Resisting the Temptation of Perfection

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Abstract. With the advance of CRISPR technology, parents will be tempted to create superior offspring who are healthier, smarter, and stronger. In addition to the fact that many of these procedures are considered immoral for Catholics, they could change human nature in radical and possibly disastrous ways. This article focuses on the question of human perfectionism. First, by considering the relationship between human nature and technology, it analyzes whether such advances can improve human nature in addition to curing diseases. Next, it looks at the moral and spiritual dimensions of perfection by analyzing the cardinal virtues. It argues that seeking perfection in the physical sense alone may not be prudent or wise and may produce greater injustices and weaken the human spirit in the long run. Understanding our true calling to perfection can help us resist the temptation of hubris to enhance the human race through technology. *National Catholic Bioethics Quarterly* 17.1 (Spring 2017): 51–62.

Rabbi Elazar, the son of Rabbi Shimon, was returning home riding his donkey after an extended period of Torah study and contemplation, when … he encountered a man who was very ugly. Rabbi Elazar greeted him, but the man did not respond. Rabbi Elazar then said to him: "What an ugly man! Are all the people in your town as ugly as you?" And the man replied: "I don't know. Go and tell the artist who made me: How ugly is this vessel that you have created!" Realizing that he had sinned, Rabbi Elazar dismounted, prostrated himself before the man and said: "I have responded to your

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plea—forgive me!" But the man replied: "I will not forgive you until you tell the artist who made me: How ugly is this vessel that you have created!"

—Jonathan and Adina Halevy
"Jewish Perspectives on Vulnerable Groups"

Each new power won by *man is a power* over *man as well. Each advance leaves him weaker as well as stronger. In every victory, besides being the general who triumphs, he is also the prisoner who follows the triumphal car.*

—C. S. Lewis
The Abolition of Man

In a not-too-distant future, doctors and biotechnology companies will offer Catholic parents the possibility of creating children free of genetic disorders and immune to a variety of infections and ailments, who possess superior intellectual and athletic prowess, enhanced physical appearance, and longer life spans. The procedures will be safe, effective, and affordable. The only caveat is that this can only be done through IVF, which their Church prohibits and which involves creating and selecting embryos with the best potential while discarding others.[1] Many Catholic couples will agonize over the possibility of giving their offspring the best start in life, and they will undoubtedly feel pressured by their non-Catholic peers who are gaining an additional edge for their children to attend Ivy League schools, be selected for the best athletic programs, and eventually get the best-paying jobs on the market. Would Catholics or others who oppose this technology be left behind?

At first sight, this might seem like the far-fetched scenario from the 1997 science fiction film *Gattaca*, which describes a futuristic society where eugenics is the norm, and persons conceived naturally face genetic discrimination. Belonging to a class of inferior "invalids," Vincent cannot become an astronaut, no matter how hard he studies and trains. To beat the system, he assumes the identity of a person who has superior, "valid" genes. Vincent thus realizes his dream. In the final scene, as an astronaut inside a rocket blasting into space, Vincent reads a note from his double, who has committed suicide after leaving him sufficient genetic material to continue being an impostor. The unspoken question remains: if Vincent were to have offspring, would he choose to provide them with superior genes and a brighter future, or would he risk genetic discrimination for a more spirited existence?

A few years ago, after analyzing hundreds of science fiction films, NASA deemed *Gattaca* to be the most realistic and plausible movie in the genre with

1. This paper will not explicitly address genetic modification of gametes. Some Catholic moral theologians hypothetically accept genetic remodeling of sperm and ova and reintroduction of these gametes through homologous artificial insemination or GIFT to correct genetic defects. See J. Suadeau, "Current Possibilities of Genetic Intervention," in *The New Frontiers of Genetics and the Risk of Eugenics*, Proceedings of the Fifteenth Assembly of the Pontifical Academy for Life, ed. Jean Laffitte and Ignacio Carrasco de Paula (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2011), 52–92.

