BIOTECHNOLOGY, HUMAN NATURE, AND CHRISTIAN ETHICS

In public debates over biotechnology, theologians, philosophers, and political theorists have proposed that biotechnology could have significant implications for human nature. They argue that ethical evaluations of biotechnologies that might affect human nature must take these implications into account. In this book, Gerald McKenny examines these important yet controversial arguments, which have in turn been criticized by many moral philosophers and professional bioethicists. He argues that Christian ethics is, in principle, committed to some version of the claim that human nature has normative status in relation to biotechnology. Showing how both criticisms and defenses of this claim have often been facile, he identifies, develops, and critically evaluates three versions of the claim, and contributes a fourth, distinctively Christian version to the debate. Focusing on Christian ethics in conversation with secular ethics, McKenny's book is the first thorough analysis of a controversial contemporary issue.

GERALD MCKENNY is Walter Professor of Theology at the University of Notre Dame. He is the author of *To Relieve the Human Condition: Bioethics, Technology, and the Body* and *The Analogy of Grace: Karl Barth's Moral Theology*. His work in theological ethics and biomedical ethics is concerned with Christian ethics in a milieu that is shaped by modern culture, politics, and technology.

NEW STUDIES IN CHRISTIAN ETHICS

Christian ethics has increasingly assumed a central place within academic theology. At the same time, the growing power and ambiguity of modern science and the rising dissatisfaction within the social sciences about claims to value neutrality have prompted renewed interest in ethics within the secular academic world. There is, therefore, a need for studies in Christian ethics that, as well as being concerned with the relevance of Christian ethics to the present-day secular debate, are well informed about parallel discussions in recent philosophy, science, or social science. *New Studies in Christian Ethics* aims to provide books that do this at the highest intellectual level and demonstrate that Christian ethics can make a distinctive contribution to this debate – either in moral substance or in terms of underlying moral justifications.

TITLES PUBLISHED IN THE SERIES

1. *Rights and Christian Ethics*, Kieran Cronin
2. *Biblical Interpretation and Christian Ethics*, Ian McDonald
3. *Power and Christian Ethics*, James Mackey
4. *Plurality and Christian Ethics*, Ian S. Markham
5. *Moral Action and Christian Ethics*, Jean Porter
6. *Responsibility and Christian Ethics*, William Schweiker
7. *Justice and Christian Ethics*, E. Clinton Gardner
8. *Feminism and Christian Ethics*, Susan Parsons
9. *Sex, Gender, and Christian Ethics*, Lisa Sowle Cahill
10. *The Environment and Christian Ethics*, Michael Northcott
11. *Concepts of Person and Christian Ethics*, Stanley Rudman
12. *Priorities and Christian Ethics*, Garth Hallett
13. *Community, Liberalism, and Christian Ethics*, David Fergusson

(*continued after the Index*)

BIOTECHNOLOGY, HUMAN NATURE, AND CHRISTIAN ETHICS

GERALD McKENNY

University of Notre Dame, Indiana

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

One Liberty Plaza, 20th Floor, New York, NY 10006, USA

Cambridge University Press is part of the University of Cambridge.

It furthers the University's mission by disseminating knowledge in the pursuit of education, learning, and research at the highest international levels of excellence.

www.cambridge.org
Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9781108435154
DOI: 10.1017/9781108385916

First published 2018

Printed in the United States of America by Sheridan Books, Inc.

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Names: McKenny, Gerald, author.
Title: Biotechnology, human nature, and Christian ethics / Gerald McKenny, University of Notre Dame, Indiana.
Description: New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, [2018] |
Series: New studies in Christian ethics | Includes bibliographical references and index.
Identifiers: LCCN 2017046243 | ISBN 9781108422802 (hardback) | ISBN 9781108435154 (paperback)
Subjects: LCSH: Biotechnology – Social aspects. | Ethics.
Classification: LCC TP248.23. M35 2018 | DDC 660.6–dc23
LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2017046243

ISBN 978-1-108-42280-2 Hardback
ISBN 978-1-108-43515-4 Paperback

To the memory of Peter Andre (1984–2008)

Contents

General Editor's Preface

In 1992 Kieran Cronin's pioneering study *Rights and Christian Ethics* was the first monograph to be published in *New Studies in Christian Ethics*. It anticipated and helped shape Christian responses to a growing emphasis on human rights within health care and social ethics. It is very fitting that Gerald McKenny's fine contribution *Biotechnology, Human Nature, and Christian Ethics* now adds to this long-running series, seeking as it does to shape responses to the extraordinary emerging techniques that might one day make various human "enhancements" possible.

