The accusation of “playing God” is one commonly levelled against proposals to use science and technology to make dramatic changes in the way we live and cope with the many ills, boons, misadventures, and adventures of living today. It is also used in many other contexts to reject a proposed course of action, including, as we shall see later, in the world of sport. I want to scrutinize this charge of playing God to see what it means and what, if anything, it amounts to as a moral criticism. I will not therefore be concerned so much with whether particular proposals fall prey to this accusation, but with what sort of objection those who present it are making.

To get clearer about this, however, it will be necessary to look at some proposals, or proposal schema, in the area of genetic modification that have been subject to the criticism of playing God.

To begin with, we should be clear that the allegation of playing God need not be the preserve only of religious critics, though it is common enough for the words to be on the lips of those who believe that there is a God whose part is being usurped by the innovators. It may seem strange that the non-religious could object to proposals on the ground that they violate the prerogatives of a non-existent being. Put thus, it is indeed strange, but there are, as we shall see, other ways of putting the point that are amenable to the non-theistic or anti-theistic outlook.

The religious perspective

But first, let us look at the problem from the religious or theistic perspective. Here, I think, the idea is that there are certain things that it is presumptuous for human beings to undertake because those matters are really in the care
of God. The theological concept of "providence" is clearly at work here, at least in the background, and theistic religions have characteristically held that there is some sense in which God is in control of creation. Not only did God make the world but God conserves, shapes, and cares for what goes on in that world. Certainly, this idea of providence is powerful in Christianity despite the difficulties it creates for explaining the presence and persistence of evil in the world. These difficulties are met in a variety of ways that we will not be concerned to assess here, but it is worth noting that a prominent part is played in those responses to the problem of evil by the idea that human beings have been given free will by God as part of the providential plan. Such are the benefits of human freedom that the accompanying capacity for evil-doing, and the realization of that evil, are worth suffering.

The "free-will defence", as it is often called, has some well-known problems, but, for our purposes, it is significant in reminding us that the idea of providence allows for human freedom to act and create. God may have made the forests, but it is no violation of God's proper sphere for human beings to make paintings of forests or other representations of them, or to plant more trees. God may heal disease in response to prayer, but the majority Christian view has been that this does not prohibit medical research to discover earthly cures or the resort to those cures by the devout. The slogan "God helps those who help themselves" is a crude reminder of the theological insight that God has given human beings parts to play or perhaps better still has allowed them to find parts to play themselves in the unfolding of the providential design. In this sense, "playing God" may be a description of what theology teaches us that God has called people to do. To the degree that we are co-workers with God, as much Christian tradition teaches, and I dare say other traditions as well, then playing God is no accusation.

This much seems to me to be right, and it provides a caution against what might be called too "pietistic" an interpretation of God's rule and role. I say "pietistic" because the admission of an important role for resignation to and acceptance of God's will in a variety of religious traditions need not require the passive submission in a spirit of (surely false) piety to all that happens or is likely to happen. Such passivity would after all disavow the spirited opposition to evil that has always been a mark of mainstream Christianity.
So what then remains of the accusation of playing God? One interpretation I want to rule out from the beginning is that sin or immorality is ipso facto playing God. I rule this out because it is implausible to think that deliberate evil-doing is some form of imitating God. Perhaps there is a sort of self-assertion involved in sin that amounts to a defiance of God but this seems to me too uninteresting a sense of "playing God", if a sense of it at all. If playing God is to be an interestingly specific allegation it had better not collapse into just any form of wrong-doing.

