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“Playing God”: Invoking a Perspective



by Allen Verhey

Should human beings play God? It's a question frequently asked in discussions of bioethics.¹ Indeed, the question played an important role in what some regard as “the birth of bioethics” (Jonsen, 1993).

It was 1962. The “artificial kidney” that made dialysis possible had recently been invented, but already it was clear that it was an effective therapy. An artificial kidney center was started up at Swedish Hospital in Seattle—and soon a new committee started up there, too. The committee was necessary because there were not enough kid-

ney machines to meet the need. Hard choices had to be made: Who would receive dialysis when not all could? Who would live and who would die? The committee was formed to make such choices. And it made them by selecting those patients of greatest social worth. One of the patients—a patient fortunate enough or worthy enough—to have been chosen said of the committee, “It's like trying to play God.” The phrase was picked up in *Life* magazine's description of the committee as “the Seattle God Committee.”

Many objected to this “playing God.” One commentator wanted to make it a principle: “Thou shalt not play God with human lives” (Freund, 1965, 687). Another said that the essence of “playing God” was to look at Allen and Barbara, compare them, declare that Barbara is worth more than Allen, and save Barbara (Sanders and Dukeminier, 1968, 375). Others, however, objected to these objections. Some said the notion of “playing God” was meaningless (Erde, 1989, 600-601). And others said that choosing the socially worthy for treatment is hardly the sort of behavior Paul celebrated as God's grace. It is not by works or by worthiness that we are saved, but by grace. So a better argument against selection for scarce life-saving therapies on the basis of social worth might begin with an invitation to “‘play God’ as God plays God” (Ramsey, 1970a, 256). Perhaps then it is not a question of whether “to play God” or not but of how we can play God in a way that honors God.

The phrase has been used in debates not only about allocation but about euthanasia, neonatal intensive care, abortion, technologically assisted

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reproduction, genetics—about almost every area of bioethics. It has been used in a variety of contexts—and it has been used in a variety of ways! We are sometimes invited to play God, and we are sometimes warned against it, but before we decide whether to accept the invitation or to heed the warning, it would be good to know what it means to “play God.”

When my daughter Kate was very young, she once invited the rest of the family to play “52-semi.” She was holding a deck of cards, obviously eager to play. But when we asked for an explanation of this game, she would give none, only repeating her invitation to play “52-semi.” Finally we said, “OK, Katie, let’s play ‘52-semi.’” She threw the cards up into the air and, when they had fallen back to the floor, commanded triumphantly, “Now pick ‘em up.” She had gotten her trucks mixed up, confusing “52-semi” with “52 pick-up,” but suddenly—too late—we knew what she meant. Should human beings “play God”? It depends, you see, on what it means to “play God.”

Unfortunately, the phrase does not mean just one thing; it means different things to different people in different contexts. That is hardly surprising, I suppose, given the fact that neither “play” nor “God” are simple terms. Moreover, sometimes the phrase is used in ways that have nothing to do with either “play” or “God.” One recent survey of the uses of the phrase (Erde, 1989) called for a moratorium on the question “should human beings play God?” The phrase is meaningless, the survey insisted, adding for good measure that it was also “muddle-headed,” “nonsensical,” “unconstitutional or blasphemous,” and “immoral.” The author demanded that, for the phrase to be meaningful, it must mean a single moral principle, and a universal moral principle at that. That seems a bit much to ask.

Today I invite you to consider this phrase “playing God”—focusing on issues raised by human knowledge and power in human genetics. I hope to indicate that the phrase is used not so much to state a principle as to invoke various perspectives on the world, perspectives from which other things, including scientific and technological innovations in genetics—and the phrase itself—are meaningful.

I will examine the report of the President’s

Commission on Genetics called *Splicing Life*, the lament of some religious people about other people “playing God,” the invitation of Joseph Fletcher, “Come, let us play God,” and the warning of Paul Ramsey. I hope to indicate along the way that we must be attentive not only to particular moral problems raised by genetic engineering but also to the perspective from which we examine and evaluate these new powers and problems. I will, in the end, invite people to “play God” but in the context of a perspective in which “God” is taken seriously and “play” playfully.

The President’s Commission report on *Splicing Life* (1982) is a good place to begin. The

Attend to the moral problems raised by genetic engineering but also to the perspective from which we examine and evaluate these new powers and problems.