Like all other contributors to the series, Gerald McKenny has carefully observed the two central aims of *New Studies in Christian Ethics*, namely:

1. To promote monographs in Christian ethics that engage centrally with the present secular moral debate at the highest possible intellectual level.
2. To encourage contributors to demonstrate that Christian ethics can make a distinctive contribution to this debate – either in moral substance, or in terms of underlying moral justifications.

In *Moral Passion and Christian Ethics* (2017) I offered a critical analysis of Kieran Cronin's original contribution and used this as a standard for assessing all other books in the series – except, of course, the present one. I identified three slightly more refined phases in *Rights and Christian Ethics*. The first phase involved learning from a secular discipline (in this instance, philosophy and political theory) and encouraging other Christian ethicists to do likewise. The second phase involved challenging a purely secular understanding of the issue at hand (in this instance human rights) and deepening it with an understanding that is not entirely secular. And the third phase involved exploring a distinctively theological justification for moral choices and acts.

How does *Biotechnology, Human Nature, and Christian Ethics* measure up in terms of these three phases? I believe that it does so remarkably well. Gerald McKenny has listened attentively to a range of different

voices within bioethics and taken proper account of the scientific and philosophical factors involved in the possibilities (or improbabilities) of different forms of human enhancement. He has identified three versions of the claim that normative status attaches to human nature in the context of biotechnology. This part of his task brings considerable clarity to secular and religious positions alike. He sees strengths and weaknesses in each and agrees that the standard bioethical principles of autonomy, safety, and fairness remain important. But, like many other Christian ethicists, he does not regard these principles as morally sufficient. So, he has suggested a fourth, more theological, version, grounded here specifically in Christology and eschatology, which seeks to challenge and deepen purely secular positions. Yet he has done this with admirable theological modesty. Here is a Christian apologist who is more than prepared to learn from secular discourse, albeit without being exclusively limited to its principles.

This is an impressive achievement, and I am delighted to welcome this percipient monograph to the series.

Robin Gill

Preface

In recent decades, bioethicists, policy makers, journalists, and others have been intrigued by biotechnological interventions that aim not at the prevention or treatment of diseases or injuries, but at desired changes in performances (athletic, cognitive, sexual), behaviors (moods, emotions, dispositions), and physical traits (longevity, height, physiognomy). These changes, which are commonly, if imprecisely, called enhancements, are brought about by a wide assortment of technologies. Notwithstanding their novelty and technical sophistication, some of these technologies, including pharmaceuticals (for example, anabolic steroids, Adderall, and Viagra) and surgical manipulations, are continuous with efforts at human self-transformation that reach back into the archaic human past. Other technologies, such as those that involve genetics, neuro-digital interfaces, and tissue-regenerative processes, are historically unprecedented. But in either case, these technologies are enabling us, at least to some extent, to control, select, bypass, replace, and alter human biological functions and traits to degrees and in ways that were never possible. It is unsurprising, then, that their development has been accompanied by recurring questions about human nature. In particular, many people ask whether the potential of biotechnology to implicate biological functions and traits in these ways requires us to take human nature into account in our ethical evaluations of biotechnology. Does human nature have some normative significance (that is, some meaning, value, purpose, or role) that ethical evaluations of biotechnology should consider? If so, then what is that significance and how should we take it into consideration? In short, what is the normative status of human nature, and how should it count in ethical evaluations of biotechnologies that implicate human nature?

These questions, and the answers that have been or may be given to them, are the subject matter of this book. At the end of the first chapter I offer a rationale for addressing them in a book-length inquiry in Christian ethics. But it is appropriate to say something here about the context in which they

