



BIOETHICS & BEING HUMAN

A Recap of the Center's 25th Annual Summer Conference

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Biotechnological advancements such as gene editing, physical and moral human enhancement, chimeras (human-animal hybrids), radical life extension, and artificial intelligence are no longer the sole realm of science fiction but very real possibilities in the not too distant future. As such advancements are ever-approaching realities, developing and maintaining a robust Christian anthropology becomes more pressing than ever. What does it mean to be human? How might these emerging technologies threaten, alter, or even enhance our understanding of personhood? What does it mean to be and remain human in an age of science, medicine, and technology?¹ The task of The Center for Bioethics & Human Dignity's (CBHD) 25th annual summer conference, *Bioethics and Being Human*, was to provide a starting point for approaching these questions.

Traditionally, Christians have appealed to the *imago Dei* to provide a framework for answering questions of this nature. However, as Michael J. Slesman noted during the closing address of the conference,

while the *imago Dei* plays a significant role in theological reflection about what it means to be human, Scripture provides scant information for fleshing out what exactly being made in the image of God means. To be clear, the goal of the conference was not to throw out the *imago Dei* or deny its importance for a robust Christian anthropology. Rather, it was to move beyond the *imago Dei* and explore new areas of reflection regarding what it means to be and remain human in our MedTech world.²

To this end, the various speakers engaged with topics beyond the traditional realms of bioethical inquiry. In the conference's opening address, Dennis Hollinger explored the cultural shifts that have taken place since CBHD's founding. Twenty-five years ago, the Center saw a need to emphasize matters of dignity, especially as it related to questions at the beginning and end of life. However, after two and half decades of engagement, this need has shifted towards matters of humanity itself. One factor Hollinger pointed to as driving this shift is rapidly developing technologies. When robots can reason

on a level at or surpassing that of a human, can engage in sexual activity with humans, and can even sway humans to form emotional attachments with them, where should lines between the human and non-human be drawn? Rather than a simple acceptance of technology or wholesale rejection of anything new or different, Hollinger recommended "a critical and thoughtful analysis of new technologies, [and] an awareness of where and how they threaten our understanding of humanness."³

Hollinger went on to describe a shift in thinking that makes it questionable whether we can actually talk about what it means to be human. Our society has come to a point where it no longer believes there is an essence to things, but only experience. This results in a situation in which most people cannot talk about what it *means* to be human because there is no "essence" of *being* human, but only their own experience of humanity. Hollinger suggested, however, that despite our society's denial of essence, it still intuitively recognizes snippets of truth that could be viewed as creating a human

nature (relationality, moral reasoning, etc.). For the Christian, he argued, Christ's life both provides the perfect example of and is the lens through which we should view questions about what it means to be truly human.⁴

In his address, C. Christopher Hook underscored the importance of learning from history in developing a conception of being human. Despite competing claims in the marketplace of ideas, Hook encouraged Christians to remember "the real narrative we inhabit."⁵ This narrative recognizes that humans were created intentionally by God as part of his good creation yet fell into sin, and that despite humanity's corruption, there is a moral code God has revealed and expects us to follow. Human flourishing happens when we are dependent on God, and has as its goal becoming Christlike, moving away from the Fall and back towards God's original plan for us.

Hook asserted that our fallen, depraved state makes all humans idolaters, and this idolatry has nearly always coalesced around two main themes—knowledge and power. Though the names and methodologies have changed, the near worship of scientism, the pursuit of human "perfectionism," the push towards eugenics, and many other movements can each be seen as a form of idolatry. These have then carried over into the medical atrocities of the 20th century such as human subjects research without consent, the deification of autonomy, abortion on demand as a fundamental human right, and the allowance of physician-assisted suicide with no room for conscientious objection. Thus, in Hook's words, "Bioethics is not just a struggle of ideas, but of deities."⁶ Only by rejecting the idols of our day can true humanity be pursued.

In the address by Warren Kinghorn, he examined how we view what it means to be human in light of modern psychiatric and psychological methods. Through a brief history of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM) and the Research Domain Criteria (R-DOC) initiative, he teased out three assumptions prevalent in the field today. The first assumption is that of individualism, and the brief step from there to internalism (a belief that mental disorders occur solely within the individual). The second assumption is that maladaptive behavior can be externalized from the self into

observable symptoms; thus, treating a disorder means treating a symptom distinct from the person. The third assumption is that disease classification will eventually lead to an understanding of all the biological causes of mental disorders.