Commission noted the concerns about “playing God” in genetics and undertook to make some sense of the phrase. It decided that the phrase “playing God” does not have “a specific religious meaning” (54). If the Commission had meant by that only that the phrase does not simply mean one thing, then one could hardly object, but the Commission proceeded to assert that “at its heart” the phrase was “an expression of a sense of awe [in response to extraordinary *human* powers]—and concern [about the possible consequences of these vast new powers]” (54). It simply translated the warnings against “playing god” into a concern about the consequences of exercising great human powers (Lebacqz, 1984, 33).

The Commission reduced the meaning of the phrase to secular terms and made “God” superfluous. “At its heart,” according to the Commission, the phrase “playing God” has nothing to do with “God.” Moreover, there is nothing very playful about “playing God” either. The human powers in genetics and their possible consequences are too serious for playfulness.

“Playing God” might mean what the Commission interpreted it to mean, something like, “Wow! Human powers are awesome. Let’s

not play around!” It evidently does mean something like that to many who use the phrase. Such an interpretation of the phrase is hardly trivial, but it is also not very useful to guide or limit human powers. It is worth asking, however, whether the President’s Commission invoked a particular perspective in interpreting the phrase the way it did. I think the answer is yes, the perspective invoked was the Baconian perspective.

The President’s Commission highlighted one very important feature of contemporary culture, the hegemony of scientific knowledge. “Since the Enlightenment,” it said, “Western societies have exalted the search for greater knowledge” (President’s Commission, 1982, 54). Scientific knowledge, beginning with Copernicus, has both “dethrone[d] human beings as the unique center of the world” and delivered “vast powers for action” into their hands (54-55).

Science has taught us the hard lesson that human beings and their earth are not “the center of the universe” (Augenstein, 1962, 11), but it is now putting into human hands powers and responsibilities “to make decisions which we formerly left to God” (Augenstein, 1962, 142). This is, to borrow the phrase of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, humanity’s “coming of age” (Augenstein, 1962, 143). Where this is the context for talk of “playing God,” it is not surprising that “God” is superfluous, that “God” is not taken seriously when we try to make sense of the phrase. Bonhoeffer, after all, described humanity’s “coming of age” as an effort to think the world “*etsi deus non daretur*” (“as though God were not a given”). Science has no need of God “as a working hypothesis” (Bonhoeffer, 1953, 218); in fact it is not even permitted for science qua science to make use of “God.” There are assumptions operative in this perspective, however, not only about “God” but about humanity, knowledge, and nature as well.

With respect to humanity, science has taught us that we are not “the center of the universe.” However, science has not taught us where we do belong. As Nietzsche aptly put it, “since Copernicus man has been rolling from the center into x” (cited in Jungel, 1983, 15). Once human beings and their earth were at the center. They did not put themselves there; God put them there, and it was simply accepted as a matter of course that

they *were* there. After Copernicus had shown that they were not there, not at the center, humanity was left to fend for itself (or simply continue “rolling”). This *positionlessness* was the new assumption, and it entailed that humanity had to attempt to secure (if somewhat anxiously) a place for itself—and what better place than at the center.

After Copernicus, humanity had to *put* itself at the center, *make* itself *into* the center. The very science, moreover, that destroyed the illusion that humanity was at the center gave to humanity power in the world and over the world. Such mastery, however, has not eliminated human insecurity and anxiety; in fact, the new powers and their unintended consequences evoke new anxieties. In this context “playing God” *etsi deus non daretur* might well be interpreted as “an expression of a sense of awe [before human powers]—and concern [about unanticipated consequences].”

There are assumptions in the Baconian perspective concerning knowledge, too. The comment of the President’s Commission that “[s]ince the Enlightenment, Western societies have exalted the search for greater knowledge” requires a gloss. They have exalted a particular kind of knowledge, the knowledge for which they reserve the honorific term “science.” It is simply not the case that the search for knowledge began to be exalted only with the Enlightenment. Thomas Aquinas, for example, had exalted the search for knowledge long before the Enlightenment, affirming “all knowledge” as “good.” He distinguished, however, “practical” from “speculative” (or theoretical) sciences. The difference was that the practical sciences were for the sake of some work to be done, while the speculative sciences were for their own sake (Aquinas, Commentary on Aristotle’s *On the Soul*, I,3; cited in Jonas, 1966, 188).

