Moral Evaluations of Genetic Technologies

The Need for Catholic Social Doctrine

Devan Stahl

Abstract. The author argues that genetic technologies can never be fully separated from their eugenic ends. Because of this, the Church’s sexual ethic must be integrated with its social teaching to respond faithfully to ethical issues that arise with the use of genetic technologies. The author discusses, first, the Catholic opposition to eugenics from the turn of the twentieth century to the official papal condemnation of eugenics in 1930; next, the Church’s reaction to advances in DNA research in the 1950s and 60s; and finally, the shift from optimism to caution from the 1970s on, as new genetic technologies emerged in embryonic stem cell research, genetic counseling, and gene therapy. The author explores both the sources on which the Church has drawn in responding to genetic advances and the social issues that should prove fruitful for contemplation in the future. National Catholic Bioethics Quarterly 15.3 (Autumn 2015): 477–489.

As genetic research progresses and new technologies are developed, questions concerning the aims and proper limits of genetic technology become ever more important for Catholic moral theologians to consider. Distinguishing between humankind’s proper dominion over nature and the domination of technology over humankind’s nature is becoming far more difficult with the advancement of genetic technology,

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and may require drawing on new sources from within the Catholic moral tradition. In particular, moral theologians will need to consider how best to incorporate the Catholic tradition’s rich social teaching into the moral evaluation of genetic technologies.

The Eugenics Era

Although the modern eugenics movement of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries is now almost universally condemned, American religious leaders were some of the movement’s most enthusiastic supporters. In the early twentieth century, progressive Protestants were looking for new avenues to distinguish themselves from fundamentalists and remain relevant in the public sphere. For many Protestants, the Social Gospel movement was a chance to reconcile their faith with the challenges of modern culture. While participating in secular reform movements in the hope of ushering in the Kingdom of God, many were quick to align themselves with the eugenics movement, which shared the goals of improving society and ending poverty.

Roman Catholics, however, were wary of the eugenics movement from its inception. Guided in large part by their natural law tradition and sexual ethic, Catholics believed that eugenic practices, particularly sterilization, clearly violated the inherent dignity of human beings. Like their Protestant counterparts, lay Catholics were waging social campaigns at the turn of the twentieth century; however, these campaigns rallied against the eugenics movement, particularly in states where sterilization was already legal or where such laws were being considered. For American Catholics in the early twentieth century, the natural law supported the indissolubility of marriage, the sanctity of life and procreation, and the family, and so whatever else it might imply, it clearly prohibited sterilization. Sterility operations gravely mutilated the human body and inhibited procreation. A more powerful or detailed social justice critique of eugenics was not necessary. Even if the ends of the eugenics movement were morally suspect, the means were clearly prohibited, so a more thorough critique of the eugenics movement was unnecessary (and might prove unnecessarily divisive).

Catholics publicly criticized the eugenics movement using at least two strategies. Lay Catholic writers, many of whom were well versed in the sciences, attacked the weak science of eugenics and its potentially dangerous political consequences. Such attacks easily coincided with the Catholic tradition’s appeal to human reason, natural law, and human rights as providing a common moral ground for ethical agreement.

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3 Rosen, Preaching Eugenics, 15.

4 Ibid., 139.
with non-Christians. In the United Kingdom, one of the strongest opponents of the eugenics movement was G. K. Chesterton, an English writer and Christian apologist who promoted a “distributist” political theory (a third-way economic theory that advocated for Catholic social doctrine in opposition to capitalism and socialism). Chesterton claimed not only that the science of eugenics was weak—as eugenicists were unable to prove that heredity exercised a powerful force over human existence—but also that eugenicists were conspiring with state power to achieve their goals. Chesterton was concerned that in an attempt to appear pro-science, governments were trampling on individual rights. Russell Sparkes notes that in Chesterton’s book *Eugenics and Other Evils* (1922), “Chesterton showed that eugenics was an unholy mixture of social Darwinism, coupled with mad Nietzsche’s dream of breeding the Superman.” Chesterton saw the real target of eugenics as the poor and not the mad or feebleminded. Through his powerful rhetoric, Chesterton was able to effectively stave off government support of the eugenics movement in Britain.

