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Travis Ryan Pickell on McKenny's *Biotechnology, Human Nature, and Christian Ethics*

Last semester, a single, hypothetical, issue haunted all our discussions in my co-taught class, "Engineering Humanity: The Promise and Perils of Biotechnology." "Hypothetical," that is, until the penultimate week of class when we received word that a Chinese scientist named He Jiankui crossed an ethical red-line, allegedly using CRISPR-cas9 technology to bring the planet's first gene-edited babies into the world. These twins, Lulu and Nana, had undergone "gene-surgery" (He's preferred term) as embryos to edit-out a single gene, CCR5, without which He hoped they might become immune to HIV (their father carries the virus). Suddenly, all of our previous hedging, *imagine if this technology is ever applied to the human germ-line*, seemed somewhat naïve.

His announcement rattled the international research and bioethics community, which is still scrambling to respond in an adequate manner. Jennifer Doudna, one of the first to develop the CRISPR technique, described herself as "horrified ... disgusted ... and disappointed" by He's willingness to flaunt the international guidelines that had been so precariously put in place. NIH Director Francis Collins called the act "deeply disturbing" and "profoundly unfortunate" and urged the creation of a "binding international consensus on setting limits" to such research. What has become increasingly clear, however, is that voluntarily chosen self-limitation in the scientific community comes into conflict with other values and incentives which currently reign there. As ASU Professor Ben Hurlbut has noted, "it's wrong to call him a rogue when he's acting in line with" a scientific culture "that puts a premium on provocative research, celebrity, national scientific competitiveness, and firsts"; moralistic denunciation of He thus ignores broader cultural problems within the scientific community.

So what is the correct moral description here? It seems He is either easily labeled and denounced as a violator of international agreements, or he is merely a symptom of a scientific community whose drive to innovate necessarily rushes past any imposed limitations. This either/or points to the deeper issues of when, where, and how lines of limitation are drawn and what principles are employed to make the required adjudications.

Yet we should pause to note that there is a certain danger in beginning ethical enquiry with moral quandaries and extreme cases. It is not simply, as Oliver Wendell Holmes once claimed, that “hard cases make bad law” because they arouse intense feelings and “distort [one’s] judgment.” Sometimes this is true (though one should be careful about drawing a stark division between “feelings” and “judgment”). The real problem is that such an approach gives the false impression that ethics is the “solving” of seemingly intractable “dilemmas.” We sometimes face quandaries that demand answers, but most of the moral life is far more quotidian. I will rarely, if ever, be called upon to steer a careening trolley toward an ethically acceptable terminus; but I may be forced to choose how I respond to a snarky comment on Twitter. That said, extreme cases can be useful. Not only do they command one’s full attention, but they raise to the surface certain unarticulated, but deeply-felt moral intuitions.

The genetic alteration of Lulu and Nana is such a case. But we might also consider a range of issues in contemporary biomedicine, where new technologies consistently raise unanticipated ethical questions: Should we create (and destroy) human blastocysts in order to research the potential therapeutic benefits of embryonic stem cells? Should we use gene therapy to alter a patient’s genetic makeup? Oxford ethicist Julian Savulescu has argued that parents have a “duty of procreative beneficence” toward their children. In other words, parents have a moral duty to “select the child, of the possible children they could have, who is expected to have the best life, or at least as good a life as the others, based on the relevant, available information.” If therapeutic interventions are merited, why not do what is possible to maximize the next generation’s prospects for success? What if this involves injecting the human genome with bits of non-human genetic information? Or, perhaps, building an ideal genome from scratch utilizing synthetic biology? And what if we could “cure” aging and radically extend the typical human life-span? These ethical problems are interesting not simply because they puzzle us on a pragmatic level, but because of the deep concerns they raise about what it means to be human.

There is a problem with this line of reasoning, however: the phrase “human nature” is not exactly self-interpreting. In his 2010 book *Nature & Altering It*, theologian Allen Verhey lists *sixteen* distinct senses of the term “nature” in popular usage before the task became too “tiresome” for him to continue. For some, such ambiguity is reason enough to avoid the term altogether. This was the approach taken by the President’s Commission for the Study of Ethical Problems in Medicine and Biomedical Research in its 1982 report on genetic engineering, *Splicing Life*. According to the report, “*in one sense* all human activity that produces changes that otherwise would not have occurred interferes with nature. . . . *In another sense*, human activity cannot interfere with nature—in the sense of contravening it—since all human activities, including gene splicing, proceed according to the scientific laws that describe natural processes.” Therefore, it is better not to dwell on concerns about altering human nature, which is somehow both inevitable and impossible.