respect to what humanity could actually face.[2] With the recent discovery of CRISPR as a tool for editing DNA, the future is knocking at our door. This new technique is reportedly easy to perform and inexpensive. Scientists can now use this technology to change the genetic make-up of cells in plants, animals, and humans.[3] Its possible medical applications are tremendous. Research is currently centered on correcting genetic diseases in somatic cells, but there is no reason why this technology cannot be applied to the germline—sperm, eggs, and zygotes—thus altering the human gene pool. In fact, concerned scientists and ethicists are discussing whether this boundary should ever be crossed.[4] Presently, there is a moratorium on human germline modification in around forty countries, but some patient advocacy groups, biotechnology companies, and scientists are calling for an end to the ban.[5] The insatiable urge for excellence and greater perfection is ingrained in the human heart. With the aid of biotechnology, humanity is on the verge of attaining the dreams of human perfection. No wonder some bioethicists are advocating the creation of supermen, wonder women, and perfect babies.[6]

Most of the debates about germline manipulation in literature center on the questions of safety, eugenics, inequality, and the hubris of playing God. Let us suppose that the questions of safety—mishaps, creation of monsters, and unpredictable effects on the human gene pool—eventually disappear as technology overcomes these obstacles.[7] Let us also suppose that the question of justice—Nazi-style eugenics, social discrimination, and the unfair distribution of this technology—can be eliminated by affordability, availability, and governmental policy to ensure fairness.[8] The

2. See Sarah Zielinski, "NASA Picks Best and Worst Sci-Fi Movies," *Smithsonian*, January 6, 2011, http://www.smithsonianmag.com/.

3. See Antonio Regalado, "Everything You Need to Know About CRISPR Gene Editing's Monster Year," *MIT Technology Review*, December 1, 2015, https://www.technologyreview.com/.

4. See Antonio Regalado, "Scientists Call for a Summit on Gene-Edited Babies," *MIT Technology Review*, March 19, 2015, https://www.technologyreview.com/.

5. See Edward Lanphier et al., "Don't Edit the Human Germ Line," *Nature* 519.7544 (March 26, 2015): 410–11, doi:10.1038/519410a. See also Antonio Regalado, "Patients Favor Changing the Genes of the Next Generation with CRISPR," *MIT Technology Review*, December 2, 2015, https://www.technologyreview.com/; Antonio Regalado, "CRISPR Gene Editing to Be Tested on People by 2017, Says Editas," *MIT Technology Review*, November 5, 2015, https://www.technologyreview.com/; and James Gallagher, "GM Embryos 'Essential,' Says Report," *BBC News*, September 10, 2015, http://www.bbc.com/.

6. See John Harris, *Wonderwoman and Superman: The Ethics of Human Biotechnology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992). See also Glenn McGee, *The Perfect Baby: A Pragmatic Approach to Genetics* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1987).

7. See Jonathan Glover, *What Sort of People Should There Be?* (New York: Penguin, 1984); Gregory Stock, *Redesigning Humans: Choosing Our Genes, Changing Our Future* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2002); and John Harris, *Clones, Genes, and Immortality: Ethics and the Genetic Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).

8. See Allen Buchanan et al., *From Chance to Choice: Genetics and Justice* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2001). See also Philip Kitcher, "Utopian Eugenics

question that still remains is whether genetic perfection is absolutely desirable or would impoverish us, paradoxically making us less human? Paul Ramsey warns in *Fabricated Man*, "Access to the Tree of Life (meaning genetic management of future generations) could cause grave damage. It could cause the genetic death God once promised and by his mercy withheld so that his creature, despite having sought to lay hold of godhood, might still live and perform a limited, creaturely service of life. Then would *boundless freedom* and self-determination become *boundless destruction* in its end results, even as its methods all along included the unlimited subjugation of man to his own rational designs and designers."[9]