That classical account (and celebration) of knowledge must be contrasted with the modern account epitomized in Francis Bacon’s *The Great Instauration* and “exalted” in Western societies. In Bacon allknowledge is sought for its utility, “for the benefit and use of life” (Bacon, [1620] 1960, 15). The knowledge to be sought is “no mere felicity of speculation”(29) which is but the “boyhood of knowledge” and “barren of works”(8). The knowledge to be sought is the practical knowledge that will make humanity “capable of overcoming

the difficulties and obscurities of nature”(19), able to subdue and overcome its vexations and miseries. “And so those twin objects, human knowledge and human power, do really meet in one”(29). The knowledge “exalted” in Western societies is this power over nature which presumably brings human well-being in its train.

In the classical account, theory (or the speculative sciences) provided the wisdom to use the practical sciences appropriately. The modern account may admit, as Bacon did, that for knowledge to be beneficial, humanity must “perfect and govern it in charity” (Bacon, [1620] 1960, 15), but science is “not self-sufficiently the source of that human quality that makes it beneficial” (Jonas, 1966, 195). Moreover, the compassion (or “charity”) that responds viscerally to the vexations and miseries of humanity will urge us to *do something* to relieve those miseries, but it will not tell us *what thing* to do. Bacon’s account of knowledge simply arms compassion with artifice, not with wisdom (O’Donovan, 1984, 10-12). For the charity to “perfect and govern” human powers and for the wisdom to guide charity, science must call upon something else. But upon what? And how can humanity have “knowledge” of it?

Knowledge of that which transcends “use” has no place in Bacon’s theory.² Knowledge of that which might guide and limit the human use of human powers was the subject of classical theory, but not of the Enlightenment “search for greater knowledge.” In this context there is no place for either “play” (because play is not “useful”) or “God” (because God is transcendent and will not be used). With the different assumptions concerning knowledge come different assumptions concerning nature, too. The Baconian project sets humanity not only *over* nature but *against* it. The natural order and natural processes have no dignity of their own; their value is reduced to their utility to humanity—and nature does not serve humanity “naturally.” In Bacon’s perspective nature threatens to rule and to ruin humanity; against the powers of nature knowledge promises the power to relieve humanity’s miseries and “to endow the human family with new mercies” (Bacon, [1620] 1960, 29). The fault that runs through our world and through our lives must finally be located in nature. Nature

may be—and must be—mastered (Jonas, 1966, 192).

This, I think, is the perspective invoked by the President’s Commission, and it is from this perspective that it understands “playing God” as having nothing to do with either “play” or “God,” but as having rather to do with human scientific knowledge and power over nature even when (or especially when) the faith that human well-being will come in the train of technology is a creed ripe for doubt.

Religious people have sometimes celebrated this Baconian perspective and its quest for scientific knowledge and technical power—and have sometimes lamented it. Some who have lamented

“I’m afraid the only thing left to do is pray.”

“Oh my! And I didn’t even think it was serious.”

it have raised their voices in protest against almost every new scientific hypothesis and against almost all technological developments (for example, anaesthesia during childbirth or vaccinations). These evidently regard scientific inquiry as a threat to faith in God and technical innovation as an offense to God. These lament a “humanity come of age” and long to go back to a former time, a time of our childhood (if only we knew the way!). They regret a world *etsi deus non daretur* and wish to preserve the necessity of “God” in human ignorance and powerlessness. But such a “God” can only ever be a “God of the Gaps” and can only ever be in retreat to the margins.

It is an old and unhappy story in Christian apologetics that locates God’s presence and power where human knowledge and strength have reached their (temporary) limit. Newton, for example, saw certain irregularities in the motion of the planets, movements which he could not explain by his theory of gravity, and in those irregularities he saw, he said, the direct intervention of God. When later astronomers and physicists provided a natural explanation for what had puzzled Newton, “God” was no longer necessary. And there is the old joke of the patient who, when told that the only thing left to do was to pray, said, “Oh, my! And I didn’t even think it was serious.” The God of the Gaps is only invoked, after all, where

doctors are powerless.