In the United States, early organized efforts of Catholics led to the defeat of some major legislative proposals that would have allowed forced sterilization procedures in the 1910s and 1920s. Unsure of the best approach to blocking such legislation, the heads of Catholic organizations appealed to Rev. John Burke, the general secretary of the National Catholic Welfare Conference, for advice on how best to prevent the passage of sterilization laws. Burke advised leaders of Catholic organizations to appeal to those outside the Church to make their case, basing their testimony on scientific and legal grounds rather than issues of individual rights or moral law. As Sharon Leon writes, “Burke pointed to the precarious balance that Catholics had to strike in the democratic political process. This situation had troubled Catholics in American public life for decades, as they faced periodic accusations of having divided loyalties and of being so disciplined by Church structures and teachings as to be patently incapable of participating in liberal, democratic structures.” Unlike the British Catholic response spearheaded by Chesterton, American opposition to eugenics avoided Catholic social doctrine. To appeal to a wider base of support, Catholic lay leaders attacked the science of eugenics and, in the first two decades of the twentieth century, were often successful at preventing the legalization of forced sterilization, particularly in states that had a high proportion of Catholic residents.

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9 Sharon Leon, “‘A Human Being, and Not a Mere Social Factor’: Catholic Strategies for Dealing with Sterilization Statutes in the 1920s,” *Church History* 73.2 (June 2004): 393.
Unlike lay leaders, however, Catholic clergy were careful to draw a distinction between the goals of eugenics and the methods eugenicists promoted. Christine Rosen notes, “Clerical writers, on the other hand, . . . usually drew a clear distinction between eugenic means and ends.” Insofar as eugenics attempted to “improve the human race,” through the alleviation of human suffering, Catholics could approve of it; however, most believed Catholic teaching morally prohibited the means eugenicists wished to use. The Church’s sexual ethic dictated that sterilization was illicit. Rev. Charles Bruehl, a professor of dogmatic theology at St. Charles Borromeo Seminary in Pennsylvania, stated unequivocally that, “if birth control is to be made an essential feature of the program of the eugenists, we can have nothing at all to do with it.” Even the Rev. John Ryan and Rev. John Cooper, Catholics who had served as members of the American Eugenics Society, vehemently opposed any use of sterilization or artificial contraception to achieve the ends of eugenics, as these practices constituted a moral perversion of the human faculty and were, as Rosen notes, a “symbol of the growing selfishness and ‘decadence’ of modern existence.” Ryan wrote the 1919 US Bishops’ Program of Social Reconstruction, a text that offered liberal social reforms supporting an active role for the state in promoting social justice. (Franklin Roosevelt enacted many of Ryan’s proposals in his New Deal legislation.) Leon notes that for Ryan, “there could be no guarantee of justice when the calls for reproductive restrictions were based on selfishness, economic gain, or racial prejudice.” Ryan’s justice arguments, however, were an outlier in mainstream resistance to eugenic sterilizations. Unlike the arguments based on science and the law, Ryan’s position was far-reaching, calling on explicit common good and social justice goals.

In Casti connubii, Pope Pius XI officially condemned eugenic sterilization; however, he did not explicitly condemn eugenic aims. Although the encyclical is more widely known for its condemnation of the use of artificial contraceptives, Pius XI also asserted that the state’s eugenic attempts to prohibit marriage, usurp the status of the family, and directly mutilate bodies for forced sterilization must be condemned. He declared, “Christian doctrine establishes, and the light of human reason makes it most clear, that private individuals have no other power over the members of their bodies than that which pertains to their natural ends; and they are not free to destroy or mutilate their members, or in any other way render themselves unfit for their natural functions, except when no other provision can be made for the good of the whole body.” He also evoked the common argument against sterilization as being contrary to the natural sexual functioning of the human being.

