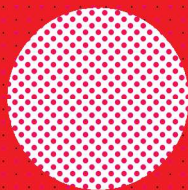


# FUTURE- HUMAN. LIFE



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« IF WE CONCLUDE THAT RESPECTING GOD'S WILL MEANS RELINQUISHING ALL CONTROL OVER CREATION, WE COME INTO A CONFLICT WITH ANOTHER PROMINENT THEISTIC NOTION: FREE WILL. OUR BODIES ARE AS MUCH AS ANYTHING A PART OF GOD'S CREATION, YET HERE WE ARE, APPARENTLY IN CHARGE OF THEM. HOW IS IT POSSIBLE THAT THE CONCEPTS OF DIVINE PROVIDENCE AND FREE WILL CAN CO-EXIST? »



## Chapter 7

# Playing with the “Playing God”

HOSSEIN DABBAGH AND ELENA ANDREEVA

«ANDERSON COOPER, CNN: "YOU'RE SAYING DOCTORS PLAY GOD ALL THE TIME?"

DR. KEVORKIAN : "OF COURSE. ANY TIME YOU INTERFERE WITH A NATURAL PROCESS. YOU'RE PLAYING GOD. GOD DETERMINES WHAT HAPPENS NATURALLY. THAT MEANS THAT, WHEN A PERSON IS ILL. HE SHOULDN'T GO TO A DOCTOR. BECAUSE HE'S ASKING FOR INTERFERENCE WITH GOD'S WILL."

Modified from CNN transcripts, April 15th, 2010

Dr. Jack Kevorkian was a zealous activist for euthanasia. Beginning in 1990, the infamous “Doctor Death” helped more than 100 people end their own lives by lethal injection. In an interview, when accused of “playing God”, Kevorkian retorted that he was as guilty as any other doctor, given that they also step into God’s shoes of determining destiny by interfering with the natural processes of the human body.

Not everyone goes as far as Kevorkian in claiming that all medical interventions count as “playing God.” This charge is more commonly leveled against practices such as capital punishment and abortion, in addition

to in vitro fertilization more recently, pre-natal screening and genetic engineering. The common denominator among these issues is that they all concern something for which personal responsibility is not easily taken; they all concern something that is considered so serious that we would rather pass the care and the blame on to God – or to fate or to chance – rather than face the responsibility for it ourselves, and they concern something that has been traditionally placed in the realm of the sacred: human life.

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**DESTRUCTION OF HUMAN LIFE. CREATION OF HUMAN LIFE. MODIFICATION OF HUMAN LIFE FROM ITS ORIGINAL FORM – DARE WE TAKE THESE THINGS**



**INTO OUR OWN HANDS? DO WE HAVE THE RIGHT TO DO SO?**

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Human enhancement, as a prime example of this final category, naturally raises the same concerns. Already we taunt fate when we decide – as part of the accepted procedure of in vitro fertilization – which of our embryos will go on to become life – those with two X chromosomes or those with a Y chromosome. In addition, as our skills in genetic engineering grow more refined, we may soon see:

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**"THE ADVENT OF DESIGNER BABIES". WHOSE LOT IN LIFE WITH RESPECT TO ATTRACTIVENESS AND INTELLIGENCE WILL BE CAST NOT BY FATE BUT BY THEIR PARENTS IN CHOOSING THEIR GENES.**

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We have never been as close to treading on this “forbidden soil” of the gods as we are today; that much is clear. If there was ever a time to heed the legend of Icarus, today is the day. Theologians and philosophers alike issue warnings against our growing obsession with self-enhancement. Domenico Mogavero, Bishop of Mazara del Vallo, has denounced the modification of creation from its original design as

an “enormous risk” that threatens to make humans barbarians. “In the wrong hands, today’s development can lead tomorrow to a devastating leap in the dark”. In the same vein, Harvard’s Michael Sandel (2007) and Ronald Dworkin (2002) have noted that, by being perpetually dissatisfied with the natures that we have been given, we fail to appreciate the beauty of our imperfections; thus, in striving to reach some imagined ideal by any means, we risk destroying the very traits that make us human.

These thinkers may very well have some valid points. However, one question must be raised. How certain are we, really, that we are indeed “playing God” when we take a more active role in determining our bodies’ physical fates? What type of evidence is such an assumption based? Is there a theological foundation for it?