In the context of such a piety, a defensive faith in the God of the Gaps, “playing God” means to encroach on those areas of human life where human beings have been ignorant or powerless, for there God rules, there only God has the authority to act. In this context “playing God” means to seize God’s place at the boundaries of human knowledge and power, to usurp God’s authority and dominion there. In this context it is understandable that humanity should be warned, “Thou shalt not play God.”

Once again the phrase is used not so much to state a principle as to invoke a perspective. To be sure, such warnings remind humanity of its fallibility and finitude, and such warnings are good. There are, however, at least three problems with this perspective and with such warnings against “playing God.”

The first and fundamental problem with this perspective is that the God of the Gaps is not the God made known in creation and in Scripture. The God of creation and Scripture made and sustains the order we observe and rely upon. To describe that order in terms of scientific understanding does not explain God away; it is to give an account of the way God orders God’s world. The order of the world comes to us no less from the gracious hand of God than the extraordinary events humans call “miracles.” “Nature” is no less the work of God than “grace.” And, to understand the earth and its order as God’s is not to understand it in a way that prohibits “natural scientific” explanations. It is to be called to serve God’s cause, to be responsible to God in the midst of it.

The second problem with this perspective and with such warnings against “playing God” is that they are *indiscriminate*; they do not permit discriminating judgments. There are some things that we already know how to do (and so can hardly be said to trespass the boundaries of human ignorance and powerlessness) but which we surely ought never do. And there are some things (including some things in genetics) that we cannot yet do but which we must try to learn to do if God is God and we are called to “follow” the one who heals the sick and feeds the hungry. The warning against “playing God” in this perspective reduces to the slogan “It’s not nice to fool with Mother Nature (at

least not any more than we are currently comfortable with).” Ironically, then, the warning enthrones “nature” as god rather than the One who transcends it and our knowledge of it.

The third problem is a corollary of these other problems. By its failure to make discriminating judgments, and by its confusion of God with natural process, this perspective nurtures irresponsibility. It does not take all our human powers to be part of our human responsibility to God, part of our answer-ability to serve God’s cause in the midst of the world.

It is little wonder, then, that some *other* religious people have reacted against this God of the Gaps and against this warning, “Thou shalt not play God.” These have sometimes celebrated the advances of science and the innovations of technology, urging humanity bravely to go forward, uttering a priestly benediction over the Baconian project. These sometimes also use the phrase “playing God,” but usually to invite humanity to “play God.” Joseph Fletcher, for example, responded provocatively to the charge that his enthusiasm for genetic technology amounted to a license to “play God” by admitting the charge (Fletcher, 1970, 131) and by making the invitation explicit; “Let’s play God,” he said (126).

The “God” Fletcher invited us to “play” was still the God of the Gaps in a sense (1970, 132), the god at the edges of human knowledge and power. For Fletcher, however, “that old, primitive God is dead” (1970, 132; 1974, 200). Dead also are the “taboos” which prohibited trespass on the territory of that God’s rule (1974, 127), the “fatalism” that passively accepted the will of that God (1974, 128), and the “obsolete theodicy” that attempted to defend that God (1970, 132). “What we need,” he said, “is a new God” (1970, 132). But Fletcher’s “new God” resembled the God of the eighteenth-century deist, and indifference to a God so conceived is inevitable. Life may proceed—and “playing God” may proceed—*etsi deus non daretur*.

Although Fletcher said little more about this “new God,” he did say that “any God worth believing in wills the best possible well-being for human beings” (1974, xix). Fletcher’s “new God” turns out to be a heavenly utilitarian, and this God, too, humanity must “play.”

So, Fletcher's invitation to "play God" comes to this: humanity should use its new powers to achieve the greatest good of the greatest number of people (not intimidated by "taboos"), to take control over "nature" (not enervated by "fatalism"), to take responsibility, to design and make a new and better world, to substitute for an absent God. "It was *easier* in the old days," Fletcher said (1974, 200), "to attribute at least some of what happened to God's will—we could say with a moral shrug that we weren't responsible. Now we have to shoulder it all. The moral tab is ours and we have to pick it up. The excuses of ignorance and helplessness are growing thin." Notice what has happened to responsibility here. Fletcher underscores human responsibility, but we are responsible not so much to God as *instead* of God.⁵ That shift puts an enormous (and messianic) burden on genetics, a burden that leaves little time for "play."