This article will approach the debate from a spiritual–theological perspective while engaging certain detractors who consider Ramsey and the like to be Luddites and who shun the "playing God" language as nonsense. To examine what perfection entails, this paper will look at the question of human nature and its relationship with technology. A comparison of treatment and enhancement is crucial in this analysis. After these preliminary considerations, the paper will delve into the moral and spiritual dimensions of human perfection by analyzing the cardinal and theological virtues. Understanding the roles of these higher faculties might engender a Christian worldview that will enable future parents to resist the temptation to reach out to the tree of life.[10]

Ambivalence toward Technology and the Language of Nature

The conception of human nature is central to the debate on genetic modification. Those who are in favor of using these technologies generally consider nature, especially human nature, in a mechanistic way, as being open to manipulation and improvement. There is a tendency to reduce nature to the level of genes and to view a change in our genetic composition as a positive gain for evolution. Phillip Sloan traces this development to Descartes, whose modernity project explains physical nature in terms of mathematical and scientific models. Sloan sees the Human Genome Project as an example of the triumph of this reductionist model, based as it is on the idea that, once we have mapped the human genome, we will be able to understand and control human nature.[11] John Harris, confident that the human species can continue its evolution, audaciously endorses the creation of a superior new breed that would not mix with inferior *Homo sapiens*.[12]

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and Social Inequality," in *Controlling Our Destinies: Historical, Philosophical, Ethical, and Theological Perspectives on the Human Genome Project*, ed. Phillip R. Sloan (South Bend, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2000), 229–262.

9. Paul Ramsey, *Fabricated Man: The Ethics of Genetic Control* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1970), 96, original emphasis.

10. See Richard A. McCormick, "Moral Theology and the Genome Project," in Sloan, *Controlling Our Destinies*, 417–427.

11. See Sloan, *Controlling Our Destinies*, 1–26. See also Gerald P. McKenny, *To Relieve the Human Condition: Bioethics, Technology, and the Body* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1997), 184–210.

12. See Harris, *Clones, Genes, and Immortality*.

According to the Catholic natural law tradition, we can discover, within our nature, obligations and laws that dictate our behavior.[13] The idea of a metaphysically grounded basis for human nature is thus essential to understanding what constitutes human flourishing and the design willed by God. Because of secularization and a variety of other causes, this notion of human nature is no longer commonly held.[14] In contrast, in fact, the view that nature is fluid and evolving is palpable in the debates about redesigning humans through genetic engineering. This mutable view of humanity is influenced to a great extent by advances in technology.[15] As we become alienated from nature, losing touch with it and allowing our direct experience to be mediated by technology, we increasingly imagine that we have the power to control, manipulate, and dominate it. Certainly, the power of technology can raise our standard of living, and that is where we dedicate most of our energy. But technology also tends to take on a life of its own if it escapes individual, societal, or political control. Its unfettered proliferation has recently caused concerns that technocracy can harm both the environment and human existence.[16] C. S. Lewis warned that we have both a strange sense that science should be worshipped as the savior and fear and anguish that it can lead to the abolition of man.

Arnold Gehlen notes that as nature becomes more alienated from our common experience, technical and mechanical boundaries will replace ethical ones: "What men fear are not the monstrous destructive energies of the atomic nucleus, but their own; not the H-bomb, but themselves. They sense, rightly, that they cannot count on an internal constraint upon the use of a power one holds in one's hands."[17] Gehlen observes that technology tends to assumes functions it was not originally intended to perform. We see this in the case of IVF, which was originally developed to treat infertile married couples. Now it is used for nontherapeutic reasons (e.g., for enhancement), by fertile couples (e.g., for sex selection), and by the unmarried (e.g., single woman). The same may happen with genetic engineering. That is why it is so hard to draw a line between therapeutic applications, of which most people approve, and enhancements that raise eyebrows. Eventually the line between enhancement and transhumanism will become equally blurred. Therefore, any successful applications of CRISPR using somatic cells will sooner or later be attempted on germ cells.