Interestingly, Pius XI also drafted two encyclicals discussing the ethical implications of the social and economic order: Quadragesimo anno, which describes the principles of solidarity and subsidiarity, and Humani generis unitas, which condemnns

10 Rosen, Preaching Eugenics, 145.
11 Ibid., 153.
12 Ibid.
14 Pius XI, Casti connubii (December 31, 1930).
15 Ibid., n. 71.
anti-Semitism, racism, and the persecution of the Jews but was never released.\textsuperscript{16} Social justice issues were not explicitly invoked in \textit{Casti connubii}, however. Instead, as noted, Pius XI limited his condemnation of eugenics by his use of natural law arguments aimed at upholding the dignity and natural ends (procreation) of human beings.

The DNA Era

While the science behind the eugenics movement was suspiciously weak, the field of genetics began to establish itself as a legitimate and more careful undertaking. At the same time that eugenicists were attempting to uncover hereditary traits, geneticists were exploring the locations of genes, chromosomes, DNA, RNA, and proteins and the relationships between them. In 1953, James Watson and Francis Crick’s discovery of the double-helix structure of DNA was heralded as a scientific breakthrough. Watson and Crick had finally discovered how genetic traits were inherited.\textsuperscript{17}

Pope Pius XII gave the first documented religious response to the double-helix breakthrough just six months after Watson and Crick published their findings. With the violence of World War II still fresh in the public consciousness, it was not difficult for many to associate scientific discovery with the atrocities of Hitler. In an address to the First International Symposium of Genetic Medicine in September 1953, Pius XII recognized the potential individual and communal benefits that genetics research could yield. The Pope also recognized, however, the potential eugenic uses of this new genetic science saying, “The fundamental tendency of genetics and eugenics is to influence the transmission of hereditary factors in order to promote what is good and eliminate what is injurious. This fundamental tendency is irreproachable from the moral viewpoint. But certain methods used to attain this end, and certain protective measures, are morally questionable, as is also, in fact, a misplaced esteem for the ends to which genetics and eugenics tend.”\textsuperscript{18} Pius XII warned against genetic research that led to racialism and eugenic sterilization, both of which are contrary to natural law. Unlike other animals, human beings are “personal beings, with inviolable rights, with individuals, who for their part are bound by unshakable moral laws in using their power to raise up a new life.”\textsuperscript{19} Although eugenic science has since been

\textsuperscript{16} Pius XI, \textit{Quadragesimo anno} (May 15, 1931). A preliminary draft of \textit{Humani generis unitas} was written for Pius XI, but he died before finishing the encyclical, and Pope Pius XII decided against its publication. The draft was eventually published by a French publishing house in 1995, and an English edition appeared in 1997; see \textit{The Hidden Encyclical of Pius XI}, by Georges Passelecq and Bernard Suchecky, trans. Steven Rendall (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1997).


\textsuperscript{19} Ibid., 260.
discredited by more nuanced studies of DNA, Catholics recognized the potential link between the two.

In this era, the magisterium produced an abundance of social doctrine in response to the many political upheavals throughout the world. In 1963, Pope John XXIII issued his encyclical *Pacem in terris* (lit., “peace on earth”), which was the first encyclical to address “all men of good will” rather than only Catholics. In the face of the Cold War, the erection of the Berlin Wall, and the Cuban Missile Crisis, the Pope emphasized the importance of human rights and the proper relationship between individuals as well as between individuals and states and between nations. He states, “Man has the right to live. He has the right to bodily integrity and to the means necessary for the proper development of life, particularly food, clothing, shelter, medical care, rest and, finally, the necessary social services. In consequence, he has the right to be looked after in the event of ill health; disability stemming from his work; widowhood; old age; enforced unemployment; or whenever through no fault of his own he is deprived of the means of livelihood.”

