

Bioethics: A Christian Perspective

What is bioethics?

Bioethics applies reason to, and reflects upon, the moral issues within science and medicine, including those that affect the human person. Bioethics always seeks after that which is good (whatever is thought to be valuable and important), whether this is care for those who are suffering or the desire to have one's life relatively free of pain. Christian bioethics has its own set of moral values which are drawn particularly from the biblical account of God's relationship with humanity. One of the fundamental truths of Scripture is that humans have the capacity to do both good and evil. This duality of human nature requires that Christians be alert both to the genuine benefits of science as well as to the potential for its misuse. Bioethics is, therefore, a positive activity through which we seek to understand and encourage the many beneficial scientific advances that are in accord with God's purposes. It is also a critical process in which we try to determine the technologies, or their applications, that are contrary to the divine will.

In order to engage in bioethics it is necessary to grasp some of the key Christian principles relating to human life, and to carefully distinguish these from other cultural values which are not consistent with the faith. It is also important to be informed about science and medicine in order to understand the issues. The purpose of Test of Faith is to assist in this process. It is not necessary to be an expert, and thinking about these questions is simply a part of our Christian life as we seek to honour God in our world.

The individual

Some people in Western secular society understand the guiding values of bioethics to be concerned solely with the individual, and specifically with the individual's freedom to choose – what kind of children they have, for example, and when and how they die. One consequence of this view is that it sees those who are not capable of choice as not truly human. This focus upon the individual is due, at least in part, to the influence of the Christian tradition. Christianity holds that each person has innate value before God, and therefore within society. Whilst this is the implicit assumption throughout the biblical writings, it is best encapsulated in the idea that humans are made in the image of God; we bear a likeness to God which gives our lives absolute worth.¹ This means that human dignity is not based, as some secular views suggest, on the individual's capacity to choose, nor on personal moral inclination or on what society decides. Human dignity is, rather, unchanging and absolute because it has been given by God.

The inherent value of every human person is a key element in Christian bioethics because it means that each individual is to be treated with respect and dignity regardless of their age,

1 Gen. 1:26–27; 9:6; Jas. 3:9.

gender, wealth, ability, disability, race, ethnic origin and so on.² These categories, which we often use to differentiate people in contemporary society, are equalized before the greater reality that all are made in the image of God. This equality means that no individual should be disregarded in bioethical decision-making; it also requires that we seek for just and fair outcomes, such as equity in the distribution of medical benefits. In addition to these positive commitments to the welfare of others, the image of God also has implications for what we should not do. Persons should not be treated as commodities, as mere 'things' which can be used for another's advantage and interests; they are not to be seen as a means to an end.

The community

According to Scripture, we establish our identity as humans through our relationships with God and with other human beings. In the same way that the nature of the Trinitarian God is to be in relationship, so we, as image bearers, are made for relationships. This view differs from the prevailing Western notion that humans are independent and isolated individuals who create their own identities through freedom of choice and engage with society through the rights that they claim. In contrast, the Christian tradition stresses the importance of communal relationships; individuals, therefore, are to express their choices and rights responsibly – that is, with consideration for the good of others (and not just oneself).

Most of us will experience community first in the family – in accord with God's intended purpose in creation.³ God also, however, invites us into a second 'family', the church,⁴ and calls us to be part of our society⁵ – the wider community which now extends globally. The biblical texts are clear that we should work towards harmony and justice within these wider groupings, as well as seeking the welfare of future generations.⁶ These communal obligations mean that Christian bioethics must consider the impact of technologies not only on individuals, but also on these wider social units. We must not limit ourselves to thinking narrowly in terms of the immediate consequences on particular persons; we must also consider the wider and long-term implications.

Since the issues associated with the natural family, particularly the parent-child relationship, are discussed with regard to in vitro fertilization (IVF) and cloning in Test of Faith, it is appropriate here to make some brief comments. It is evident from the biblical texts that parents are to nurture their children's physical and spiritual growth, and not to overpower or exploit them,⁷ for they are a blessing and gift from God.⁸ Parents are to love and accept their children unconditionally for they too bear the image of God. Jesus reflects this attitude in his own care of children – actions which were contrary to the prevailing

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2 Lev. 19:32; 1 Tim. 5:1–2; Mk. 10:13–16; Gal. 3:28; Jas. 2:1f.; Col. 3:11.