Take the case of eugenics: After the Nazi's experience, coercive breeding and sterilization programs are universally decried. Yet in the liberal practices of today, IVF-created embryos that have undesired features or defective genes are customarily

13. See Joseph Tham, "The Decline of Natural Law Reasoning: The Influence of Recent Cultural and Intellectual Currents on the Tradition," *National Catholic Bioethics Quarterly* 14.2 (Summer 2014): 245–255.

14. See S. Joseph Tham, "The Secularization of Bioethics," *National Catholic Bioethics Quarterly* 8.3 (Autumn 2008): 443–453.

15. See Joseph Tham and Massimo Losito, *Bioetica al futuro. Tecnicizzare l'uomo o umanizzare la tecnica?* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2015).

16. See Francis, *Laudato si'* (May 24, 2015).

17. See Arnold Gehlen, *Man in the Age of Technology* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), 101.

eliminated through preimplantational genetic diagnosis.[18] Gregory Stock candidly admits that genetic screening and abortion of the less-than-perfect could become routine: "Parents philosophically opposed to diagnostic screening might wish to repair a genetically flawed embryo they created during IVF, but I suspect that more such people exist in the minds of clever bioethicists than in the real world. Germline therapy would bring the destruction of embryos as surely as embryo screening does."[19]

This prediction is already coming true. Scientists who favor a moratorium on germline editing nonchalantly argue that these technologies are unnecessary because there is already an effective practice in place—the elimination of defective embryos through selection.[20] The debate as to whether this constitutes a slippery slope is a matter of perspective, since it is the normal trajectory of any technology to improve, become more efficient, and expand to new applications in other fields.[21]

The Quest for Perfection

What do people desire to improve through technology? Clearly, most want to lead a healthy and disease-free life. Many of our resources are currently invested in reducing mortality and morbidity, which in developed countries are most commonly caused by cancer, heart and metabolic diseases, and degeneration of tissues and organs. Research funds are poured into making the human organism more durable and resistant to infections, radiation, and environmental threats.[22] This culminates in anti-aging research that offers a longer disease-free life span, perhaps eventually even exceeding the age limit of 120 years. Next come technologies that could yield superior performance, which would allow average people, not just athletes, to be stronger, run faster, jump higher, or see further. Another area of enhancement is neuroscience: individuals could be given greater cognitive and mnemonic powers and exercise greater control over their emotions.[23] Next on the menu is the cosmetic improvement of physical attributes, such as height, body weight, and appearance.[24] Genetic engineering is only one weapon in this modern armory of medical wonders, which include nanotechnology, neuroscience, artificial intelligence, cybernetics, regenerative medicine, cloning, stem cells, and hybridization with animals and

18. PGD is a technique by which a cell of the early embryo is examined to detect genetic defects or diseases.

19. See Stock, *Redesigning Humans*, 61.

20. "The current ability to perform quality controls on only a subset of cells means that the precise effects of genetic modification to an embryo may be impossible to know until after birth. Even then, potential problems may not surface for years. Established methods, such as standard prenatal genetic diagnostics or *in vitro* fertilization (IVF) with the genetic profiling of embryos before implantation, are much better options for parents who both carry the same mutation for a disease." Lanphier et al., "Don't Edit the Human Germ Line," 411.

21. See Jinil Choi, "A Study of the Slippery Slope Argument in Bioethics, and Its Application to the Case of Preimplantation Genetic Diagnosis," *Studia Bioethica* 7.2 (2014), 31–37.

22. See McGee, *Perfect Baby,* 128.

23. See Harris, *Clones, Genes, and Immortality*, 173.

24. See Stock, *Redesigning Humans*, 118.

machines.[25] The search for physical perfection, culminating in the transhumanist project, is expressed in this enthusiast's letter:

> Mother Nature, truly we are grateful for what you have made us. No doubt you did the best you could. However, with all due respect, we must say that you have in many ways done a poor job with the human constitution. You have made us vulnerable to disease and damage. You compel us to age and die—just as we're beginning to attain wisdom. … We have decided it is time to amend the human constitution. … We will no longer tolerate the tyranny of aging and death. … We will expand our perceptual range … improve on our neural organization and capacity … reshape our motivational patterns and emotional responses … take charge over our genetic programming and achieve mastery over our biological and neurological processes.[26]