20 It is worth noting that he identifies access to medical care and social services as fundamental rights. In response to the many technological advances that could be used to end all human life (specifically, nuclear weapons), John XXIII not only affirmed the inherent worth of all people, but called on nations to develop just systems to ensure peace and prosperity within nations.

Just a year later, one of the four apostolic constitutions produced by the Second Vatican Council was dedicated to humanity’s relationship to society, including the proper use of science and technology. The document—titled *Gaudium et spes* (lit., “joy and hope”)—addresses the role of the Church in the modern world. It “affirms the legitimate autonomy of human culture and especially of the sciences.”

21 In *Gaudium et spes*, the Church recognizes that it does not always have all the solutions to humankind’s problems at hand, and so it acknowledges the importance of the sciences for solving particular problems as long the sciences are ultimately used in the service of the human person. *Gaudium et spes* affirms, “All things are endowed with their own stability, truth, goodness, proper laws and order. Man must respect these as he isolates them by the appropriate methods of the individual sciences or arts.”

22 In other words, scientists ought to work in conformity with God’s order of nature.

Although *Gaudium et spes* is a rather positive account of the potentials of the scientific enterprise, the Church places moral limits on the manipulation of nature. In the tremendously influential encyclical *Humanae vitae*, issued in 1968, Pope Paul VI cautions that man has made “stupendous progress in the domination and rational organization of the forces of nature, such that he tends to extend this domination to his own total being: to the body, to psychical life, to social life and even to the laws which regulate the transmission of life.”

23 Just a few years earlier, in 1963,
Pope John XXIII had established a small two-year commission for the study of birth control (rather than have the nearly three thousand bishops and clerics participating in Vatican II discuss the matter), which his successor Pope Paul VI continued and expanded. In its 1966 report, the commission overwhelmingly voted to recommend lifting the prohibition on contraceptives. Its majority report considered contraceptives to be closely related to the rhythm method, which was already accepted as a way to regulate births, and described contraceptive use as a way of acting “which is in an ordered relationship to responsible fruitfulness, and which has a concern for education and all the essential, human and Christian values.”

(Interestingly, the leaked minority report said that unless contraception was deemed evil, the Church would have to concede that “the Holy Spirit . . . assisted Protestant churches” in papal teachings against contraception in 1930, 1951, and 1958, and that the teachings of Popes Pius XI and Pius XII could thus be found in error.) Rather than accept the recommendation of the commission, however, Paul VI reaffirmed that the unitive and procreative aspects of the conjugal act should never be separated. *Humanae vitae* declares that some technologies, like contraceptives, go against natural law, and their use is improper, because they dominate rather than serve the natural ends of human beings.

During much of the DNA era, genetics research was still nascent, and developing technologies could only alter particular genes. The Catholic Church recognized the need to affirm the scientific discoveries for their healing potential but also the need to place limits on the kinds of technologies being produced. After World War II, it was easy to see how the ends of science might not justify all means, and the Church found support for its cautious position among non-Catholics as well as its faithful. During this period, it was important to establish firm moral limits for scientific technologies so that those technologies would be used to serve humankind rather than dominate it. As is obvious in the debates surrounding contraceptive use, human dignity informed by natural law continues to play a significant role in setting the limits to scientific innovation.

The Genomics Era

Perhaps no theologian influenced the subsequent discussion of the potential of genetic medicine more than Karl Rahner. In “Experiment: Man,” and “The Problem of Genetic Manipulation,” written in the mid 1960s, Rahner provides theological reflections on human self-determination and, in particular, genetic manipulation and artificial insemination. Audrey Chapman points out that in the first essay, “Rahner

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26 Paul VI, *Humanae vitae*, n. 17.
defines Christianity as the religion of absolute future and affirms that God … both judges and confirms human efforts at self-definition.”28 For Rahner, man “can ultimately and absolutely become what he wants to be.”29 At the same time, Chapman notes, “Rahner underscores that human beings proceed from existential limits that constrain our ability to make choices”30 and reflects that changing our genetic code might reduce the freedom or well-being of future generations.