A vastly different approach was taken by the President’s Council on Bioethics, under the leadership of its first director, Leon Kass. Rather than avoid the notion of human nature outright, the council repeatedly chose to place questions about human nature front-and-center, even to the frustration of many critics. Kass famously (or infamously) began the first session of the council with an extended group discussion on Nathaniel Hawthorne’s 1843 short story, “The Birth-mark”—an allegory, according to Kass, of humanity’s desire to use science and technology to rid

itself of the mark of our mortality and our finitude with devastating and ironic results. In seven reports over four years the President's Council on Bioethics pursued "a rich bioethics," by addressing itself to thicker notions of human nature from varied religious and philosophical traditions.

This is not to imply that the council agreed on any comprehensive understanding of human nature and its importance. Members of the council held deeply divergent views about human nature, including different views about whether it should be included in the council's deliberations. Indeed, Kass was legitimately criticized for politicizing the PCB by dismissing perspectives that were not sympathetic with his own. Nevertheless, Kass's approach is worth noting because of its goal of unearthing operative assumptions about human nature by making them explicit, which should have had the effect of raising them to the level of critical public discourse. That Kass seemingly short-circuited the process by excluding certain voices does not invalidate his fundamental conviction that emerging biotechnology "compels attention to what it means to *be* a human being and to be active *as* a human being." To dismiss such questions outright may be expedient for policy formation, but it is ultimately unwise and short-sighted. *Biotechnology, Human Nature, and Christian Ethics*, a new book by Gerald McKenny, Walter Professor of Theology at the University of Notre Dame, is an in-depth consideration of just these questions. It asks how appeals to "human nature" are currently being used within bioethics, while also making a constructive proposal of its own. McKenny's book usefully presents a typology of perspectives on the importance of human nature for bioethics (four types, referred to as NS1, NS2, NS3, and NS4). In intricate detail, McKenny analyzes a variety of perspectives individually within each group, and further evaluates each type as a group.

The first cluster of positions (NS1) claims that human nature is important insofar as it remains, in one sense or another, outside of intentional human control. There is a great difference, according to this type, between what exists as a result of intentional human activity and that which is merely "given," whether through biological evolution, in the contingencies and indeterminacy of the reproductive process, or by divine creative intent. The latter is natural; the former is *artificial*.

Michael Sandel's pithy book, *The Case Against Perfection: Ethics in the Age of Genetic Engineering*, which built upon his experience as a member of the PCB, is a good example of NS1. In it, Sandel explores the value and the limitations of the traditional distinction between therapy and enhancement, long influential in biomedical ethics. Recognizing the difficulties of relying too heavily upon this distinction, he nevertheless seeks to articulate a way of discerning why certain uses of biotechnology might trouble us more than others. For Sandel, the pursuit of perfection or enhancement through biotechnology ultimately becomes problematic because it undermines the norms and institutions that we hold (or *should* hold) dear—norms and institutions that, according to Sandel, presuppose a relation to nature as "given." Though Sandel offers a number of illuminating examples from the realm of athletics and musical performance, his central concern is with the effects of genetic enhancement on the institution of the family and on civil society. Where Julian Savulescu sees a duty of procreative beneficence, Sandel sees "a Promethean aspiration to remake nature, including human nature, to serve our purposes and satisfy our desires." It may be possible to choose the biological characteristics of a child and still love that child unconditionally, but Sandel questions whether "parents *committed* to unconditional love *would choose* the biological characteristics of their child in the first place"

(my emphasis). Sandel's fear is that certain ways of thinking about and enacting biotechnological power have the tendency to "crowd out" moral norms that are independently valuable, norms related to our ability and willingness to adjust ourselves to a realm beyond our agency and control.

A slightly different claim is made by those in the second group. According to NS2, biotechnology should respect human nature because the latter is the "ground of distinctively human goods or rights." One form of this position is (neo)Aristotelian: all living beings are ordered teleologically toward a particular form of flourishing characteristic of their kind, and the goods that promote that form of flourishing are recognizable, distinct, and rooted in their nature as the kind of being they are. Rights, where they are legitimate, are meant to protect access to these goods. In its strongest (and least plausible) form this position claims that such goods inhere in nature such that they may be "read off" the face of human biology. A more plausible (but weaker) form simply suggests that our nature places constraints on what we might reasonably consider to be good for us *as humans*.

Here we may return to Leon Kass, whose interest in human nature is rooted in his conviction that "the worthiest human desires as well as the deepest and most meaningful ideals and attachments to others emerge out of conscious struggle with the limitations, vulnerability, incompleteness, neediness, and dependence of biological life." Mortality and sociality are not unique to humanity, but the desires, longings, and forms of attachment to which they give rise dignify and ennoble humanity in profound ways. If this is so, then such ennobling goods are threatened not simply when biotechnology directly alters human nature, but also when biotechnology enables us to evade or ignore our limitations and vulnerabilities. When we do so, according to at least one version of NS2, we "substitute inferior yet superficially attractive goods that depend on alienation from our biological nature for the superior and more profound goods that inhere in conscious, engaged struggle with it."