The phrase "playing God" here does state a principle, namely, utility, but it also does more than that—it invokes a perspective, a perspective in which the God of the Gaps is superfluous, in which humanity is maker and designer, in which knowledge is power, and in which nature must be mastered to maximize human well-being. Such a perspective makes the invitation to "play God"—and much else in Fletcher's discussion of genetics—meaningful. Christians may welcome Fletcher's burial of the God of the Gaps, but they still wait and watch and pray not for the invention of some "new God" but for the appearance of the one God who continues to create, preserve, and redeem humanity and the earth. Moreover, Fletcher's invitation to "play God" need not seem blasphemous to those trained to "imitate God," to "follow" God, to be disciples of one who made God present among us. But to map the path of discipleship and imitation as "the utilitarian way" must seem strange to those who know the law and the prophets, the gospels and the gospel.

It seemed strange, at least, to Paul Ramsey. In Ramsey's usage, although we are usually warned against "playing God," we are sometimes encouraged to "'play God' in the correct way" (Ramsey, 1970a, 256) or to "play God as God plays God" (1978, 203)—and God is no utilitarian. "God," Ramsey said (1978, 205), "is not a rationalist whose care is a function of indicators of our per-

sonhood, or of our achievement within those capacities. He makes his rain to fall upon the just and the unjust alike, and his sun to rise on the abnormal as well as the normal. Indeed, he has special care for the weak and the vulnerable among us earth people. He cares according to need, not capacity or merit." These divine patterns and images are, according to Ramsey, at "the foundation of Western medical care" (1978, 205).

One might expect Ramsey, then, simply to echo Fletcher's invitation to "play God" while engaging him and others in conversation concerning who this God is whom we are invited to "play." However, he also (and more frequently) warned

*Our responsibility to God
limits and shapes an account
of what we are responsible
for in God's good world—
and in its genetics.*

against "playing God." The phrase itself, he admitted, is "not [a] very helpful characterization" (1970b, 90), but he used it to name—and to warn against—an "attitude," an "outlook," certain "operating, unspoken premises" at work in Western scientific culture (1970b, 91), and to invite a different perspective on the world.

The fundamental premise that Ramsey warns against is that "God" is superfluous. "Where there is no God . . .," he said (1970b, 91-96), there humanity is creator, maker, the engineer of the future, and there nature, even human nature, may be and must be controlled and managed with messianic ambition. Where "God" is superfluous and human beings cast in this role of "the maker," there morality is reduced to considering consequences, knowledge is construed simply as power, and nature—including the human nature given to humanity as embodied and communal—is left with no dignity of its own. Ramsey's warnings against "playing God" are not immediately identified with a particular moral rule or principle; rather, they challenge the wisdom and the sufficiency of the assumptions too much at work in Western culture. It is not that some "God of the Gaps" is threatened. It is not simply that human powers are awesome or that the consequences of

“interfering with nature” are worrisome, as the President’s Commission suggested. It is rather that the fundamental perspective from which we interpret our responsibilities is critically important to seeing what those responsibilities are (1970b, 28, 143).

The fundamental perspective Ramsey recommends and to which he contrasts “playing God” is “to intend the world as a Christian or as a Jew” (1970b, 22), i.e., *etsi deus daretur*—and not just any old *deus* (nor Fletcher’s “new God”) but the God who creates and keeps a world and a covenant. That means, among other things, that the end of all things may be left to God. Where God is God and not us, there can be a certain eschatological nonchalance. From this perspective, our responsibilities, while great, will not be regarded as being of messianic proportion. There will be some room, then, for an ethic of means as well as for considering consequences (1970b, 23-32), for reflecting about the kind of behavior worthy of human nature as created by God, as embodied and interdependent, for example.

When joined with such reflection, Ramsey’s warnings that we should not play God do prohibit some actions. When joined with an interpretation of human procreation, for example, the warning against “playing God” prohibits putting “entirely asunder what God joined together,” prohibits separating “*in principle*” the unitive and procreative goods of human sexuality, prohibits reducing human procreation either to biology or to contract (1970b, 32-33), and these prohibitions support, in turn, a series of more particular prohibitions, for example, artificial insemination using the sperm of a donor (1970b, 47-52).