In the second essay, Rahner rejects artificial insemination, because it separates the unitive and procreative acts of marital union.31 He also states explicitly that “man must freely accept his nature as being predetermined. For he has not called himself into existence.”32 Although we are self-determining beings, there is an inherent limit to our self-manipulation.

Rahner’s compelling—if somewhat vague—affirmation of self-manipulation with inherent limits echoes Church teaching. The magisterium maintains that science and medicine can do tremendous good in society and ought to be promoted to the extent that they are put in the service of the human person and do not transgress natural law teaching regarding the nature and purpose of sex. Although human beings are by nature creative, there need to be legitimate boundaries to that creativity within procreation.

As genetic science began to produce more technologies aimed at relieving the human condition, the Church’s sexual ethic was reiterated and adapted to new forms of research, testing, and technologies. Once again, however, the Church’s rich social doctrine was not consistently integrated into its response to questions about genetic manipulation.

In the Catholic tradition, the conservation of health has never been understood as the human being’s highest good, which implies that there might be good reasons to place limits on scientific research and technological innovation. As Rev. Nicanor Pier Giorgio Austriaco, OP, points out, in *Evangelium vitae* Pope St. John Paul II condemns “the technical and scientific worldview that reduces nature to mere matter and completely dominates it through human manipulation.”33 Although John Paul II does not strictly define which manipulations might dominate human beings completely, he does recognize that any alteration of the human person affects the whole of that person, because the human person is the unity of body and soul: “Thus in the body

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31 Rahner, “Problem of Genetic Manipulation,” 246.

32 Ibid., 243, original emphasis.

and through the body, one touches the person itself, in its concrete reality.”

Genetic technologies, then, must be evaluated with absolute reverence for the integrity and dignity of the body.

When we consider altering our genetic code, we enter a treacherous territory. As Richard McCormick notes, “Deliberation and rationality tell us only that a human being is acting, not that he is acting humanly. One can, with utter control and deliberateness, do the most monstrously inhuman things.”

As concrete genetic technologies began to develop, however, general warnings about the capacity of science to violate the dignity of the human person became more specific condemnations of embryonic destruction and warnings about gene therapy.

**Embryos**

Since the promulgation of *Humanae vitae*, the magisterium has consistently reinforced its teaching that the conjugal act must be at once unitive and procreative. Not only does this mean that contraceptive use and sterilization are forbidden; it suggests that any attempt to create human life apart from the conjugal act is also illicit. As the Pontifical Academy for Life notes, quoting *Evangelium vitae* n. 59,

> The Church has always taught and continues to teach that the result of human procreation, from the first moment of its existence, must be guaranteed that unconditional respect which is morally due to the human being in his or her totality and unity in body and spirit: “The human being is to be respected and treated as a person from the moment of conception; and therefore from that same moment his rights as a person must be recognized, among which in the first place is the inviolable right of every innocent human being to life.”

The Church has forbidden most (though not all) artificial reproductive technologies and condemns the use of any embryos, including those created outside the conjugal act, for reproductive or therapeutic purposes. As the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith states in *Donum vitae*, “Various procedures now make it possible to intervene not only in order to assist but also to dominate the processes of procreation. These techniques can enable man to ‘take in hand his own destiny,’ but they also expose him ‘to the temptation to go beyond the limits of a reasonable dominion over nature.’ They might constitute progress in the service of man, but they also involve serious risks.”

The CDF affirms that human beings have dominion over the earth and that “scientific research and applied research constitute a significant expression of this dominion over creation”; however, scientific research and its applications are not “morally neutral.” Scientific technologies must respect the moral law, which the

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34 John Paul II, Address on Medical Ethics and Genetic Manipulation (October 29, 1983), *Origins* 13.23 (November 17, 1983), n. 6.
38 Ibid., intro., 2.
CDF describes as serving the human person, his inalienable rights, and his true and integral good according to the design and will of God. Believing that the embryo constitutes a human person, the CDF restricts experimentation on embryos to what will benefit the embryo itself. Although some Catholic theologians have questioned whether the CDF is asserting that early-stage embryos are persons or ought merely to be treated as persons, the magisterium has maintained that nontherapeutic experimentation on early-stage embryos is morally illicit.

