



## from the director's desk

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Executive Director

Enhancement. Beyond therapy. "Better than well." Superhuman. What do these phrases intimate? A futuristic sci-fi scenario? A much needed leap forward in biomedicine? Or, merely a description of the current state of affairs? These phrases suggest a reality that is both 'now' and 'not yet.' We are all familiar with the controversy over the use of steroids in athletic competition. We may not be as familiar with personalized genomics. One element that ties these two examples together is the moral reflection that should attach to each. But, all too often, moral reflection comes after the fact, after the scandal, after the cosmetic surgery gone awry.

As we absorb the scientific discoveries and technological innovations of this biotech century, it is exceedingly urgent that we grapple with the moral questions they raise. Should we chase after the goals of living longer and working smarter, boosting our brainpower and physical performance to boundless heights? Can we discern which of these developments genuinely respect our human dignity as they remedy our human frailty? Our investigation must go further. Even if these innovations are individually unobjectionable, they could have a collective impact that we ought to consider.

These considerations were at the heart of our recent summer conference, "Beyond Therapy: Exploring Enhancement and Human Futures." I was pleased to participate in the proceedings with our high-caliber, diverse array of speakers. Collectively, they unpacked serious questions about genomics and race, living humanly in a digitized world, regenerative medicine, physicians and other "endangered species," and the pursuit of superhealth. Dr. William Hurlbut (former member of the President's Council on Bioethics) opened our deliberations with considerations on embodiment and human dignity. Amy Laura Hall explored the troubling area of "mommy mistakes and the rhetoric of shame." Read Schuchardt took us behind the camera to scrutinize Hollywood's angle. A new feature was the opportunity to listen in as three scholars engaged each other in closing reflections on our possible human futures.

In reflection on the rich discussion of enhancement and human futures, I have been thinking about my own uneasy relationship with technology. While not precisely *biotechnology*, there are communication technologies that re-shape how I live my day. My time seems to dribble away, spent on the demands of the alluring chime announcing "you've got mail," desultory wandering around the Internet, and on and on. Whether in pursuit of the latest technology that promises efficiency, productivity, and cutting-edge information, or biomedicine that suggests youth, health, and energy, one outcome is the same: a continual raising of the bar of expectations and aspirations. Will it stop? Or, will we contrive to raise it to ever greater heights, until we "build us a city and a tower, whose top may reach unto heaven?"

Allow me to propose one theme to ponder. Alyssa Henning, a doctoral student in Jewish Bioethics, suggests a value common to all Jewish denominations: *Shabbat*, or Sabbath. This day of rest is more than a 24-hour interlude every seven days. Sabbath recalls the biblical account of creation. The text reminds us of the great creative act which brought the universe into being, God's perfect satisfaction with the fruit of his work, and his response. When God completed his work and contemplated all that he had made, "behold, it was very good." And then, God rested "from all his work which he had made."

Could we learn a bioethics lesson from the richness of this account? First, every development in biomedicine or biotechnology springs from gifted, creative powers. Unlike God, we do not create *ex nihilo*, and we do not create perfectly. Yet, we have capacities for astounding inventiveness. As the pace of our inventiveness increases, the generations of biotechnology compress. Rather than a span of five centuries between Copernicus' heliocentric revolution and the arrival of Apollo 11 on the moon, mere decades separate the birth of Louise Brown, the first test tube baby, from the birth of Hannah Strege, the first "Snowflake" baby born as the result of embryo adoption.

Second, we can contemplate all that humankind has made, and say that much of it is good. Honesty demands that we also admit the poisonous fruit of our labors.

Finally, could we periodically rest from all that we have made? God's seventh day invites us to pause, to contemplate creation, and to enjoy completion. We would do well to be content with our human limitations, and grateful to the One who designed us this way. Gratitude and contentment are the remedy for what truly needs to be enhanced: our souls.

*Paige C. Cunningham*

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