One way of approaching the interpretation of "playing God" begins with distinguishing three traditions of response to the relationship between human beings and the natural order. The governing images associated with these are: domination, stewardship, and co-creation. The first two have been prominent in debates about the role of Christianity in promoting what many have seen as bad attitudes to the natural environment. Writers such as John Passmore have charged Christianity with promoting the idea that human beings have been given untrammeled sovereignty over nature and they see this idea as at least a contributing cause of the environmental degradation that has been such a feature of modern times. They cite such texts as Genesis 1: 28 where God addresses Adam and Eve telling them "to fill the earth and subdue it. Have dominion over the fish of the sea, the birds of the air, the cattle and all the animals that crawl on the earth." (Confraternity version). Again, in Psalm 8, the psalmist claims that God has made human beings "a little lower than the angels" and "to have dominion over the works of thy hands; thou hast put all things under his feet." (King James version). The dominational (or as Passmore calls it "despotic") attitude is supposed to involve a lack of respect for the rest of creation which is seen purely in terms of its instrumental value for human beings. In response to this, some Christians have emphasized the stewardship tradition in Christianity, associating this with such models as St Francis of Assisi. Instead of viewing God as handing the created world to humans for domination and exploitation, the picture is one of God giving humans the task of caring for the creation on God's behalf.

1 John Passmore, *Man's Responsibility for Nature*, 2nd edn (London: Duckworth), 1980. Passmore distinguishes the domination and stewardship traditions, grudgingly allowing that the stewardship tradition is present in Christianity but insisting that it is very much a minority response. He also goes part of the way towards recognizing something like co-creation in ch. 2.
It seems plausible that there are elements of both these outlooks within Christian tradition though the idea of dominion contained in the Genesis quotation is not necessarily that of ruthless instrumentalist exploitation. Dominion is not necessarily tyranny, though being “underfoot”, as the Psalmist would seem to require of the rest of creation, is certainly to be in a dominated position. The Genesis text gives humans a special place in the creation, a place that many animalists and environmentalists want to deny or downplay, but it does not licence despoliation. After all, a ruler may rule with respect for those ruled and Jews and Christians could stand as much in awe of the wonders of the natural world as anyone else, though, as Passmore points out, there is a certain amount of Christian theology that shows an indifference, if not contempt, for the value of the natural world. But the matter is quite complex since Christian tradition is committed to the view that God created the world as good and this suggests that the natural order has a value independent of humanity. St Augustine, whom Passmore plausibly treats as within the dominator tradition, is nonetheless capable of recognizing the value in the natures of all created things and of rebuking the human tendency to see the natural order purely in terms of its utility to human purposes. So he objects to those who “find fault with the sun itself; for certain criminals or debtors are sentenced by the judges to be set in the sun. Therefore it is not with respect to our convenience or discomfort, but with respect to their own nature, that the creatures are glorifying to their Artificer.” St Augustine is here putting human beings in their place, and, in a way, accusing them of playing God by imagining themselves to be entirely the beneficiaries of creation. This involves a sort of hubris, and, as we shall see, hubris is the vice that seems most naturally associated with the allegation of playing God.

But, if the domination model is at fault in not showing sufficient respect to the rest of nature, then its fault may be of several different kinds. One is the fact that it may have failed to understand the bad consequences for human beings themselves of the human drive to dominate and transform the natural world. Much environmentalist criticism makes this point. Pursuing human purposes such as destroying insects for better crop production or genetically modifying food crops to make them disease resistant may

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2 Passmore, *Man’s Responsibility for Nature*, ch. 1. Passmore’s discussion shows how complex the different strands of Christian theology could be on this point.

increase human sickness. But the second way human domination can bring bad consequences is the actual damage to the environment and to animals that it causes. Many believe that this is wrong irrespective of the good or bad outcomes for human beings. They hold that there are intrinsic values in nature that can be transgressed by human domination, even where no obvious harm to humans is involved. Even the quotation from St Augustine might be taken to imply as much. The destruction of a species of plant or wildlife, for example, strikes many people as wrong per se even if human beings don't suffer from it at all.

It is worth noting at this point, that it may indeed be possible to capture much of the content of this second form of objection without resorting to the moral ontology it commonly deploys. The idea that there is much in the natural order that is "intrinsically valuable" need not, I suspect, be required to invoke intrinsic values as entities inhering in forests, whales, and the like. A morality adequate to the best insights of the environmental movement, in other words, need not be so construed that it departs radically from "a human-centred ethic" in the way many of its supporters believe. I do not think that a morality based upon the deepest needs of human nature must involve the superficial aggrandizement of human interests. But the further pursuit of this issue in the foundations of morality will take us too far from our topic. We should note the different possibilities here and move on.