When joined with an interpretation of the patient as “*a sacredness in the natural, biological order*” (Ramsey, 1970a, xiii), the “edification” drawn from the warning against “playing God” prohibits deliberately killing patients, including very little patients, for the sake of relieving their (or another’s) suffering, prohibits using one, even a very little one, even one created in a petri dish, to learn to help others without consent.

Ramsey warns against “playing God,” against trying to substitute for an absent God, against trying to “be” God, but there remains room for “playing God” *etsi deus daretur*. Indeed, as we have

seen, Ramsey can invite people to “‘play God’ in the correct way.” Such “playing” is not to substitute for an absent God, not to “be” God, but to “imitate” God (1970a, 259), to follow in God’s way like a child “playing” a parent.

In both the warning and the invitation a perspective is invoked, an outlook that assumes God is God and not us, that humanity is called to honor and to nurture the nature God gave, that knowledge of that which transcends use is possible, and that the fault that runs through our lives and our world is not simply located in nature but in human pride or sloth.

One who—like me—shares this perspective will make sense of the phrase “playing God” in the light of it and find it appropriate sometimes to sound a warning against “playing God” and sometimes to invite people to “play God” in imitating of God’s care and grace.

Permit me to focus on the invitation to “play God”—and first to underscore the invitation to “play.”⁶ Many have complained that “playing God” is serious stuff and regretted the implication of “playfulness” in the phrase (Lebacqz, 1984, 40, n.19). Some “play,” however, can be very serious indeed—as anyone who plays noon-hour basketball knows quite well. “Playfulness” is quite capable of being serious, but it is not capable of being purely instrumental.

When Teilhard de Chardin said that “in the great game that is being played, we are the players as well as . . . the stakes” (1961, 230), he created a powerful image to call attention both to the extraordinary powers of human beings and to the awesome consequences of exercising those powers. No wonder playfulness seems inappropriate. Precisely because the stakes are high, however, it may be apt to set alongside De Chardin’s image a Dutch proverb, “It is not the marbles that matter but the game” (quoted Huizinga, 1950, 49). When the stakes are high, or even when the stakes alone are taken seriously, then one is tempted to cheat in order to win. And when one cheats, then one only pretends to play; the cheat plays neither fair nor seriously.

Play, even marbles, can be serious, but it cannot be purely instrumental; it cannot allow attention to be monopolized by the stakes, by the consequences of winning or losing. When our attention

is riveted by De Chardin's image that we are "the stakes," it may well be important to allow our imagination to be captured by his image that we are "the players," too. Then we may be able to avoid reducing the moral life to a concern about consequences, even where the stakes are high. We may be able to avoid reducing ourselves to makers and designers and our existence to joyless and incessant work. We may see that we are at stake, not just in the sense of some plastic destiny our powers may make but already in the imagination, in the image of ourselves with which human creativity begins (Hartt, 1975, 117,134).

The invitation is an invitation to "play," but it is more specifically an invitation to "play God," and that invitation requires attention to the God whom we are invited to play. In the foreword to a book entitled *Should Doctors Play God?* Mrs. Billy Graham wrote (1971, vii),

If I were an actress who was going to play, let's say, Joan of Arc, I would learn all there is to learn about Joan of Arc. And, if I were a doctor or anyone else trying to play God, I would learn all I could about God.

That seems a prudent strategy for an actress—and good advice for people called to imitate God. The invitation to "play God," to cast ourselves playfully in the role of God, invites theological reflection; it invites reflection about "God."

The invitation goes out to all, not just to Christians. When ancient Greek physicians swore the Hippocratic Oath by Apollos, Aesclepius, Hygiea, Panacea and all the gods and goddesses, they invoked a story. Healing had its beginnings among the gods, and the Hippocratic physicians swore to make that story their own. And when the temple to Aesclepius in the Areopagus was inscribed with the message that, like a god, Aesclepius healed both rich and poor without discrimination, a path was laid out for physicians to follow.

The invitation goes out to all, but reflection about God is always formed and informed by the particular stories and communities within which it is undertaken, and Christians will heed this invitation in the light of their own tradition and its talk of God. We play God in response to God, imitating God's ways and providing human service to God's cause. Our responsibility to God limits and shapes an account of what we are responsible for

in God's good world—and in its genetics.