are to be understood. This context can be conceived narrowly to cover the past two or three decades, in which widely publicized developments – first in genetics and psychopharmacology, then in neuro-digital interfaces and regenerative medicine – have generated widespread and sometimes heated debates on the normative status of human nature. Nearly all the authors whose work I examine in this book belong to this period. However, the positions most of these authors take have antecedents in the work of authors (including Hannah Arendt, Hans Jonas, C. S. Lewis, Karl Rahner, and Pierre Teilhard de Chardin) who wrote in the decades immediately following World War II and whose concerns reflect developments in genetics and reproductive technology that occurred during those decades, along with the discrediting of eugenics. This broader context suggests that a common discourse on biotechnology and human nature runs through our era of biotechnology, in which optimism regarding scientific and technological progress is haunted by the memory of abuses of knowledge and technique. Taking a still broader context into account, the capability of biotechnology to intentionally intervene into human nature, and especially its capability of selecting, replacing, and altering biological functions and traits, can be understood as an event that is comparable in its significance to the modern "discovery" that social and political arrangements are not merely given but are subject to human construction. Of course, we have come to realize that social and political arrangements are far more recalcitrant to human construction than was initially suspected, and the same has proved true, at least up to now, in the case of human nature. It is also true that human beings have always sought and found ways to intervene into their nature despite its alleged givenness, just as they did with their social and political arrangements. These points should caution us not to exaggerate the novelty of the so-called biotechnological era. Nevertheless, intentional intervention into human biological nature is now a full-scale program, and this circumstance affects our attitudes and practices regarding our nature as well as our self-understanding as agents, even as the actual achievements of human biotechnology thus far remain modest and intermittent. It also poses the question whether the basis for the modern hope that human nature and the basic conditions of human life are fundamentally alterable and can be improved by human action, which has always oscillated between the realm of politics and that of science and technology (while usually taking both in), has come to rest, at least for now, in the latter realm (where Bacon and Descartes placed it) rather than the former. (For someone like me, whose official academic career began in 1989, it is at least symbolically significant that the first human gene therapy clinical trials as

well as such an ambitious biotechnology project as the Human Genome Initiative were getting underway at about the same time as the last vestiges of a utopian political program were unraveling with the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the Soviet Union.)

If it is the case that hopes and ambitions regarding the human condition are increasingly directed to biotechnology, then the conversation about the normative status of human nature considering biotechnological enhancement belongs to a larger set of conversations, all of them characteristically modern, that focus on the proper stance toward human vulnerabilities and limitations in light of what is at least thought to be our increasing power to overcome them. Should humans commit themselves to those moral norms and virtues and social and political arrangements that enable them to live rightly and well with their characteristic vulnerabilities and limitations or to those that press them to overcome as many vulnerabilities and limitations as they can? Of course, these alternatives are not mutually exclusive; the question is what it would mean to do justice to both. My point, however, is that biotechnological enhancement is one of the most important contemporary sites in which the claims of both are contested and will be resolved, for better or worse.

Considerations drawn from this broader context take us beyond Christian ethics to the description, explanation, and criticism of modern culture. Those tasks lie beyond the scope of this book. But their relevance suggests that it is as important for Christian ethics to determine its relationship to contemporary biotechnology as it is to determine its relationship to modern political orders and movements. This book is a contribution to that task. It begins by clarifying how contemporary biotechnology implicates human nature and thus raises the question of its normative status, what it means to claim that normative status attaches to human nature, why that claim can be problematic, and why it is important for Christian ethics to try to make that claim in a way that avoids the problems that have always attended it (Chapter 1). It then goes on to formulate and critically examine three versions of that claim and to propose a fourth one (Chapters 2–5). Following a conclusion that presents the results of the inquiry, an appendix addresses the question of the implications of the normative status of human nature considering the distant but possible prospect of the transformation of human nature into something else.

Before turning to the main body of this inquiry, it is appropriate to say a word about its scope. It is not a general inquiry into the ethics of biotechnological enhancement or even an inquiry into the role of the normative status of human nature in resolving concrete ethical issues related to

biotechnological enhancement. Still less is it an inquiry into the ethics of technology. Finally, it is not an inquiry into human nature. It is instead an inquiry into the normative status of human nature in light of the growing capabilities of contemporary biotechnological enhancement to implicate human nature. During this inquiry, much is said about the ethics of particular biotechnological enhancements, not a little is said about human nature, and something is said about the ethics of technology. But the emphasis of this book is on what it means to claim in the context of biotechnology that normative status attaches to human nature and how the normative status of human nature should count in the ethical evaluation of biotechnological interventions that implicate human nature. If the reader protests that this focus is too narrow, I would say two things in defense of it. First, there are already many fine studies in Christian ethics and related fields of the ethics of biotechnological enhancement, the ethics of technology, and human nature, but there is no thorough study in these fields of the normative status of human nature in relation to biotechnology. Second, if (as I am convinced) Christian ethics is in its own way as heavily invested in what biotechnology means for our biological nature as modern science, technology, and politics are in their way, then there is a need for a study in Christian ethics that takes it as seriously as it is taken in these other domains. It is my hope that this book will go some way toward meeting that need.