The earlier these modifications can be installed, the better chance youngsters have to begin life with a head start. Hence, parents will be sorely tempted. A few years ago, the President's Council on Bioethics under the direction of Leon Kass issued a valuable critique of enhancement technology and why using them *beyond therapy*, as their book's title implies, could diminish rather than improve humanity. Creating better children could lead to the commoditization of human life, changing the parent–child relationship, family structures, and social fabrics. For example, doping has deformed the nobility of sportsmanship and diminished spectators' admiration for athletic excellence. Artificial interventions to make happier souls can make us superficial and less courageous when facing life's hurts, and reduce our capacity to rise to the occasions that make life worth living. Achieving ageless bodies may change intergenerational relationships as well as our ability to love, appreciate beauty, and accept human finitude.[27]

Thus, in addition to the possible physical advantages of enhancement and transhumanism, we need to carefully ponder the risk that physical perfections might paradoxically bring about moral and spiritual ruin. We should never reduce the human condition to genetic vitality. Our reflection therefore turns toward how these advances may either help us acquire moral perfection and live virtuous lives or hinder us from doing so. Aristotle defines virtue as the permanent disposition to do the good well, "that which makes good who possesses it and makes good his action."[28] Even though human actions are based primarily on will and intellect, a person is influenced to a great extent by his passions, which are understood as feelings or emotions. Properly channeled, virtues can help parents subordinate their passions to their intellect and

25. See James Hughes, *Citizen Cyborg: Why Democratic Societies Must Respond to the Redesigned Human of the Future* (Cambridge, MA: Basic Books, 2004). See also Harris, *Clones, Genes, and Immortality*.

26. Max More, "Letter to Mother Nature," August 1999, quoted in Stock, *Redesigning Humans,* 158–159.

27. See President's Council on Bioethics, *Beyond Therapy: Biotechnology and the Pursuit of Happiness* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2003).

28. Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. F. H. Peters (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner, 1893), II.6.1106-15ss.

will to seek the true good for their children. According to the classical tradition, we will explore the four cardinal virtues: prudence, justice, fortitude, and temperance.[29]

Moral Perfection and Spiritual Transcendence

Prudence is the virtue that allows us to see reality as it truly is. A prudent person is able to see with unbiased reason the objective good in each concrete situation and act purposefully by choosing the best means of realizing it. This means facing reality as it is without hiding or coloring truth in such a way as to make life easier. Honest confrontation with reality, or nature, is problematic in postmodernity. Prudence is facilitated by memory and experience. With regard to the question of perfectionism, there is a treasure trove in the collective memory of humanity recorded in literature, history, and philosophy. The President's Council on Bioethics has selected some readings to make the reader reflect on what it means to be human: Why perfection? Are we our bodies? Where dwells the human spirit? Are our scientific aspirations limitless? Should we care when we cannot cure? Why do we suffer? Do we change through the different stages of life? What is the purpose of generation? Why not immortality?[30]

The anthology includes Nathaniel Hawthorne's tragic narrative about a great scientist whose very beautiful wife is marred by a birth mark. Obsessed with this imperfection, the scientist uses his incredible skills to remove the stain. However, in doing so he kills his wife, who willingly sacrifices herself for the sake of love. In an episode of Homer's epic the *Odyssey*, Odysseus is captured by the goddess Kalypso, who promises him the comforts of the gods and immortal life in paradise. But our hero prefers to endure hardships and return home to an aging wife rather than be with an eternally youthful nymph. We read in the *Autobiography of Mark Twain* that the author grieves the death of his adult daughter yet writes, "Would I bring her back to life if I could do it? I would not. If a word would do it, I would beg for strength to withhold the word. … In her loss I am almost bankrupt, and my life is bitterness, but I am content: for she has been enriched with the most precious of all gifts—that gift which makes all other gifts mean and poor—death."[31] Recognizing these perennial truths about ourselves will help us choose wisely and prudently.