3 Gen. 1:28; Mt. 19:1–6; Eph. 5:21–6:4; 1 Tim. 5:8.

4 Mt. 12:46–50; Rom. 8:15–16; Gal. 6:10; 1 Jn. 3:1.

5 Mt. 5:13–16; Jn. 17:15–18; Col. 4:5–6.

6 Deut. 4:40; Prov. 13:22a; Jer. 29:7; Rom. 12:15–13:8; Titus 3:1–2 (see also Mt. 12:18–2; Lk. 4:16–21).

7 Deut. 4:9–10; Lev. 19:29; 20:1–5; Eph. 6:4; Col. 3:21.

8 Gen. 1:28; Ps. 127:3.

view of his day.⁹ The question for Christian bioethics is whether current medical advances in human fertility uphold or undermine these parental commitments.

Christian love and the care of the vulnerable

Given the communal nature of our humanity, Christian bioethics must be concerned with the way that we relate to one another – that is, with the quality of relationships within the communities to which we belong. The biblical ideal for human relationships includes characteristics such as humility and justice, but it is defined primarily by self-giving love. This is the nature of God's love for us, and we see the supreme example of this in Christ's giving of himself for our sakes.¹⁰ So, we also are called to attend to the welfare of others.¹¹ As all people have been created in God's image, we are to express this self-giving love toward everyone. This is clear in Jesus' response to the question, 'Who is my neighbour that I should love?'. In this respect, then, Christian bioethics is an expression of our commitment to love all others.¹²

There may be situations, however, where a technology that will benefit one individual will adversely affect the well-being of another. These apparent conflicts may be resolved by recognizing the priorities within Christian love – namely, that the stronger should help the weaker. This is the example that Christ himself set, as he understood his calling in terms of serving and caring for those in need.¹³ Scripture gives us many examples of how this principle works in practice: through the care and respect given to those who were particularly vulnerable in society such as the poor, orphans and the disabled.¹⁴ These people were not to be exploited – their vulnerability was not a reason to see them as in some way inferior. Rather, they were to receive a special and protected status in society. Christian love also expresses these priorities in a willingness to come alongside, and show compassion towards, those who suffer – for example, those who are grieving or experiencing mental anguish,¹⁵ those afflicted by disease, or who are facing infertility.¹⁶

Some secular bioethicists endorse the moral priority of the weak present within Christian bioethics, whilst others reject this principle outright. The latter include those who see the human ideal as autonomous independence, a criterion that the weak cannot meet. Some even argue that it is right to use the weak to further the welfare of the strong. If Christian bioethics is to be faithful to Christ, it must maintain its commitment to those who are particularly vulnerable in society. We are not to fulfil this responsibility, however, with an attitude of high-handed superiority or pity as that is not how Christ treats us. Indeed, Christ shared in our suffering and death, in order that he could be our representative

and advocate.¹⁷ Similarly, we should use our common experience of vulnerability to empathetically identify with others. It is the task of Christians to recognize those who are vulnerable and suffering within contemporary society, to stand with them and to commit ourselves to their welfare.

Even this fuller understanding of Christian love, however, cannot easily resolve all of the dilemmas that we encounter in our increasingly complex world. For instance, some Christians see human embryos as humanity in its weakest and most vulnerable form and seek to protect them. Others do not regard the embryo as a person in the very early stages of development and see the use of the human embryo for the treatment of those with diseases as part of a commitment to the suffering. Similarly, Christians disagree as to whether the benefits of providing IVF for infertile couples who desperately want children outweigh the necessary destruction of human embryos that is part of the IVF process. These complexities ought not to deter us from engaging with these issues. Rather, they should encourage us to listen more closely, and with humility, to both Scripture and science, and most importantly, to pray.

Spiritual bodies

Christian bioethics must also take into account the importance that Scripture places on the physical human body. The Bible celebrates the body because God created it,¹⁸ and because Christ honoured it in his incarnation and resurrection.¹⁹ The reality that God became human flesh in the person of Jesus Christ, and that Christ's rising again is the promise for the redemption of our own bodies, endorses the importance of our physical nature. Christ's ministry of healing also confirms that it is right to care for our bodies and to pursue medical advances that will heal and restore both body and mind. There are, therefore, many good reasons for Christians to support scientific and medical work that aims to help those struggling with disease and disability.

