

President's Commission on Bioethics

Philosophical and Theological Perspectives

Transcript from September 13, 2010, in Philadelphia, Penn.

Q&A

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Arthur Caplan:

By the way, I think it is true that 90 percent of the people invoke to playing God metaphor do so from a secular or non-religious point of view. I don't know why that is, but it's sociological interesting. Instead of the allegory of the golden calf, let me use a parable of the glowing goldfish.

Some years ago an organism was made with a luminescent gene from a bacteria that was put into a goldfish and sold at pet stores. I was interested in that because it was the first genetically engineered organism, really. When you went out to find out who did this and how did this thing get on the market, it turned out nobody knew. All of the regulatory agencies said, I don't know; is it ours to worry about? You don't eat it. It's kind of an entertainment thing." And when I was talking about playing around, it was that kind of an example that I was using. I think the public in some way says, oh, that's kind of interesting, or if an artist makes himself glow in the dark with a luminescent gene you get this suggestion that no one is watching the store, Anybody can sort of head off in any direction, things get made for fun and amusement with serious technologies. To me, all of that message is wrong. It doesn't reflect the deliberations of you all as you think about synthetic biology. It doesn't reflect the fact that different presidential administrations have thought long and hard about genetic engineering. It doesn't even reflect the fact that in our commercial activities we don't have some license or clearance to say, well, if we're going to use these technologies to make these kinds of critters at least you should register somewhere.

So my point is on the playing part, I think there have been instances of playing. And I think that they are dangerous. And I think that both educating the public about the steps, barriers, reflection

that has to take place to release the new technology, accountability for what's being made and where it's going — all of these things, I think, will tamp down the playing part.

Last comment on playing God. I think playing God is an argument that is tossed up sometimes as an obstruction. It's more an obstructionist argument than it is a serious "let's engage the question whether we should play God" kind of argument. And as such I think that argument needs to be addressed by asking people to cash out what they mean. In other words, it's a little bit like the precautionary principle. If I want to invoke playing God, I would like to hear what exactly do you think about that metaphor in terms of what you want us to avoid or not do. I can interpret it, and maybe interpret it in ways that not every critic would find accommodating. But nonetheless, you have to call the objection on the carpet. It isn't just one that ends a debate, but sometimes it does in the hands — in certain circles.

Jim Wagner:

Ingrid?

Ingrid Mattson:

I guess at a time when a large percentage of Americans believe that Joan of Arc was the wife of Noah, we have as much of a problem with religious education as we do with science education. So there's two sides of it. What's the science, and then what do we know about what God is and God's power. And I think here, you know, to some extent we're helped by the separation between religious and scientific education, but we're also harmed by it. Because many Americans have such a superficial understanding of their own religious ethics and theology that they have this, you know, simplistic, cartoonish idea of what it means for God to have power, to have a relationship with life.

You know, there's beautiful, prophetic tradition that, in my tradition, where the prophet Muhammad said, "There is a cure for every disease except death. So seek the remedy." And that really has been the impetus for continuing to push scientific research and medical research and new medical technologies. But, you know, these teachings without a place to really discuss them, they pass by in many ordinary people, and what they have is just this — as I tried to explain in the beginning was the story about Muhammad and seeing the cross-pollenization of the date palm, there's this visceral, kind of "icky" reaction that this isn't natural. And so we're left with that. We're left with this untaught visceral revulsion to things that are new and different and seem somehow unnatural to us.

So maybe, you know, the integration of religious theological ethics more — at least education about religious theological ethics into scientific education as well as vice versa will help.

Jim Wagner:

Sondra, did you want to —

Sondra Wheeler:

Quickly, let me make a very Protestant comment about “playing God.” I don’t think that the people who throw that term around, at least — all right, there is the press, who will do anything to create a controversy because we have shown them that’s what sells papers or brings up TV ratings or whatever. So if we get stupid journalism, it’s because that’s what we buy. So your own doing. But apart from that, when people use that language, I don’t think they are thinking of something lighthearted at all. They are thinking of the absolute core of evil as Protestant Christianity has understood it, where the serpent, who is the wisest of all of the creatures, tempts the human couple. What he says is, “if you eat from this tree, you will you be like gods” and, blimey, it’s the first thing they do.

And so if you think of the sort of root of human evil is the striving to be your own god, that that is the nature of what is wrong with the — the chasm between us and goodness, then this language invokes the sort of just newest technological dress on the oldest problem in human existence. So that’s what’s being played with and that’s why it has the weight it does.

Now, like Ingrid, I am horrified by not the things my students don’t know but the things they’re sure of that aren’t so. I spend a great deal of time not only in the classroom but in churches addressing communities of faith in various settings, and clergy as well as laity. And because I teach bioethics and do things like talk about why it might be a good idea to withdraw treatment, which inevitably brings up the “Aren’t you deciding who lives and who dies? And doesn’t that mean you’re playing God?” I spend a great deal of time trying to say what we are doing is working very hard at how to be human, and how to be human in a world where these powers exist, where the knowledge is out there.

The Smallpox genome can be looked up on your local Internet Explorer anytime you want. And, like Genies, knowledge does not go back in the bottle all that readily. And so if we are going to live as at human beings, as responsible agents in a world in which dangerous knowledge is out there and possible, in a world in which medical technology can extend metabolism and respiration and heartbeat and circulation long past the point that it’s easy to see how it’s a benefit, then in order to take responsibility for what we have done we have to think together, and hard, about these. And bumper sticker ethics is not going to cut it.

So we have to, I think, both take the concern seriously and take the underlying recognition that we do overreach, we do overstep, and we are accessibly optimistic about ourselves seriously at the same time that we say the response is to think well, not to stop thinking.