Issues of justice in genetic engineering have taken up the most space in the bioethics literature. Clearly, coercive eugenic ideologies promulgated in both Nazi Germany and the United States during the 1930s are universally rejected today. Proponents of a brighter future believe that as long as there is a fair genetic marketplace where parents can freely exercise their choices for the finest product, these past worries

29. Some of these ideas about perfection of the moral virtues are taken from Gilbert Meilaender, "Designing our Descendants," *First Things* 109 (January 2001): 25–28. See also Alasdair MacIntyre, "Seven Traits for the Future," *Hastings Center Report* 9.1 (February 1979): 5–7, doi: 10.2307/3561692.

30. See President's Council on Bioethics, *Being Human, Readings from the President's Council on Bioethics* (Washington, DC: President's Council on Bioethics, 2003).

31. Ibid., 428.

can be set aside.[32] Such a policy is summarized by one group of ethicists: "Through its democratic processes, a liberal society could decide to devote resources to the continual enhancement of desirable human characteristics—to embark on a process of genetic perfectionism—so long as in doing so it do not compromise its commitment to justice and prevention of serious harm. Such a policy need not infringe on individuals' reproductive freedom, for example, if it only encourages rather than coerces or unduly pressures prospective parents to use enhancement technologies."[33]

Such a free market of utopian eugenics is not totally free of problems.[34] Genetic discrimination can be applied subtlety, not only explicitly. It may be difficult to protect genetic privacy from employers and insurance companies when such information becomes commonly available. We already observe this phenomenon in certain sports, where doping has become routine and athletes who demur are phased out. Parents who practice sex selection today may be pressured tomorrow to use enhancement technologies to extend a disease-free legacy.[35] Societal and peer pressures might reach a stage where a child born with disabilities will be considered a "wrongful life" with "wrongful disability," and his misguided parents punished accordingly.[36] Extreme freedom of choice can even result in communitarian eugenics, whereby groups choose certain traits in their offspring—deafness, religiosity, homosexuality—to perpetuate the existence of such groups.[37]

In all these scenarios, we turn ourselves into either tyrants or artifacts.[38] This is the throwaway culture that Pope Francis warns about. Similarly, *Dignitas personae* cautions that genetic manipulation "would promote a eugenic mentality and would lead to indirect social stigma with regard to people who lack certain qualities, while privileging qualities that happen to be appreciated by a certain culture or society; such qualities do not constitute what is specifically human. This would be in contrast with the fundamental truth of the equality of all human beings which is expressed in the principle of justice, the violation of which, in the long run, would harm peaceful coexistence among individuals."[39]

Living the virtue of fortitude makes life characteristically human. We admire those people whose human spirit shines forth as they courageously face hardships in order to achieve the good or act justly in spite of great odds. These include athletes, musicians, and artists who put in the time and energy to excel; firefighters, police,

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32. See Arthur Caplan, "What's Morally Wrong with Eugenics," in Sloan, *Controlling Our Destinies*, 209–222; Glover, *What Sort of People Should There Be?*, 47–55; and McGee, *The Perfect Baby*, 31–32.

33. Buchanan et al., *From Chance to Choice*, 345.

34. See Diane R. Oaul, "Commenting on 'Utopian Eugenics,'" in Sloan, *Controlling Our Destinies*, 263–268.

35. See President's Council on Bioethics, *Beyond Therapy*, 53–58.

36. See Buchanan et al., *From Chance to Choice*, 239–257.

37. See ibid., 176–178.

38. President's Council on Bioethics, *Beyond Therapy,* 296.

39. Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Dignitas personae*, On Certain Bioethical Questions (December 8, 2008), n. 27.