While both NS1 ("nature is valuable because it is given") and NS2 ("nature is the basis for human goods or human rights") typically affirm biotechnology for therapeutic purposes, each tends toward a more restrictive stance on biotechnology for the purpose of human enhancement. To be sure, neither requires human nature to remain absolutely static across time or uniform across populations, yet each is skeptical of the intentional alteration of human nature. But what if it is actually essential to human nature that it *change itself*?

A third orientation (NS3) suggests that change is essential to human nature: it is a distinctively human trait to develop potentialities and transcend natural limits. The human being, so it is claimed, is unfinished and instinctually-deprived at birth, and is for that reason uniquely "open" to the world among biological lifeforms. Different accounts are provided for how humans navigate this world-openness, some emphasizing cultural activity and the role of institutions, others emphasizing evolutionary biology, still others existentialist projects of self-creation. Together, however, these views all characterize human nature as inherently open-ended, indeterminate, and malleable. Whether, in the end, this has the effect of rejecting the very notion of "human nature" is a pressing question, and the ground on which we argue for or against universal notions of human nature becomes unstable. More to the point, what role does religion play in these discussions—and what role should it play?

Unfortunately, McKenny does not address this question directly. Though he engages both theological and secular voices, he is primarily interested in the implications of moral arguments

for Christian ethics. He is not overly concerned about whether the specifically Christian perspective should matter to non-Christian or non-religious people.

In this reticence, however, McKenny (implicitly) models a helpful approach to confessional religious ethics in a pluralist public sphere. By drawing out the theological implications of different arguments, McKenny demonstrates the relevance (and limits) of the Christian tradition for contemporary ethical problems. He rightly assumes that Christians should care whether their understanding of human nature contradicts a theologically orthodox doctrine of creation or eschatological hope (not, that is, that they do care, but that they *should*). He does not, however, assume that this is all that Christians should care about. He meticulously maps the conceptual terrain and notes distinctions between different ways of understanding key terms, signaling the importance of analytical rigor and clarity of thought and language. He often approaches different positions by way of immanent critique, revealing their unacknowledged assumptions or internal contradictions, signaling the importance (and possibility) of engaging others on their own terms. The attempt to demonstrate the reasonableness of your position for someone who does not share your faith commitments does not assume a neutral public sphere but is an exercise in patience and charity. McKenny's approach is explicitly theological, non-defensive, public-facing, and goes beyond the culture-war mentality of the loudest religious voices today. McKenny is less interested in whether a "Christian" perspective wins the day than in how Christians can remain faithful in their evaluation and use of biotechnology.

The emphasis on "faithfulness" is reflected in McKenny's preference in key moments for the language of "witness" over the language of "control." Consider, for example, the final form of argument for the normative status of human nature. According to McKenny's own constructive account (NS4), human nature has normative status insofar as "our creaturely nature suits or equips us for a particular form of life with God that was God's purpose in creating us." McKenny describes this form of life (following Karl Barth) as "imaging God," a form of Christic conformity where one's life is defined by "union with Christ, imitation of Christ, and witness to Christ." Boundless choices in our creation of life, furthermore, seem to undermine human characteristics that set us in a particular relation to God: dependence makes trust (i.e., faith) both necessary and possible; finitude makes moral seriousness and urgency both necessary and possible; a bounded life provides the specificity and particularity without which we could not be a genuine counterpart and covenant partner with God, with our singular and irreplaceable identity.

McKenny, however, seems more interested in how the decisions we make or the life we live "attests" or "witnesses" to the truth of God's being with and for us in Christ, than in how those decisions threaten our *ability* to relate to Christ. In other words, "The question breaks down into two questions, one concerning the effect of our actions on our nature and the other concerning our actions themselves as *attestations* of the meaning and purpose of our nature. . . . If your action is to image God, reflecting God's being with us and for us in Christ, then it is necessary to judge which if any of our acts of biotechnological alteration of human nature *witness* to Christ in that way." When we focus our attention on how our actions witness (or fail to witness) to theological realities, we might see bioethical decisions in a new light. For example, while there may be nothing harmful about maximizing the genetic well-being of one's children, Christians might consider how "procreative beneficence" serves as an example of

broader pressures to live according to a set of values (liberal democratic, late-modern, capitalist) that might exist in some tension with their theological commitments.

In the end, McKenny's achievement is not to give a definitive answer to whether or not He Jiankui should have performed gene-surgery. Appeals to the normative status of human nature are seemingly ubiquitous, yet remain variable in their plausibility and public persuasiveness. This ambiguity, however, need not entail that such appeals are meaningless. Eschewing both cheap moralizing and cynical resignation, McKenny offers his readers a variety of descriptive frameworks which are fully attuned to the ambiguities of such a bioethical quandary. The vitality of Christian moral discourses is shown precisely in how the language of witness and attestation are able to uphold such ambiguity, and to do so in our rapidly changing world.