Kinghorn then showed that these presumptions are only partly true. While disorders do occur in the brain, they do not *solely* occur in the brain, but can also arise from the influences of community and surroundings. While symptoms may be something that happens *to* a person, externalizing them completely can turn persons into strangers to and enemies of their own experience. Finally, while classifying diseases can help us better understand neurobiology, it will never result in comprehensive understanding because there are non-biological factors that influence illness. He concluded by arguing that as Christians, grasping that we are known and loved by God should be the foundation for understanding who we are. Being human is more than just being a brain. We must recognize that we are embodied creatures, "creatures of earth," not simply minds or spirits, but both biological and social beings, never only one or the other. This understanding encourages Christian physicians to resist mechanistic understandings of medicine (e.g., a person is a machine to be fixed) and instead view the practice of medicine as coming alongside a person on their journey.⁷

In his address, Paul Scherz discussed the changing ways genetic determinism has been understood in our culture. The older understanding of genetic determinism was relatively simple—those who held to it thought that having a certain type of gene would result in having a certain personality trait, disorder, illness, etc. However, in large part due to the completion of the Human Genome Project, scientists came to realize that this view was too simple. The new paradigm does not see genes as *causing* a disorder per se, but as increasing the risk factor for a disease or disorder. This "surveillance paradigm" results in something peculiar—no one is healthy, but everyone is at risk for something.

Scherz then unpacked the dangers of such an approach to our conception of being human. First, it is not comfortable to live "at risk," but the surveillance paradigm threatens to put all people perpetually into this

category—changing our conception of what a healthy, normal life looks like. Second, rather than encouraging humans to number their days and trust in God, the surveillance paradigm instead pushes them to grasp for and cling to some semblance of control. This changes how we view our bodies—not as a creation of God, but as a collection of risks that must be monitored. Knowing oneself becomes reduced to a mechanistic knowledge of what systems could go wrong, and results in a dualism where the body is the source of threats that must be managed.⁸

In their addresses, Christina Bieber Lake and Read Mercer Schuchardt discussed what it means to be human through the lens of science fiction, specifically Mary Shelly's *Frankenstein*. Lake showed how the main failings of Victor Frankenstein (the true villain of the story) can be summarized as a fear of death and a refusal to recognize the other as equal to himself.⁹ These two points, each central to being human, drive the story. Lake ultimately concludes that the result of Victor's failings is violence towards others, a theme she then traced into modern science fiction. In contrast, Schuchardt used Shelly's work as a starting point to speak of the ways in which we humans have changed ourselves over the centuries since the book's publication. After considering such phenomenon as our surrender of sleep due to modern technologies, our constant use of cell phones in place of personal touch or communication, the modification of our bodies (from piercings and tattoos to plastic surgery and medically unnecessary amputation), and our increasing rejection of procreation in favor of autonomy, Schuchardt suggested humanity has changed exactly what it is to be human through its use of technology.¹⁰

In the presentation by Morse Tan, attendees were challenged to think about loving their neighbor in light of our common humanity. As he demonstrated, human worth cannot be based on functionality but must be grounded in the image of God—this is the foundation from which one can talk about justice, a common biblical theme. Part of doing justice is to care for and love one another, not just our friends or those like us, but our enemy as well, as exemplified in the parable of the good Samaritan. Tan then detailed several of the past and present human rights abuses in North Korea, as well as several instances of abuse that took place



during the eugenics movement in America, and warned how some of these same abuses could happen, albeit in different forms, in our own society.¹¹ As Christians concerned about what it means to be human, part of our responsibility is to defend the humanity of others, whether they are part of “our” group or not.