Acknowledgements

This book was prompted by two invitations, enabled by the material support of two institutions, assisted by various invitations to present it in part or in whole, improved by the contributions of many readers and interlocutors, and brought to the scholarly community by a visionary series editor.

The invitation that first prompted me to think about this topic came in 2004 from David Albertson and Cabell King, who as doctoral students led an interdisciplinary project on theology and nature at the University of Chicago Divinity School. At that time, prominent members of the US President's Council on Bioethics had recently published books defending the normative significance of human nature in the face of biotechnology. I did not intend to pursue the topic beyond the essay I contributed to the published volume and had moved on to other things when I received an invitation to deliver a keynote address to the 2012 meeting of the Society for the Study of Christian Ethics on a topic related to theological anthropology. By that time, more Christian ethicists were engaging the topic of biotechnology and human nature, while denials that human nature has normative status had gained in number and force in the field of bioethics. It seemed an appropriate time to embark on an investigation of the matter.

I could take up and complete the investigation thanks to the willingness of institutions to support it. A research leave during the 2011–2012 academic year enabled me to complete my initial research and writing. I am grateful to the University of Notre Dame, and in particular to John McGreevy, Dean of the College of Arts and Letters, and Matthew Ashley, Chair of the Department of Theology, for granting me the leave. During the 2016–2017 academic year, the Center of Theological Inquiry (CTI) funded a year of research and provided an ideal environment, thanks to which I could bring the book to completion. I am grateful to William Storrar, its director, for inviting me to become a member of the CTI; to the John Templeton Foundation and the National Aeronautics and Space Administration for funding CTI's Societal Implications of Astrobiology

project, in which I was a participant; and to my fellow CTI members for conversations and colloquium sessions that generated new ideas and helped me refine arguments. I am also grateful to Dean McGreevy and Professor Ashley for granting me another year of leave to accept the CTI invitation.

This book has greatly benefited from various institutions that invited me to deliver lectures or lead colloquia or seminars on its topic. I am grateful to Baylor University (and especially to Paul Martens) for an invitation to deliver the Daniel B. McGee Endowed Lecture; to the Society for the Study of Christian Ethics (and especially to Susan Parsons and Robert Song) for an invitation to deliver a keynote address at its annual meeting; to the Princeton Religious Ethics Discussion Group (and especially to Frederick Simmons) for an opportunity to present parts of the manuscript for discussion; to the University of Aberdeen Department of Divinity and Religious Studies (and especially to Brian Brock and Michael Mawson) for devoting its Theological Ethics seminar to the book while in progress and inviting me to deliver a public lecture on it; to the Center for Bioethics, Health and Society of Wake Forest University (and especially to Ana Smith Iltis and Kevin Jung) for the invitation to deliver a public lecture; to Wycliffe College of the University of Toronto (and especially to Paul Allen of Concordia University) for an invitation to deliver a lecture at a symposium on theology and science; and to the Yale University Department of Religious Studies (and especially to Christine Hayes and Jennifer Herdt) for invitations to present overviews of the project to its Religious Studies Colloquium and its Religious Ethics Colloquium. I am also grateful to the many members of the audiences at these events whose questions and comments pressed me to clarify and rethink matters great and small.

Brian Brock, Kevin Jung, Michelle Marvin, Michael Mawson, and Stephen Pope read complete drafts of the manuscript with insight and care that far exceeded what any author can reasonably expect of colleagues and graduate students who render such a service. In addition, at different points along the way, I gained clarity or direction on different aspects of the topic thanks to conversations with Maria Antonaccio, Neil Arner, Jesse Couenhoven, Andrew Davison, Kathleen Eggleson, Andrew Forsyth, Stanley Hauerwas, Jennifer Herdt, Paul Martens, Douglas Ottati, Jean Porter, Paul Scherz, Frederick Simmons, Phillip Sloan, Kathryn Tanner, and Jonathan Tran. I am of course responsible for the shortcomings that remain, but the contributions of all these friends and colleagues have made it a much better book than it would have been.

The New Studies in Christian Ethics series has published much of the best scholarship in Christian ethics during the past quarter of a century and has been a major factor in the intellectual vitality of the field during this period. A debt of gratitude to the editor of the series, Robin Gill, is owed by everyone who works in this field, and especially by those whose work has appeared in this distinguished series. I am deeply grateful to Professor Gill for his unfailing support of the project.

Special thanks are due to Toy Bunnag and Erika McKenny for their encouragement, and to James Haring for preparing the index.

Finally, this book is dedicated to the memory of my nephew.