Christianity and Bioethics

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**I. What is bioethics?**

Ben Mitchell and John F. Kilner in *Does God Need our Help?*

Bioethics is a process of “distinguishing between what we should pursue and what we shouldn’t pursue in matters of life and health.”

Morality vs ethics

Morality has to do with right and wrong and assumes an authoritative definition (for example the Bible).

Ethics has to do with better or worse or cost/benefit analysis and has primarily to do with human-human interaction.

Example:

Homosexuality is immoral but not unethical.

Lying is both unethical and immoral.

Using DDT is unethical but perhaps not immoral

We will look at issues which involve both morality and ethics.

**II. Why Should a Christian Care About Bioethics?**

Biotechnology: Scientific methodologies specifically directed toward manipulating living things—whether human or non-human.

Being in the image of God, one of our traits is the desire to create new things. This is not in and of itself immoral or unethical.

Examples: antibiotics, psychopharmaceuticals, genetically modified crops, recombinant DNA technologies (to produce necessary hormones such as insulin or blood clotting factors for example). Chemically engineered drugs, organ transplants, pacemakers, computer-aided prosthesis, gene therapy, stem cell and fetal tissue therapies, human and therapeutic cloning, neural implants (against Parkinsons, for example)

This is what I tell my SCI 110 class:

1. You think a new technology is ethically bad today, but 30 years from now you will celebrate it.

Blood transfusions, IVF

We should avoid a “knee-jerk” reaction to new technologies. This is the tendency to automatically be either for or against new ideas simply because they are new. (cloning, for example)

2. You think a new technology is a great idea today, but 30 years from now you will think it was an ethical disaster.

The law of unintended consequences. (kudzu, cane toad, etc.) These are primarily ethical rather than moral issues.

3. The pace of scientific discovery and production of new technologies has outpaced human’s ability to grasp the ethical implications.

4. You cannot trust the scientists on this one.

For better or worse, most scientists have the “Let’s do it and worry about the ethics later” attitude. Once you let the genie out of the bottle….

Artificial enhancements of human intellectual capabilities.

Breast implants, anabolic steroids. Some legitimate therapeutic drugs are used for enhancement purposes (Ritalin, SSRIs, antidepressants, etc.). Will drugs to fight Alzheimer’s be used to heighten memory among the healthy? Eugenics to eliminate deafness, genetic diseases, to improve athletic abilities, etc. Eyeglasses and hearing aids are in this category.

The future is almost here. Nanotechnology promises to enhance our muscles, clear up our minds, deliver drugs to a specific desired organ, provide artificial red blood cells, repair damaged DNA. Gold nanoparticles have been used as an antennae to allow scientists to initiate protein synthesis by remote control, and so forth.

Already, machines have been built which connect directly to the human nervous system/brain and have been used to mentally direct a computer and to “speak” We will eventually be able to send visual signals into the human brain without using an eye (it has been done with cats already). We could literally have eyes in the back of our heads.

An artificial hippocampus has been built for mice which involves inserting a silicon chip into the brain, allowing scientists to produce artificial memories in mice. This can be used to help post-stroke or Alzheimer’s patients, but it could in principle be used for artificial learning.

Will gamers be able to resist brain implants which enhance the gaming experience? Once they do this, will this spill over into things we do on the job? Will test-takers be able to resist the possibility of using brain-enhancing technologies for taking tests? Will people on the job be able to resist pressure to use such devices—or lose their job?

Neuroscience will make us able to induce a particular emotion or feeling artificially.

Being able to determine the genetic makeup of your unborn child.

Using fetal or embryonic tissue to generate new organs or to cure diseases such as Parkinson’s as well as the result of traumatic injury such as spinal cord damage.

“The very identity of the human person and the very substance of reality are presumably called into question by developments in artificial intelligence, in genetics, and in virtual reality.” Albert Borgmann

A fairly easy answer to some of these questions is that as long as use of such technologies remains voluntary, then those who do not choose to use these technologies have nothing to fear from their use. Is this true? Or might a social peer pressure act making the “voluntary” nature of use of such enhancements not be as voluntary as we might think? The idea that we are all individuals is not a realistic bioethic. As with the use of steroids in sports, bienhancements become almost immediately not as voluntary as we think.

Physicist Freeman J. Dyson said:

The artificial improvement of human beings will come, one way or another, whether we like it or not, as soon as the progress of biological understanding makes it possible. When people are offered technical means to improve themselves and their children, no matter what they conceive improvements to mean, the offer will be accepted. Improvement may mean better health, longer life, a more cheerful disposition, a stronger heart, a smarter brain, the ability to earn more money as a rock star or baseball player or business executive. The technology of improvement may be hindered or delayed by regulation, but it cannot be permanently deied.

All of these technological possibilities cry out for a careful, studied “Christian” response to the question of what kinds of technologies we should pursue. If the Christian does not respond, he/she loses the chance to influence the direction our society goes. Questions such as:

What is the purpose of human existence?

What is the meaning of human dignity?

What is free will and what is its relationship to technologies?

What is a soul and what are the implications of the mind/body/soul relationship?

What is the meaning of human autonomy, is this a Christian value, and is it in play in these technologies?