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**WITHIN THE THREE MAIN ABRAHAMIC RELIGIONS (JUDAISM, ISLAM AND CHRISTIANITY). DIVINE PROVIDENCE IS A PROMINENT THEOLOGICAL CONCEPT.**

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Unlike Isaac Newton, who saw God as a “retired architect”, these three theistic traditions reject the idea that God abandoned the universe upon its creation. Instead, as with

René Descartes, who needed God to account for time, theists from these three main Abrahamic religions assert that God continuously protects, guides, preserves and takes care of His world. In addition, if God chooses to take an active interest in His creation, who are we to contest Him for maintaining control over it? Dare we claim that the manner in which God made us is not good enough and that, despite His care and involvement, we nevertheless would like to “play” His role, taking it upon ourselves to tidy up God’s mistakes and make a few much-needed upgrades to our bodies and/or minds?

Perhaps, out of full respect for Providence, we should abandon all attempts to meddle with creation. Perhaps all doctors should go out of business as we stay home to let nature take its course. Is this the outcome to which Abrahamic theology leads us? If we conclude that respecting God’s will means relinquishing all control over creation, we come into a conflict with another prominent theistic notion: free will. Our bodies are as much as anything a part of God’s creation, yet here we are, apparently in charge of them (and even held responsible for wielding them for good over evil!).

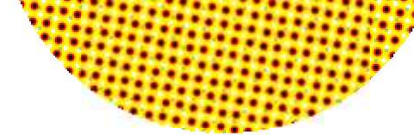
How is it possible that the concepts of divine providence and free will can co-exist?

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**ONE SOLUTION IS TO ASSUME THAT FREE WILL IS ITSELF A PART OF GOD'S PLAN. THAT THE CREATOR CHOOSES, AS IT WERE, TO BE THE ONE RELINQUISHING CONTROL: CONTROL OVER THE CONSCIOUS PART OF HIS CREATION TO GIVE THEM THE POWER TO CHOOSE**

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And, as a consequence, be held responsible for choices that they make. If that is the case, then why not imagine that God and humans can work together in parallel with one another, making us, in the words of the Australian philosopher C. A. J. Coady, “co-workers with God” (2009, 156)? For instance, God might have created different forests and lakes, but if humans plant more trees and/or dig artificial lakes, would they necessarily be interfering with His plan? We might pray to God for healing from disease, but does this mean that we are not allowed to pursue a career in medicine or research? In both Christian and Islamic culture and traditions, we find sayings such as “Man proposes, God disposes” and “God helps those who help themselves”. Theology actively urges human beings to go, find, and create what is hidden and unfolding



in God's providential plan. According to this perspective, we are not playing God in the sense of taking on the role of God;

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**INSTEAD. GOD ALLOWS US TO PLAY TOGETHER WITH HIM. WITHIN HIS UNIVERSE.**

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**WHAT DOES THEISTIC THEOLOGY TELL US ABOUT THE EXACT NATURE OF OUR JOINT WORK WITH GOD?**

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### **IN THE KORAN**

It is written: "Just recall the time when your Lord said to the angels: 'I am going to appoint a vicegerent on the Earth'" (1:30). Such a vicegerent – or Khalifah – as it is interpreted, means one who exercises delegated powers on behalf of another. As Khalifah, a human is therefore not the master himself but an agent of his Master, Allah. According to Islamic tradition, human beings thus do not have the right to their own will but are in this world to fulfill the will of the delegating Authority, Allah.

### **THE BIBLE**

The Bible offers insights from a different angle: "So God created mankind in His own image, in the image of God He created them;

male and female He created them" (Genesis 1:27). An image, although with a fundamentally different nature from the object it depicts, nevertheless captures and expresses all its characteristics. Thus, Christianity teaches that human beings have been created with the potential to express the qualities and skills of their Creator, including the skill of creation itself. Whether a poem, a painting, a symphony, or simply the choice between right and wrong, a person endowed with free will should have the capacity to impact the future in an unprecedented manner (i.e., to create something truly original).

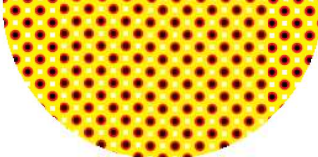
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**HOWEVER. THEISTIC THEOLOGY EMPHASIZES ONE FUNDAMENTAL DISTINCTION BETWEEN OUR CREATIVE CAPACITY AND GOD'S.**

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As an uncaused Cause of everything that exists, God creates ex nihilo – out of nothing. The Koran states, "His command is only when He intends a thing that He says to it, 'Be,' and it is" (36:82). The Bible implies the same idea: "By the word of the Lord were the heavens made, their starry host by the breath of His mouth" (Psalms 33:6). Ex nihilo creation remains beyond human reach. As





part of the created material universe, we are subject to its physical laws, including the law of the conservation of energy. As long as that law holds, we cannot make the objects of our desire materialize out of thin air without exerting some energy to procure them first. In addition, although our ideas may be completely original, they will nevertheless always remain a product of the pre-existing neural web of our brains. Thus, the fear of encroaching upon God's realm can be safely put to rest: even if we wanted to and dared take on His role, we could never overcome our a priori basic limitations.