Stewardship and co-creation

The stewardship model tends to the opposite faults of the domination model. Where the latter seems to ignore or fail to acknowledge properly the respect that is due to the non-human world, the stewards seem to have too passive an attitude to what there is. Admittedly, the model generates an attitude of care and tendering, but this seems to lack the dynamism to which human beings are called and for which they have abundant, if ambiguous talents. In particular, the astonishing achievements of human creativity in medicine, transport, architecture, labour-saving, and communications seem to be inconsistent with the picture of human beings as mere stewards and caretakers of what is given by God. Perhaps this criticism takes the image of stewardship too simplistically but the interpretation is natural enough, and it corresponds to a certain mood of excessive reverence for how
God” would disappear, but so too would the distance between God and creatures, a distance that (despite the Christian mystery of the Incarnation) has always been a central element in the Judeo-Christian tradition.

It seems to me that all three pictures have an element of truth in them and that the dialogue between them exhibits the tensions that need to be kept in view by believers in negotiating the mystery of humanity’s place in the created order. I shall say more about this after considering the non-religious viewpoint on “playing God”. Before leaving the theological perspective, however, it should be remarked that there is no tension in this matter for believers who think that they know precisely from Revelation in its various forms (scripture, tradition, Church authority) that God has reserved certain matters for divine determination and these must never be usurped by human beings. This certainty must, as we saw earlier, concern more than the knowledge that certain behaviours are immoral or against God’s commandments. God-playing behaviour may indeed be sinful, but it must be sinful because it is known to be behaviour that somehow usurps the role of God and so transcends what humans may legitimately strive to do. Some religious people argue against euthanasia, for instance, that it is God’s prerogative to determine when our lives are over. They accuse even those who seek to end a life of dreadful suffering (with the consent of the sufferer) of overstepping the limits and seeking to occupy the role of God. Even here, they do not entirely avoid the tensions mentioned above since the idea that only God has domain over the ending of our lives has to be consistent with the legitimate human role in curing disease, preventing death, and alleviating suffering. In the end, I suspect that the complaint in the case of euthanasia will collapse into the idea that it is morally wrong to kill the innocent intentionally, even where one’s motive is compassion, and where, for understandable reasons, they want to die.

The non-religious perspective

The non-religious can make sense of the accusation by thinking of the attributes God would possess if there were a God. They can insist that human beings clearly lack these attributes and go wrong by acting as if they didn’t. Naturally, they will have to avail themselves of some common understanding of God’s nature in order to proceed in this way, and there
are a variety of such understandings. Nonetheless, I think it clear enough that a certain picture of the Godhead that is deep in Christian tradition is the one most often invoked in objections to playing God in the medical and other spheres. To expand this point, let us begin with a homely example from the realm of sport. (I should apologize in advance to those readers for whom this particular sport, cricket, is sadly mysterious.)

The New Zealand cricket umpire Steve Dunne was the official standing at the other end when Australian umpire Darrell Hair created an international incident by no-balling Sri Lankan spin bowling genius Muttiah Muralidaran during a Test match in Australia. Muralidaran had never been publicly and officially “called” for throwing instead of bowling, though doubts had been privately held in many parts of the cricketing world. Although Dunne, like many other people, also believed that Muralidaran’s bowling action was suspect, he did not call “no-ball” for any of the bowler’s deliveries when he was officiating at the bowler’s end. In his recent memoirs, Dunne says that he had been keeping to an international agreement that umpires should rather report suspicious bowling actions to the match referee. He added, however, that an additional reason for not “calling” Muralidaran for bowling illegally was that he didn’t believe that detecting the illegality of the Sri Lankan’s arm action was humanly possible, without the aid of technology. As he put it: “I don’t believe it’s possible to do so with the naked eye, and I wouldn’t want to play God.”