Are we prepared to let market forces determine the direction of biotechnological advance?

Should we leave control for the direction of biotechnological moves in the hands of avowed naturalists/scientific materialists?

Are we going to simply take the “It is in God’s hands” approach to this?

**III. Toward A Christian Response to Questions of Bioethics.**

The development of scientific understanding of how nature works is neither good nor bad, but the development of specific technologies is not ethically or morally neutral.

What is the Christian world view and how might it be applicable to questions about technology?

Human beings are eternal, morally-responsible free agents with both a physical and spiritual nature, made in the image of God.

The naturalist believes we are the purposeless result of blind natural forces. We are temporal and are not spiritual. In this world view, biotechnological choices come down to cost/benefit analysis alone. Human dignity (worth) is a questionable concept.

In the Christian world view, the individual has a dignity because we are made in the image of God (Genesis 1:26-27 read Genesis 9:6) which should be respected. We cannot view the individual as simply a part of the whole, which limits the viability of cost/benefit analysis.

“Human dignity in the biblical perspective does not depend solely on who we are but, more important, on who God is—as well as on what God has done, is now doing and will do in the future” (*from Biotechnology and the Human Good*)

Are we guests, invaders or caretakers in this world? Look at Genesis 2:15 We are to “work it and keep (*shamar* care for, God told Jacob he would keep *shamar* him wherever he went) it.” and 1 Cor 4:2 It is required that those who have been given a trust must prove faithful.

Hebrews 2:8 You put everything under his feet… quoting Psalms 8:6 [about humans] You have given dominion over the works of your hands; you have put all things under his feet.: Genesis 1:28 Fill the earth and subdue it.

These passages seem to rule out a radical anti-technological/environmentalist view, sometimes called biocentrism, which views nature as essentially sacred and humans as having no special moral status over creation.

We do not worship creation, but rather we are over nature as responsible, caring stewards.

And we have biblical cautionary warning against overly-prideful conquest of nature in the story of the Tower of Babel (Come, let us build ourselves a city and tower with its top in the heavens and let us make a name for ourselves. Genesis 11).

Timothy Walker *North American Review* 1831

Where she [nature] denied us rivers, Mechanism has supplied them. Where she has left us our planet uncomfortably rough, Mechanism has applied the roller. Where the mountains have been found in the way, Mechanism has boldly leveled or cut through thim.”

This comment is a useful analogy to biotechnology. Where there is an ailing heart, we will replace it. Where there is a debilitating genetic disease, we will remove it. Where there is insufficient natural intelligence, we will supply it. Is this a Christian thing to do?

C S Lewis cautions us in *The Abolition of Man*, “What we call man’s power over nature turns out to be a power exercised by some men over other men with nature as its instrument.”

Applied to biotech, should we have as a goal to remake, redesign and prefabricate ourselves?

Question: When given the opportunity to improve himself, he did not enhance himself. Christ did not enhance or reengineer either himself or others.

**Morally responsible stewardship** (guided by a biblical understanding of the relationship between the created (man) and the creator) vs the second creation narrative (humans conquer the world and create a new world).

We need to remember that Christianity seeks to alleviate suffering, not because suffering is evil, but because this is compassion—this is what love does.

Weakness of the “that is playing God” argument.

Relieving suffering or artificially enhancing?

The ultimate goal of Christian medicine is not immortality. Our goal is not to avoid death at all costs, but to create as fulfilled a life on earth as we can.

We should use biotechnologies to relieve suffering in a way which protects human dignity without making humans less human.

Claim:

The natural Christian attitude seems to be liberal when it comes to using technology to reduce suffering and to improve the quality of natural life, but to be conservative in unnaturally altering life for personal or monetary benefit.

Biotechnologies which can alleviate human suffering and at the same time uphold human dignity, while understanding that the goal is not to prevent death.

Question: What kinds of biotechnology might reasonably be seen to violate human dignity? Technologies which force us to do something against our wills (such as GMOs which are not labeled)

Human experimentation

Technologies which clearly benefit a small group but which hurts the majority (again, GMOs?,

human cloning for reproductive purposes or in order to create human organs. Does it apply to embryonic stem cell research or even to IVF?

Forcing someone to stay alive who has chosen to no longer take food or certain kinds of treatments.

Q: Does the technology assist us in fulfilling or stewardship responsibilities?

Q: Does the technology require or promote the commodification or destruction of human life? Does the technology demean, debase or degrade individuals?

Q: Does the technology primarily appeal to our basest inclinations?

Q: Is the technology a vehicle to promote our own narcissistic self-absorption?

Q: Does the pursuit or use of the technology make just use of resources?

Q: Does the technology promote genuine human flourishing or does it more likely promote technological and economic imperatives? Must we adapt to the technology, or was the technology designed to adapt to human nature and human needs?

Question: How much additional technology is necessary to produce, maintain or safely constrain/contain the technology?

**IV. A Case Study: Stem Cell Research:**

Stem Cell Research

Are there moral implications? We should start there.

Are there ethical issues?

Is this to enhance human capability or is it to give health and alleviate suffering?

Is there sufficient negative harm to others which more than offsets possible good?