Pia de Solenni provided a fascinating account of the Catholic document *Humanae Vitae* and the implications it has for what it means to be human. She pointed to the drastic changes that the contraceptive revolution has had on how we view sex, partners, and children, and how many of the changes are incompatible with a Christian understanding of persons—for example, by separating sex and procreation, it is now possible for people to identify as an “accident.” More broadly, she spoke on the Catholic view of sex and procreation and pointed out how the prevalence of abortion in our society becomes a direct challenge to our identity as children of God made in his image. Ultimately, de Solenni argued in favor of the Catholic view that marriage and childbearing are something humans were created for and thus should not be separated by means of contraception; doing so is a radical alteration of what it means to be human in the reproductive context.¹²

In the final plenary of the conference, Stephen Williams began by asking the question: why should Christians be concerned with extreme enhancement of humans? He

made a clear case that, though they have some superficial similarities in their beliefs, the Christian cannot affirm the push for enhancements desired by transhumanists. Though we were created to live forever, we must recognize that we exist as fallen. And though we will eventually live forever, this will be in a new spiritual body; our promise of eternal life is not a call to preserve fleshly bodies as long as possible. Rather, Christians are called to be content with simply their food and shelter for the day. It is through this tension between flourishing and contentment that Christians must approach biotechnologies. Thus, for Williams, a Christian understanding of being human is not striving to surpass our fleshly bounds through the use of biotechnology, but embracing our humanity, acknowledging our fallenness, and awaiting with hope the time when Christ will return and transform us, an event that will happen in his timing, not our own.¹³

The above are highlights of how plenary speakers for this year’s conference, which concluded the twenty-fifth anniversary year of CBHD, dealt with the theme of being human. Through workshops, paper sessions, courses, private conversation, and the celebrations of twenty-five years of bioethical engagement, participants were able to dive even more deeply into the questions surrounding this important theme.

Preparations are already underway for our 26th annual summer conference, June 20–22,

2019, *Taking Care: Perspectives at the End of Life*. Speakers include Tracy Balboni, Theo Boer, D. A. Carson, Lydia S. Dugdale, John F. Kilner, Patrick T. Smith, and Jon C. Tilburt. We hope to see you there!

- 1 Paraphrased from Michael J. Sleasman, “Bioethics and Being Human: Reframing the Discussion” (plenary address, The Center for Bioethics & Human Dignity’s 2018 Annual Conference, *Bioethics and Being Human*, Deerfield, IL, June 23, 2018).
- 2 Sleasman, “Bioethics and Being Human.”
- 3 Dennis C. Hollinger, “Framing the Discussion: Why Humanness Is the Key to Bioethics” (plenary address, *Bioethics and Being Human*, June 21, 2018).
- 4 Hollinger, “Framing the Discussion.”
- 5 C. Christopher Hook, “Bad Ghostwriters in God’s Grand Narrative of Creation: Idolatry, Biotechnology, and Bioethics” (plenary address, *Bioethics and Being Human*, June 21, 2018).
- 6 Hook, “Bad Ghostwriters.”
- 7 Warren Kinghorn, “Being Human in an Age of Brain Politics” (plenary address, *Bioethics and Being Human*, June 22, 2018).
- 8 Paul Scherz, “From Selection to Surveillance: The Evolving Relationship between Genetics, Ethics, and Human Identity” (plenary address, *Bioethics and Being Human*, June 22, 2018).
- 9 Christina Bieber Lake, “It’s (Still) Alive: Dr. Frankenstein’s Hideous Progeny” (plenary address, *Bioethics and Being Human*, June 22, 2018).
- 10 Read Mercer Schuchardt, “Mortal Shock: Shelly’s Frankenstein and the Monsters We Have Become” (plenary address, *Bioethics and Being Human*, June 22, 2018).
- 11 Morse Tan, “Pursuing Justice for Humans” (plenary address, *Bioethics and Being Human*, June 22, 2018).
- 12 Pia de Solenni, “*Humanae Vitae* and Pope Paul VI’s Vision of the Human Person” (plenary address, *Bioethics and Being Human*, June 23, 2018).
- 13 Stephen Williams, “Biotechnology and Human Flourishing in Christian Perspective” (plenary address, *Bioethics and Being Human*, June 23, 2018).

CONFERENCE AUDIO AVAILABLE

Did you miss our 25th Annual Conference? Or would you like to hear from leading Christian bioethicists, professionals, and scholars on topics such as biotechnology, reproductive technology, and human dignity? Audio from *Bioethics & Being Human*, as well as the last nine years of The Center for Bioethics & Human Dignity’s conferences, is available for purchase on our website.

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