Permit me, then, simply to select a few images of God in the Jewish and Christian tradition and to suggest something of their relevance to "playing God" in genetics. Two of these images are regularly invoked in these discussions: creator and healer—and the third is often overlooked: God is the one who takes the side of the poor.

First, then, what might it mean playfully to cast ourselves in the role of the creator? This, of course, has been the topic of much discussion. If I read the story right, however, to cast ourselves in the role of the creator might mean something too much overlooked. It might mean that we look at

Human creativity and control are to be exercised in responding to God, in imitating God's ways, and in serving God's cause.

the creation and at its genetics and say to ourselves, "God, that's good." It might mean, that is, first of all, to wonder, to stand in awe, to delight in the elegant structure of the creation and its dna. It would mean a celebration of knowledge that was not simply mastery. It would mean an appreciation of nature—and of human nature—as given, rather than a suspicion of it as threatening and requiring human mastery. And if I read the story right, it might mean a second thing too much overlooked. It might mean to take a day off, to rest, to play. But we have already talked of that.

It also means, of course, a third thing, a thing seldom overlooked in these discussions—that human creativity is given with the creation. Human beings are created and called to exercise dominion in the world—and I see no reason to suppose that such creativity and control does not extend to genetics. It is not "Mother Nature" who is God, after all, in the Christian story. Human creativity and control, however, are to be exercised in responding to God, in imitating God's ways, and in serving God's cause. That's a part of the Christian story, too, a part of the story usually captured in describing ourselves as stewards and our responsibility as stewardship.

We can discover something of God's cause, the cause stewards serve, in a second feature of the

story. God is the healer. Jesus, the one in whom God and the cause of God were made known, was a healer. We discover there that the cause of God is life, not death; the cause of God is human flourishing, including the human flourishing we call health, not disease. What does it mean to cast ourselves playfully in the role of God the healer? It means to intend life and its flourishing, not death or human suffering. Therefore, genetic therapy, like other therapeutic interventions which aim at health, may be celebrated. Healing is "playing God" the way God plays God. Genetic therapies, however, are still mostly (but not completely) a distant hope. The more immediate contributions of genetics to medicine are in genetic diagnosis. And where there are therapeutic options, these too may be celebrated. However, genetic diagnoses without therapeutic options are sometimes deeply ambiguous.

Prenatal diagnoses, for example, are frequently ambiguous. Already we can diagnose a number of genetic conditions in a fetus, and the number is constantly growing. For most of these there is no therapy. The tests allow parents to make a decision about whether to give birth or to abort. How shall we "play God" here in ways responsible to God? If God's cause is life rather than death, then those who would "play God" in imitation of God will not be disposed to abort; they will not celebrate abortion as a "therapeutic option."

There are, I think, genetic conditions which justify abortion. There are conditions like Tay-Sachs which consign a child not only to an abbreviated life but to a life subjectively indistinguishable from torture. And there are conditions like Trisomy 18 which are inconsistent not only with life but with the minimal conditions for human communication. Prenatal diagnosis—and abortion—can be used responsibly. However, when some children with Down's Syndrome are aborted because they have Down's, there seems a reasonable possibility that prenatal diagnoses have been—and will be—used irresponsibly. And when some girls are aborted because they are girls, it seems obvious that the tests have been—and will be—used irresponsibly. When the slogan about "preventing birth defects" is taken to justify preventing the birth of "defectives," those who do not measure up to the standards or match the prefer-

ences of parents, then there are reasons to worry a little, to worry that the disposition of a good "parent" will change from the sort of uncalculating nurturance that can evoke and sustain trust from children to the sort of calculating nurturance that is prepared to abandon or abort the offspring who do not match specifications. "Playing God" the way God plays God—or, if you will, the way God plays "parent"—would sustain care for the weak and the helpless and for the little ones who do not measure up.

Genetic therapy, I said, may be celebrated as service to God's cause of health. It is to "play God" as God plays God. However, to use this knowledge and technology responsibly it must be aimed at "health," not genetic enhancement. The distinction between intervening for health and intervening for genetic enhancement may be a slippery one, but casting ourselves playfully in the role of God the healer will encourage us to make such a distinction and to abide by it. Eugenics is not the way to "play God" the way God plays God.

