hospital, as I had done a number of times before. And on the way into the room I asked the nurse, who was coming out, how he was doing. And was told, "Didn't you know? He had died about an hour ago." And I walked in, in the room, and there he was, sort of lying in bed, very peaceful. And had I not been told by the nurse, would have taken him for sleep — for being asleep. And I don't really know what happened in the immediate few moments, but I remember finding myself on my knees at the end of the bed now, and sort of thunderstruck. Here he was, but he wasn't there at all. It was a kind of mocking of the life that was by the facts and the gestalt and — almost the smile on his face. And all I could think of was — where is he? And where is this mind? What's happened to it? And this phenomena of the extinction of a human being, so awful whenever you encounter it, and only, I think, more so under these circumstances, because so unexpected, and because what was lost was really so great. That, it seems to me, gives anybody pause in thinking that one is going to have an adequate bodily account of what you mean by the human soul.

MOYERS: Where are all the books that were not written, all the thoughts that were inarticulate?

KASS: Right, and which no one else is going to write.

MOYERS: And you say, "Here there was vastly less than meets the eye. The dead body may be more than what our science teaches, but it is also less than what it appears to be. The body may be more than stuff, but the man seems to be more than his body."

KASS: Well, this is the companion story, really, of the experience in the anatomy laboratory. I mean, there the students come upon this body. And they respond to it as if, in fact, the body is somehow more than the stuff that science has taught them. On the other hand, my encounter with this death makes it perfectly clear that here's a still warm body which is not yet the man. And that's not a problem to be solved. I think, as much as it is a deep and profound mystery to be acknowledged. On the one hand, we are, in a way, our bodies. I mean, our individuality is written into our fingerprints.

MOYERS: Those are not like anyone else's?

KASS: Right. And each of our blood cells are — every cell in our body bears the mark of our own unique genetic makeup. That's why it's so difficult to transplant and so on. On the other hand, even as we speak there's a way in which our bodies are silent and we are participating in some medium of understanding which is hard to reduce simply to body. And at the moment of death, one is acutely aware of the fact that however much we are self-identical with our body, there seems to be something about human life that is not simply reducible to or identifiable with, this hulk that we otherwise are.

MOYERS: You take a step from reflecting on morality, on the fact that we will die, to reflecting on our conduct, on morality. What explains the connection between the two in your thinking? In other words, if I'm going to go, I might as well burn the candle at both ends. Is there a difference between dead and good and dead and bad? Why not live it up?

KASS: Well, fair enough. I think the fact that we don't have world enough and time really sets the boundaries within which it is up to us to decide what to make of our limited three score and ten. And one response is certainly to say you go around only once, you might as well really enjoy it. I mean, we're all sitting in the desperation bar together and we might as well have a good

time and go out cheerfully. But it seems to me most of the lives of human beings that have stirred us and that we admire are people who have dedicated themselves not to the elementary pleasures, but to something noble, something fine, something that reaches beyond the low pleasures. It seems to me some encounter with necessity is the ground of taking one's life seriously. It's the ground of being sensitive to all of the really beautiful things in the world. It's the ground of being open to the call of something higher in which we have a chance to participate, whether it be perpetuation of our young, whether it be the future of our country, whether it be the arts, or philosophy or music. And it's the ground, really, of transforming what is otherwise merely necessary into an occasion of something really splendidly human. The Greek gods, the Greek poets made a lot of the difference between the humans and the immortals; the immortals are youthful and ageless and immortal, but their lives are very shallow. And one of my very favorite passages is the passage in *The Odyssey* where Odysseus is offered immortal life by the goddess Calypso — who was very beautiful, and he spent seven years with her — but he turns this down to return home, quite self-consciously, to his mortal wife, Penelope, and, in a way, to live for friendship, for family, for city, for country. That really is what it means to live humanly in the face of the sentence of death.

MOYERS: And is this because he is aware, one is aware, of the finite nature of the sentence here, of the time here? Do you think that morality — the choices grow out of the knowledge of death?

KASS: Oh, I think absolutely. I think — I mean, the extreme case is, of course, courage, where people self-consciously put their lives at risk for the sake of some other cause or, in fact, even to display their ability to rise above fear and self-concern, all the things connected with survival. But I think this same kind of rising above the attachment to mere life is found in almost every display of human virtue, whether it be generosity, whether it be a certain kind of compassionate humanity. Time is all we have to give, and whether you give it all in one moment on the field of battle, or whether self-consciously you know that it is that which you are, in a way, spending and have a chance to make something of it. It seems to me, without the real awareness of the meaning of time, we couldn't make our days count, and we couldn't make our deeds worth remembering.

MOYERS: You make me think of the 90th Psalm, "Teach us to count — teach us to number —

KASS: "To number our days, that we may get us a heart of wisdom."

MOYERS: In other words, by thinking about the days being numbered, we acquire wisdom.

KASS: Yes. Well, there's a wonderful passage, I think it's Augustine, that one should keep one's body as if one were going to live forever, and keep one's soul as if one were going to die tomorrow. And there's a way in which it's — there's such a thing as thinking too much about one's death, and one becomes morbid. But there is a way in which — I'll speak simply for myself — at a certain point it became very clear to me that time was limited, and it mattered a lot how one looked at things, and what one did; and the world is a different place.

MOYERS: What was that point?

KASS: It was partially the birth of my children; and they are, in a way, daily reminders that one's not a member of the frontier generation any longer. But especially the death of my father. I've always had this kind of image that he stood in front of me before the ditch, and he was no longer in the way, and the world is a different place. Everything looks different, I'm much more sensitive to all sorts of things.

MOYERS: What is the soul in Leon Kass yearn for, as far as you can identify those aspirations? You've got just about everything: successful scientist, physician, philosopher, father, husband, professor.

KASS: I guess having all of those works, it leaves one somewhat perplexed about what's at one's center. But I guess I would say I'm in the perpetuation business. I regard myself, in a way, as a teacher. I'm pretty much in the same business to keep alive certain kinds of questions and concerns, to make sure that these vital questions about what makes a human life worthwhile, what is a good community, what is the human good, that these questions not be submerged in our technical competence or a desire for prosperity. And that the young are wonderful, if you give them half a chance. These are the questions that really bother them, and if you provide them with the opportunity to think about those things, you give them the books that in a way raise those questions most profoundly and acutely, the little candle might stand up against the barbaric

darkness. Now, that's a rather modest ambition, but if what I got survives another generation, I have a feeling that I'm part of something much bigger than myself.

MOYERS: From the University of Chicago, this has been part one of a conversation with Leon Kass. Tomorrow we'll talk about how his philosophy applies to specific questions facing doctor and patient. I'm Bill Moyers.

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