and soldiers who are willing to sacrifice their lives to protect and save others; and to no lesser degree mothers who wake up in the middle of the night to care for their sick children. *Gattaca* presents us with a paradox: the genetically invalid Vincent triumphs precisely where his genetically valid counterparts fail because they lack aspiration and fighting spirit. Human flourishing requires effort, and "genuine happiness requires that there be little gap, if any, between the dancer and the dance."[40] Personal identity can only be maintained through suffering, and attempts to erase or replace one's biography and memory by technical means may be a loss rather than a gain. Kass remarks on the absence of fortitude in those who have attained godhood: "Homer's immortals—Zeus and Hera, Apollo and Athena—for all their eternal beauty and youthfulness, live shallow and rather frivolous lives, their passions only transiently engaged, in first this and then that. They live as spectators of the mortals, who by comparison have depth, aspiration, genuine feeling, and hence a real center in their lives. Mortality makes life matter."[41]

To daringly strive toward justice requires the person to be at peace, not addicted to excesses of life. The virtue of temperance allows a person to live with self-control, sobriety, and moderation because he or she is in harmony with self and nature, the Creator, and the use of creaturely things. Qin Shi huang-ti (259–210 BC), the self-proclaimed first emperor of China, offers us a negative example. Enthroned at the age of thirteen, he managed to unify the country after a bloody twenty-five-year campaign. After obtaining power, he conscripted a labor force to build the Great Wall, a magnificent palace, and a tomb guarded by terracotta warriors. Afraid of opposition, he burned books and killed scholars. He was obsessed with the quest for immortality and sought an elixir of life in liquid metal—mercury. As luck would have it, the tyrant died of mercury poisoning before he reached the age of fifty. On his deathbed, he ordered all his concubines and the builders of his tomb to be buried with him. His dynasty was the shortest one in Chinese history, as his successor was soon killed and overthrown.

Today, with the Baconian project and the technological imperative, postmodern humanity is similarly faced with the immoderate use of new powers. Television and billboard ads encourage us to seek more and never be satisfied, to explore and exploit if necessary, and to dominate and control. In this culture of well-being and egocentrism, we are tempted to know our genetic future and control it, even to the point of becoming genomaniacs.[42] To counter this lure is not easy. Power, be it political, financial, or physical, is as tempting now as it was in the past. While Heidegger believes that we cannot escape the prison of technology, because its structure is ingrained in the modern way of being, Romano Guardini believes that we can overcome technological power only by becoming powerless! This calls for an acceptance of oneself and of one's reality as limited and finite. Through self-acceptance, we can become humble,

40. President's Council on Bioethics, *Beyond Therapy*, 293.

41. Leon Kass, "L'Chaim and Its Limits: Why Not Immortality?," *First Things* 113 (May 2001): 17–24.

42. See Sloan, *Controlling Our Destinies*, 433.

moderate, and willing to serve the needs of others.[43] Francis frequently cites Guardini in his encyclical *Laudato si'*, which addresses the problem of a throwaway culture whose wastefulness, self-centeredness, and desire for control are having disastrous effects on the environment. His call for an ecological conversion is a reminder to be content with what we have been given. It is fine to not have everything, know it all, or control every aspect of our lives and future. It is all right to serve those less fortunate and to get the short end of the stick at times so that we can appreciate the gifts we already have.[44] This echoes the Gospel call to be "poor in spirit" (Matt. 5:3).

The language of conversion points toward spirituality. The cardinal virtues are only the first steps toward greater perfection through living the beatitudes and the theological virtues of faith, hope, and charity. In this sense, Catholic parents are expected to trust the wisdom and guidance of the magisterium and, through "obedience of faith" (Rom 1:5), to resist the temptation to use enhancement technologies to reach the tree of perfectionism. Catholics are fortunate to have clear indications through a rich natural-law tradition backed by magisterial teaching, whereas other denominations have greater difficulties discerning God's will regarding the proper boundaries for using biotechnology to change ourselves.[45]