However, within the material world, God has given us freedom to be original, theists claim. Why, then, should we be afraid to create something "unnatural"?

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**WOULD GOD ACTUALLY OBJECT IF WE USED OUR KNOWLEDGE OF GENETIC ENGINEERING TO MAKE A STRIPED WHITE-AND-PURPLE PETUNIA PLANT?...**

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...which may very well have never evolved as such on its own, or to reducing drastic food shortages in the developing world by giving crops "artificial" pest-resistant genes, or to relieving the symptoms of Parkinson's

disease and major depression by implanting platinum electrodes into the human brain? To not make full use of our skills in the face of the challenges confronting our century would be akin to resigning to death on a sinking ship by refusing to fix a leak. One needs only to recall the Parable of the Talents to know what Jesus Christ thought of such an attitude.

However, as with all good intentions, the human condition – or simply, our thoughtlessness and greed – persistently obstruct our way. As technology develops, our power to tap the planet's resources grows; however, we do not simply tap but use a sledgehammer instead. We know that the havoc wreaked by our insatiable consumption is wreaking havoc, in turn, on the environment. However, we continue importing, jet-setting and eating meat from our factory farms. If we were indeed fashioned by a loving Creator, could this relationship genuinely be the relationship between humankind and the rest of His creation that He envisioned?

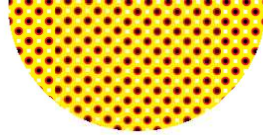
Genesis 2:15 describes the intended relationship in the following: "And the Lord took the man, and put him into the Garden of Eden to work

it and to keep it.” What do the tasks of “working” and “keeping” imply? In the first five books of the Bible’s Old Testament (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy, collectively known as the Torah in Judaism), the only other instances in which the Hebrew words for “work” and “keep” are used are in reference to the duties ascribed to priests in watching over their temple (Numbers 3:5-7). Jewish scholars note the pervading parallels between the story of creation in the Book of Genesis and the construction of this temple – the tabernacle – in the Book of Exodus. By instructing human beings to “work and keep” the garden, God is, in fact, entrusting us with the roles of priests – and our temple is the rest of creation.

The Islamic and Christian traditions teach that, as priests, human beings are meant to bless and sanctify creation, not to abuse, dishonor, or exploit it. We are meant to treat creation with deep appreciation for the fullness of its intrinsic value as the work of God’s hands. The human body, as part of creation, deserves to be treated with the same reverence, and all the more so. New Testament language repeatedly refers to the

body as the temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 3:16-17). The Apostle Paul teaches that, when we become members of the Christian Church, our bodies become members of a single body – the body of Christ – and as such, the dwelling place for the Spirit of God (Ephesians 2:19-22). Muslim jurists and mystics frequently refer to Prophetic sayings and Koranic verses, such as “Surely we belong to Allah and to Him we shall return” (1:156), to insist that people are able to become God’s hands, eyes or ears in this world. Therefore, human beings are understood as intrinsically holy.

As the possibility of enhancing the human body through biotechnology becomes increasingly real, the “playing God” allegation will inevitably be raised repeatedly. Human life is valued deeply by both believers and non-believers alike, and given the history of our careless technological trampling of planet Earth, the concern is both understandable and pertinent. However, as argued above, there is not much theological basis on which to rest such a claim. The human capacity for creation cannot be placed on the same plane as God’s creative capacity; to consider ourselves capable of encroaching



upon His domain is a testament to our deep-seated arrogance. However, religious traditions and texts affirm that, within the creative capacity that we do have –

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**HAVING BEEN MADE IN GOD'S IMAGE AND HAVING BEEN GRANTED FREE WILL – WE ARE ENCOURAGED BY GOD TO USE ALL OUR TALENTS TO IMPROVE OUR LIVES.**

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When searching for the appropriate limits in our quest for improvement, however, we should consider the centuries-old wisdom of the Abrahamic religious traditions and take a page out of the Koran, the Torah, and the Bible as we strive to approach the task of human enhancement with due reverence and respect.



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