**Genetic Counseling**

Although the Church has condemned technologies that produce children outside the conjugal act, it does recognize the hardships many couples face when considering whether or not to have children when the likelihood of genetic defect is high. For this reason, the Church has not condemned all prenatal genetic testing or counseling. In *Donum vitae* the CDF states, “Such diagnosis is permissible, with the consent of the parents after they have been adequately informed, if the methods employed safeguard the life and integrity of the embryo and the mother, without subjecting them to disproportionate risks.” The CDF goes on to warn, however, that “this diagnosis is gravely opposed to the moral law when it is done with the thought of possibly inducing an abortion.” Similarly, directive 50 of the *Ethical and Religious Directives for Catholic Health Care Services* states,

Prenatal diagnosis is permitted when the procedure does not threaten the life or physical integrity of the unborn child or the mother and does not subject them to disproportionate risks; when the diagnosis can provide information to guide preventative care for the mother or pre- or postnatal care for the child; and when the parents, or at least the mother, give free and informed consent. Prenatal diagnosis is not permitted when undertaken with the intention of aborting an unborn child with a serious defect.

In other words, the Church recognizes that prenatal diagnosis can be useful for parents and potentially beneficial in planning for the care of a child, so testing is morally permissible as long as key conditions are met: the testing must be relatively safe for mother and child, the information it provides must be beneficial for the child’s health care, and the information must not be used for the purposes of abortion.

Reminiscent of the eugenics “means–ends” discussion, the Church recognizes that some children might place an unbearable burden on families. (Remember that Pius XII declared that the eugenic goal of influencing the transmission of hereditary factors to “eliminate what is injurious” is “irreproachable from the moral viewpoint,” but he did not give criteria by which one might evaluate an “injurious” quality.) In his

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39 Ibid.
41 CDF, *Donum vitae*, 1.2.
42 Ibid.
address to geneticists, Pius XII said, “Certainly it is right, and in the greater number of cases it is a duty, to point out to those whose heredity is beyond doubt very defective, the burden they are about to impose upon themselves, upon their marriage partner, and upon their offspring. That burden might perhaps become unbearable. To advise against, however, is not to forbid.” 44 Although he does not specify what he means by “very defective,” he recognizes that the potential to pass on genetic defects might warrant reconsiderations of marriage or parenthood.

Directive 54 of the ERDs suggests that genetic counseling may promote responsible parenthood and prepare parents for caring for children with genetic defects. 45 Although genetic screening and counseling have often been associated with abortion, the Church recognizes that there may be morally appropriate uses for these technologies. At the same time, permissibility is distinct from obligation. Genetic testing may be prudent, but the Church allows personal freedom when deciding whether or not to have it done. 46

**Gene Therapy**

Although the Church has forbidden the use of embryonic stem cells in research—because embryos are to be treated as human persons—the Church has not condemned all forms of genetic manipulation for therapeutic reasons. In his 1983 address on medical ethics and genetic manipulation, John Paul II states, “A strictly therapeutic intervention having the objective of healing various maladies—such as those stemming from chromosomal deficiencies—will be considered in principle as desirable, provided that it tends to real promotion of the personal well-being of man, without harming his integrity or worsening his life conditions. Such intervention actually falls within the logic of the Christian moral tradition.” 47 John Paul II recognizes that genetic abnormalities can cause real physical and mental suffering, which ought to be prevented when medically and morally appropriate.

