**Christianity and Bioethics**

**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 should not 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 probably not unethical.

Lying is both unethical and immoral.

Arial spraying of DDT is unethical but probably not immoral

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

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

Examples: psychopharmaceuticals, genetically modified crops, artificial organ transplants, computer-aided prosthesis, gene therapy (embryonic and post-birth), stem cell and fetal tissue therapies, human and therapeutic cloning, neural implants, artificial blood cells, IVF, Artificial enhancements of human intellectual capabilities.

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?

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 students 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.

Parents will be able to determine the genetic makeup of their unborn child.

Leon Kass: “Human nature itself lies on the operating table, ready for alteration, for eugenic and neuropsychic enhancement, for whole-sale redesign.”

Transhumanists view human nature as a work-in-progress, a half-baked beginning that we can learn to remold in desirable ways.”

“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

Does a commitment to keeping use of such technologies voluntary solve most problems?

No, because peer pressure will enter in. Consider the pressure by professional bicyclists to use PEDs.

The idea of human autonomy (it is not my problem) is not a realistic bioethic.

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 denied.

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 in biotech?

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.

The naturalist view:

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.

Christian world view:

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

In the Christian world view, the individual has a dignity because we are made in the image of God (Genesis 1:26-28) which should be respected.

“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*)

Psalm 139:13-14 For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother’s womb. I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful. I know that full well.

Genesis 1:27-28 We are made in the image of God and God has put us in charge over his creation.

So, can we do with creation whatever we want?

1 Cor 1:2 Now it is required that those who have been given a trust must prove faithful.

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? No!

Note: When given the opportunity to improve himself, Jesus did not enhance himself. Christ did not enhance or reengineer either himself or others (but he did relieve suffering)

Does the technology relieve suffering or does it artificially enhance?

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.

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.

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

Good technologies:

Alleviate suffering.

Give humans the opportunity to have greater “quality of life.”

Bad technologies:

Violate human dignity/Take away human choice.

Benefit a few at the expense of many.

Artificially amplify abilities beyond what is “natural”

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

Conclusion:

Science itself is ethically and morally neutral, but the Christian worldview suggests

We should use biotechnologies to relieve suffering or improve quality of life in a way which protects human dignity without making us either more than or less than human.