Consider, finally, this third image: God is one who takes the side of the poor. What would it mean to cast ourselves in the role of one who takes the side of the poor? It would mean, at the very least, I think, a concern for social justice. It would mean, for example, to ask about the allocation of resources to the human genome project. When cities are crumbling, when schools are deteriorating, when we complain about not having sufficient resources to help the poor or the homeless, when we do not have the resources to provide care for all the sick, is this a just and fair use of our society's resources? Is it an allocation of social resources that can claim to imitate God's care and concern for the poor?

Having raised that question, let me focus instead on the sharing of the burdens and benefits of the human genome project itself. Who bears the burdens? Who will benefit? And is the distribution fair? Does it fit the story of one who takes the side of the poor and powerless? If we cast ourselves in this role, if we attempt to mirror God's justice and care for the poor and powerless, we will not create human life in order to learn from it with the intention of destroying it after we have learned what we can from it. We will not use the unborn for experiments to learn some things that would benefit oth-

ers, even if it were a great benefit, even if it would benefit a great number of others. And we would be cautious about stigmatizing some as diseased and others as carriers.

But consider also the sharing of benefits. Who stands to benefit from the human genome initiative? Will genetic powers be marketed? Presumably, given the patenting of micro-organisms. And so the rich may get richer while the poor still watch and pray. Will the poor have access to health-care benefits that their taxes helped develop? Can we have any confidence that genetic technology will be available to the uninsured? to those with public insurance? Or will insurance companies use genetic information to screen candidates for insurance? Will the category of "preexisting condition" be redefined to make it easier for insurance companies to make a still larger profit? Will corporations use genetic information to screen applicants in order to hire those with greatest promise of long-term productivity? The point of these questions is to suggest that "playing God" as God plays God will be to be attentive not only to intriguing questions about the frontiers of technology and science but also to mundane questions about fairness, about the effect of such innovations on the poor. If we are to "play God" as God plays God, then we have a pattern for imitating God's hospitality to the poor and to the stranger, to the powerless and to the voiceless, to one who differs from both us and the norm, including some genetic norm. If we are to "play God" as God plays God, then we will work for a society where human beings—each of them, even the least of them—are treated as worthy of God's care and affection.

I have selected only a few images of God, and I admit that I moved to claims about genetic interventions far too quickly. But I said enough, I hope, to suggest the importance of the invitation to play God as God plays God. I said enough, I hope, to suggest the importance of the perspective in terms of which we think about genetics and in terms of which we make sense not only of our powers but of the phrase "playing God."

All who would be stewardly, who would serve, must resist the power of the Baconian perspective in the culture and in the academy. They must resist the temptation to worship some God of the Gaps instead of the God of Scripture and creation. They

must in faith not pretend to substitute for an absent God—*etsi deus non daretur*. They must in faithfulness respond with all their powers and with all human powers to the cause God made known in Christ. They must play God as God plays God. God is God, and not us—but God has called us to follow where God leads, to imitate God's works, to serve God's cause.

END NOTES

1. This paper was delivered at the Bioethics Conference at Dordt College; it is a revision of Allen Verhey, "'Playing God' and Invoking a Perspective," *The Journal of Medicine and Philosophy* 20, 4 (Aug. 1995) 347-364.
2. To be sure, Bacon recommended his "great instauration" as a form of obedience to God, as a restoration to humanity of the power over nature which was given at creation but lost through the fall. Indeed, he prays "that things human may not interfere with things divine, and that...there may arise in our minds no incredulity or darkness with regard to the divine mysteries" (Bacon, [1620] 1960, 14-15). Even so, such mysteries have no theoretical place in Bacon's account of knowledge.
3. Jonas (1966, 194) contrasts the relations of leisure to theory in the classical and modern traditions. In the classical account leisure was an antecedent condition for speculative knowledge, for contemplation; in modern theory leisure is an effect of knowledge (as power), one of the benefits of that knowledge that provides relief from the miseries of humanity, including toil. "Wherefore," Bacon says ([1620] 1960, 29), "if we labor in thy works with the sweat of our brows, thou wilt make us partakers of...thy sabbath."
4. This account of "playing God" was the one rejected by the theologians consulted by the President's Commission (1982, 53).
5. On the shift from theodicy to "anthropodicy" see Becker (1968, 18) and Hauerwas (1990, 59-64).
6. A delightful essay by Jan van Eys (1982) also underscores the invitation to "play" in the phrase "play God."

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