At present, there are at least two avenues by which geneticists imagine genetic manipulation might take place. Somatic gene therapy, by which therapeutic genes are transferred into the somatic cells of a patient, is not illicit in principle. As theologian William May notes, “Somatic gene therapy raises problems similar to those posed by other forms of treatment. Such therapy is morally warranted as long as the risks posed by this new type of therapy are not significant when compared with the reasonable expectation that employment of such therapy will indeed bring great benefit to the patient.” 48 At the present time, somatic gene line therapy poses great risks to patients. In 1999, eighteen-year-old Jesse Gelsinger died during a clinical

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44 Pius XII, “Moral Aspects of Genetics,” 259.
45 USCCB, *Ethical and Religious Directives*, n. 54.
46 The exception is when information from a genetic test has consequences for the health of other family members. See Vatican Secretariat of State, *Observations on the Universal Declaration on the Human Genome and Human Rights* (November 11, 1997).
47 John Paul II, *Address on Medical Ethics and Genetic Manipulation*, n. 6.
48 William E. May, *Catholic Bioethics and the Gift of Human Life*, 2nd ed. (Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor, 2008), 240, original emphasis.
trial that employed gene therapy to cure his ornithine transcarbamylase deficiency. Gelsinger’s death was seen as a huge setback for gene therapy research in the United States, and the FDA suspended several related clinical trials. Given that somatic gene therapy remains risky, many question whether its applications are morally licit.

Catholics have universally condemned contemporary germ-line therapies, which modify germ cells that are heritable and so passed on to later generations. The CDF instruction *Dignitas personae* distinguishes between somatic cell therapy and germ-line cell therapy and explicitly prohibits the latter because of its potential to harm progeny and because of its use in conjunction with in vitro fertilization. However, if geneticists could find a way to perform germ-line therapies without disrupting the conjugal act, if the risks to progeny could be reduced, and if the benefits of the therapy could be greatly increased, then the Church might find germ-line therapy morally permissible. Theologians debate whether germ-line therapy ought to be more explicitly condemned. As May notes, “Such therapy is not to be regarded in any way as intrinsically evil. It is simply that at present . . . it would be better to leave it alone.” If germ-line therapy is ever to be morally licit, May believes many more studies will need to be done on animals and the risks to patients and their descendants would need to be minimized.

**Toward Equitable Care**

As we have seen, distinguishing between technologies that dominate the human person and those that serve the person’s interests has become progressively more complex. Weighing the burdens and benefits of particular technologies and procedures has become an increasingly important if not key issue in Catholic health care today. Although certain practices, such as the creation and destruction of early-stage embryos, have been condemned under the Church’s sexual ethic, the Church has provided less direction regarding the appropriateness of prenatal testing and counseling. Following the logic of *Casti connubii*, it might be decided that some measures to limit the procreation of severely genetically defective children are appropriate, but explicit criteria for identifying a severe genetic defect have not been given. The evaluation of the effects of certain genetic disorders on quality of life continues to be debated in both religious and secular spheres. Disability philosophers and theologians in particular have questioned whether the medical community properly measures the quality of life of persons with disabilities.

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53 See, for example, Deborah Beth Creamer, *Disability and Christian Theology: Embodied Limits and Constructive Possibilities* (Oxford: Oxford Press, 2009); Amos Yong, *Theology and Down Syndrome: Reimagining Disability in Late Modernity* (Waco, TX: Baylor University
As new genetic technologies develop, moral evaluations of these technologies will need to employ sources other than natural law arguments about human sexuality and the conjugal act. Advances in prenatal testing and gene therapy, for example, may press moral theologians to incorporate their insights into prejudice and discrimination when evaluating the injurious quality of some genetic defects. Moreover, as genetic technologies become more prevalent, theologians may also need to consider how the technologies affect universal access to care, the widening divide between the rich and the poor, economic and social progress, and the care of persons with disabilities. Such questions will require theologians to delve deeper into the Church’s social doctrine to ensure that health care in America is distributed equitably and without prejudice toward our society’s most vulnerable persons.