Against the backdrop of a culture of "choice, consent, control," the Christian worldview offers us the theological virtue of hope, which allows us to trust in God's providence, knowing that his plan is far superior to our projections.[46] Jesus tells us not to worry about tomorrow or what to eat, drink, or wear (Matt. 6:25–34). Likewise, we should not be too concerned with controlling our genetic future. The encyclical *Spe salvi* offers a profound reflection on human hopes and fears, suffering and immortality, salvation and technology. Pope Benedict XVI observes that people today put their trust in technological and scientific progress in the construction of the kingdom of man. However, because of our finitude and our malevolence, technology cannot totally eliminate suffering from human existence. We need hope precisely because there will always be evil and sin as long as human history continues. Hope gives us the courage to be on the side of good even in seemingly hopeless situations.[47]

Afflictions and shortcomings can therefore teach us the real meaning of charity. In society, in the Body of Christ, the presence of imperfections allows us to exercise compassion and mercy (1 Cor. 12:14–27). The weakest members are therefore

43. See Romano Guardini, *The End of the Modern World* (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2001). See also Romano Guardini, *Power and Responsibility: A Course of Action for the New Age* (Charleston, SC: Nabu Press, 2011).

44. See Francis, *Laudato si'*.

45. See Audrey R. Chapman, *Unprecedented Choices: Religious Ethics at the Frontiers of Science* (Minneapolis,: Augsburg Fortress, 1999), 70–75; Ronald Cole-Turner, ed., *Beyond Cloning: Religion and the Remaking of Humanity* (Harrisburg: Trinity Press, 2001); and Ted Peters, *Playing God? Genetic Determinism and Human Freedom*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2012).

46. C. Ben Mitchell et al., *Biotechnology and the Human Good* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2007), 90.

47. See Benedict XVI, *Spe salvi* (November 30, 2007).

looked after with greater care rather than neglected. *Spe salvi* reminds us that "the true measure of humanity is essentially determined in relationship to suffering and to the sufferer."[48] The originality of the Gospel message consists in Jesus's affirmation of the dignity of the marginalized, the poor, the outcast, the sick, the despised, and the humble. This was a revolution of love for the ancient world, and it remains a radical message for today. In it, suffering and imperfection are transformed and given value, because we are propelled to leave our egoism in order to care for the weak. In this way, service replaces power and hubris.

Harris predicts that when the first healthy genetically modified baby is born, all prejudices and barriers will be cast down, and everybody will want one for himself.[49] Will parents be able to resist the temptation to modify their offspring, even if it requires immoral means? Or will they learn to live with prudence, justice, courage, and moderation? Living the virtues and advancing in spiritual life are only possible when there is community support. The Church, in its sacramental and liturgical life, in preaching and listening to the Word of God, and in the communion of the saints, will be a source of sustenance to such parents. Strength gathered from mutual support and compassion in the Body of Christ will become a prophetic witness that can be extended to society for the common good. Lastly, the corporeal and spiritual unity of Christian perfection points to an eschatological realization: unlike the materialist, the believer sees death as a beginning, not the end. Kass intuits this truth:

> The promise of immortality and eternity answers rather to a deep truth about the human soul: the human soul yearns for, longs for, aspires to some condition, some state, some goal toward which our earthly activities are directed but which cannot be attained in earthly life. Our soul's reach exceeds our grasp; it seeks more than continuance; it reaches for something beyond us, something that for the most part eludes us. Our distress with mortality is the derivative manifestation of the conflict between the transcendent longings of the soul and the all-too-finite powers and fleshly concerns of the body.[50]

Jesus recommends to his disciples, "Be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Matt 5:48). Yet we recognize that the resurrected Christ is not exempt from visible wounds. In Revelation 5:6, the Lamb that stands on the throne has the marks of being slain. When the Lord appears, we shall be like him, and we can take comfort in the knowledge that our imperfections will be our glory.

48. Ibid., n. 38.

49. See Harris, *Clones, Genes, and Immortality*.

50. Leon Kass, *Life, Liberty and the Defense of Dignity: The Challenge for Bioethics* (San Francisco: Encounter Books, 2004), 269.