It must also be said, however, that Christians are not bound to seek the alleviation of disease at all costs. We have already seen that it is not appropriate to pursue healing when the consequences of this healing are inconsistent with Christian love – for example, when it involves the weaker being exploited for the benefit of the stronger. It is also important that therapeutic treatment not be contrary to the wider, holistic vision of Christian healing, which is concerned not only with the restoration of physical bodies, but also with the promotion of just and caring relationships. These spiritual values must be given due consideration alongside any physical benefits. Thus, whilst Christian bioethics should encourage medical advances, it should do so within certain boundaries.

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9 Mk. 10:13–16.

10 1 Jn. 3:16; Phil. 2:6–8.

11 Mt. 20:25–28; Jn. 13:12–17; Rom. 15:2–3; Phil. 2:3–5.

12 Lk. 10:25–37.

13 Mt. 20:25–28.

14 Lev. 19:14; Deut. 10:17–19; 15:7–11; 27:18–19; Prov. 31:8–9; Lk. 7:21–22; Jn. 9:1f.; Acts 2:45; Jas. 1:27.

15 Is. 61:1–3; Mt. 5:4; Rom. 12:15.

16 Ex. 23:25–26; Deut. 7:14–15; 1 Sam. 1–2; Mt. 4:23; Lk. 1:7f.

17 Heb. 2:10–18; 1 Jn. 2:1.

18 Ps. 139:13–16.

19 Jn. 1:14; Lk. 24:36–39.

Technological creativity or arrogance?

Certain medical and technical advances are more concerned with trying to get beyond our normal capacities – enhancing what it means to be human – than they are with restoring the human body. There are current debates, for example, on whether athletes should be allowed to improve their performance by the use of muscle-enhancing genes – so-called ‘gene doping’. Someday we may be grappling with the implications of adding microchips to our brains in order to increase our mental capacities. Another, rather far-fetched, possibility is that we might bypass death altogether by downloading our minds onto the Internet! The line between technologies that restore and those that enhance are not, however, always so clear-cut; vaccinations, for example, give us immunity to disease which is beyond our normal capacity.

One way of trying to form a Christian response to enhancement technologies is to explore the motivation for their development, as well as the possible intended, and unintended, outcomes. Many of these techniques were originally devised to treat those suffering with genetic diseases (e.g., gene therapies) and disabilities (e.g., implants for those with brain damage), but other motivations are in play when they become more widely used for the purposes of enhancement. These different motivations can include: curiosity; the unrealistic standards set by society which imply that only the highest achievers matter; and perhaps even a form of consumerism where ‘who we are’ becomes a product that we can buy. Some technologies, such as the downloaded mind, are seemingly motivated by a desire to free ourselves from our physical bodies and achieve immortality through technology. They are an attempt at a ‘scientific eschatology’ in which the Christian hope of our bodily resurrection within in a renewed earth²⁰ is replaced by that of a disembodied existence on the web.

Despite their worthy use as therapies, none of these latter motivations are good or acceptable reasons for their use as

20 Rev. 21:1-22:5.

enhancements. They deny the innate value of the person and replace it with a valuation based upon achievement, and some undermine the importance of the physical body. They are, according to some Christians, a grasping after divinity – an attempt to recreate human nature according to our own image and a striving to achieve God’s promised future of paradise through science. Such technologies are also likely to foster and even deepen the inequalities within our society. Inevitably only the wealthy will be able to afford enhancement, whilst the poor, and especially those in developing countries who still lack even basic medical care, are unlikely to experience any benefit. By setting an ever higher standard of human ability, enhancement technologies may also increase society’s intolerance of those who are seen to fall below par. Paradoxically, this would include the disabled – for whom some of the technologies were originally designed.

There are Christians, however, who see enhancement as simply an expression of our God-given creativity. Being in the image of the Creator, they say, means that we can use science and medicine to become more than we are. Moreover, we are not forbidden to participate in the Christian hope of a renewed world – indeed, we are invited to work alongside God in active anticipation of its final fulfilment at the end of time. Nonetheless, given the human capacity for selfishness and pride, it is right to be cautious about enhancement technologies. In addition, one of the great dangers of placing any technology within the context of the Christian eschatological vision of paradise is that it can easily blind us to its potential problems, with the result that we fail to use our critical faculties when they are most needed. Whilst Christians should be proactive in encouraging the developments within medicine and science that genuinely benefit humanity, we must remain alert to those that are likely to diminish the well-being of individuals and of the communities in which we live.



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