

Protestant Perspectives on Human Enhancement

1.1 It is not possible to speak meaningfully of *a* Protestant perspective on human enhancement, but given the large number of Protestant Churches and the confessional varieties between and within them, it *is* appropriate to speak of a range of viewpoints within Protestantism.

1.2 Much Protestant thought and theology pertinent to human enhancement overlaps with that of other Christian traditions. Belief in God as creator, in Jesus as the mediator of the Divine Life to humanity, in the need for redemption and salvation, in human destiny being fulfilled only in God, in the Christian hope of resurrection and eternal union with God in Christ and in the ethical imperatives of love and justice; these are to be found among Protestants, in common with other Christians.

1.3 There are, however, certain theological and ethical motifs that resonate with particular emphasis or importance within Protestantism. Given the nature of the historical relationship between the Enlightenment and some branches of Protestant thought, it is not surprising that some of the motifs that are most pertinent within Protestantism, are often reflected, utilising different language, in 'secular' debate within liberal democracies.

2.1 Before looking at these motifs, it is important, first, to set the debate on human enhancement interventions in context. It is not possible to divorce the actual or potential *practice* of enhancement interventions from the wider *process* in which they are set. This process includes (i) the motivation for developing such interventions, (ii) the means by which they are developed, (iii) the safety and efficacy of particular interventions and (iv) the potential societal, as well as individual, effects of human enhancement. The process within which any application of a given enhancement intervention is set gives rise to a number of concerns:

2.1.1 *Motivation* for developing novel interventions may include the desire to address illness or disability, to advance scientific knowledge and technical expertise, to pursue commercial interest or to provide enhanced human experience and performance for individuals' particular purposes which may, sometimes, be thought of as being trivial.

In principle, it may be possible to separate these motives and to be supportive of therapeutic interventions; in practice, motives are likely to be mixed and consequently, much more difficult to assess. Of particular concern is the possibility that unrealistic expectations may be embraced or promoted, with individuals believing that enhancement will inevitably lead to better and happier lives. Relational, psychological, moral and spiritual wellbeing are complex matters; enhancement cannot provide a short-cut to attaining any of them.

2.1.2 The *means* by which novel interventions are researched and developed may include ethically challenging procedures, such as the use of stem-cells or genetic manipulation involving embryonic or foetal material or the use of trans-species material. It is important that there is transparency around these issues so that researchers, clinicians and potential recipients may make informed decisions with regard to their participation in human enhancement.

2.1.3 *Safety and efficacy* are particularly relevant in neurotechnologies as they have the potential to affect such important issues as personal identity, individual character and mental health as well as having the potential to challenge our understanding of what it means to be human. Efficacy may be difficult to assure, given that many variables are involved in the application of novel technologies, while safety levels may be difficult to determine, given that problems can take many years to become apparent.

2.1.4 A wide range of *effects*, both intended and unintended, will emerge from human enhancement interventions. Therapeutic advances in the care of individuals are, in principle to be welcomed, but questions of equity arise with regard to the availability, cost and general accessibility of such interventions. The use of interventions for human enhancement raises further equity and justice issues such as the influences of privilege and discrimination, the perils of societal engineering and the encouragement of elitism.

3 .1 Addressing the above concerns requires us to recognise and to attempt to resolve a number of ethical tensions, outlined below in a series of ethical spectra. The ethical spectra have, first of all been expressed in ways that reflect debate within society and

then expressed in ways that are particularly relevant to the Protestant tradition. As will be seen, there is significant overlap. The ‘position’ that various Protestant Churches and individuals adopt on each spectrum will, to a large extent, inform the decisions that are made with regard to the utilisation of various enhancement interventions. As may be expected, Protestant opinion covers the full range within each spectrum.

3.2 Communal responsibility-Individual Freedom (expressed theologically as Justice-Freewill): individual freedom to pursue, to apply or to receive the benefits of human enhancement must be balanced by the effects of such actions on others. True individual freedom may be found when it is focused on God and on others, but a decision to act in this way must be a genuinely free one, not based on coercion. The integrity and cohesion of society is undergirded by equitable access to treatment for individuals as well as by limits being placed on the advantages that individuals might gain through enhancement, made possible because they enjoy financial or social privilege. .

3.3 Natural order-human intervention (expressed theologically as Stewardship-Co-creation): while human beings are part of the natural order, we have developed unprecedented abilities to manipulate the rest of nature as well as to alter, adjust or augment our own bodies and minds. To what extent ought we to view nature, as it has evolved and developed over time, as created and sustained by God, to represent a template that ought to be adjusted or augmented only with caution? Alternatively, ought we to view our destiny as something that is, to an extent at least, in our own hands, as co-creators with God, within the context of God’s creation of the universe? An inherent caution is often evident as a ‘default position’ with regard to ‘changing’ nature. This may properly reflect a desire to minimise the introduction of risks into a finely-tuned bio-system, but human interventions in nature have resulted in great good as well as notable harm.

3.4 Fixed –fluid understanding of human nature (expressed theologically as Creation-New Creation): undergirding this spectrum are two further issues: whether human nature can be *defined* or, more appropriately, *described* and whether human development is best understood as a comprising a series of distinct and fixed points or

as a gradualist continuum. Traditionally, many philosophers, theologians and ethicists sought to define human nature, viewing the human species as being biologically distinct from other species, with various distinctions being clearly delineated. Moral significance was often attached to particular developmental points, both in the emergence of the human species and in the emergence of individual human persons. In contemporary thought, including Protestant theological and ethical thought, a gradualist and holistic approach is often preferred, with human life being seen as part of a greater continuum of life on Earth and individual human lives as representing a continuum from one generation to another. Those who tend towards the 'fixed' end of the spectrum tend also towards limiting novel neurotechnologies to therapeutic purposes while those who take a 'fluid' approach are more likely to be open to utilising neurotechnologies for enhancement purposes.

3.4 Ideology-reasoned pragmatism (expressed theologically as Revelation-Reason): it is impossible to approach ethical issues in an ideologically free manner (pragmatism may, itself, be presented as an ideology), but for some individuals and groups their distinctive philosophical, theological or political values take primacy. Within the Protestant tradition, the place of the Scriptures as a definitive witness to God's self-revelation, has always occupied a central position. Nonetheless, the Protestant tradition has also been home to much rationalist thought and parts of the Protestant tradition have particular resonance with the Enlightenment. The tension between revelation and reason is resolved differently by various Protestant Churches and theologians, but it is seldom absent in ethical enquiry.

3.5 Pessimism-optimism (expressed theologically as Fall-Creation): an often overlooked factor in ethical and policy decision-making is the inherent attitude of individuals and groups towards the human race and to human history and society. Within the Protestant tradition there is tension evident between those whose essential understanding of humanity is based on the significance of the Fall and on those who look essentially to the inherent goodness of creation and to the concept of the Image of God.

4. Debate within Protestantism, reflects the debate within wider society, perhaps more fully than does debate within some other Christian traditions. As such, while

Protestant Churches may present a fractured witness to society, they are also well placed to draw alongside society in its quest better to understand and to apply techniques and technology associated with human enhancement.