One thing Steve Dunne was getting at is clear enough. He didn’t think that he (or any other mortal umpire) had the power or knowledge to determine the truth about the spin bowler’s action at or near the point of delivery. He seems to have thought that resort to sophisticated technology in a cool hour could have done so, but recent analyses seem to suggest that even this may not be the case. The rule about illegal deliveries is itself imprecise, and close slow-motion photographic analyses seem to indicate that, on a natural interpretation of the rule, as it was then, most fast bowlers (which Murali is not) violate the rule too constantly for it to be a sensible rule for the game. In addition, photographic evidence from different angles yields conflicting pictures of Muralidaran’s action.7

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7 These claims are to be found in a newspaper article by Jason Kemp and Damian Farrow in the sports section of the Melbourne newspaper, The Age, August 9, 2003, Sport p. 9. See also their book Run Like You Stole Something (London: Allen & Unwin), 2003. As a result of these difficulties of interpretation the no-ball law has subsequently been amended.
In any case, Dunne is concerned that he would have been exceeding his standing, his competence, and his position to have given the verdict in those circumstances. His perceived incapacity seems to have been partly that of inadequate powers and inadequate knowledge. Given that a verdict was beyond his powers of perception and the knowledge he could build on that, he thought it arrogant over-confidence to have produced the cry of “No ball”. No doubt it was also relevant that the verdict would have had momentous consequences for Muralidaran’s career and for the game of cricket. He was partly asking himself the question “Who am I to make this sort of decision?” and partly asking “Who is any umpire to think they can do so?”

The example seems to raise some of the key questions about interpreting the playing God complaint in more serious contexts. The God of Christian natural theology (and of many monotheisms) is omnipotent, omniscient, and supremely benevolent. By contrast human beings are eminently fallible, limited in power, and only partially benevolent. They are also tempted to the exercise of undue power over others. This is surely evident to natural reason even if it is also the lesson of much religion. As the philosopher Thomas Hobbes argued, the drive for pre-eminence over others, either from motives of competition or love of glory, is deep in human nature and potentially destructive. Umpire Dunne seemed to have been conscious of the temptation and he viewed it as akin to mimicking some elements of Divine power and wisdom. Playing God can be interpreted as going beyond the limits we have in these three respects, acting in ways that ignore the in-built constraints on our knowledge, power, and benevolence.

This is a complaint that has been often levelled in philosophy against the outlook of Utilitarianism, at least in its simpler forms. The utilitarian philosopher produces a theory that licences people to form their policies and guide their actions by the impossible idea of acting to produce “the greatest happiness of the greatest number”. Critics call this “impossible” because they think that mere humans cannot know enough to foresee what actions will have these happy outcomes and, in addition, cannot forge the institutions and policies that will have the power to effect this goal. It has been further objected in the same spirit that the simple utilitarian has too optimistic a view of human nature and assumes wrongly that

* Hobbes, op. cit., ch. xiii, especially paras. 3 to 8.
the injunction to promote the greatest happiness of the greatest number will unleash universal benevolence whereas it is all too likely to produce universal manipulation in favour of a certain kind of self-assertion. Unlike God, human beings have deep springs of malignance in their make-ups as well as motives of benevolence, and this too makes their “do-gooding” impulses liable to misfire. I mention this reaction to Utilitarianism, not to endorse or pursue it, but merely for its illustrative significance.

Away from philosophy and sport, many other examples could be cited from everyday life to illustrate the perils of well-intentioned motives that ignore or underestimate the limits of our capacities with respect to knowledge, power, and benevolence. For example, the introduction in 1935 of cane toads from Hawaii into Queensland, Australia, in order to control sugar cane pests, has proved an ecological disaster. Adult animals have few natural predators so their population has exploded throughout north and central Australia, and threatens regions further south. They have high toxicity and are fatally poisonous if eaten by most native animals (including crocodiles) and they are capable of eating small native toads and native frogs. Commenting on this well-intentioned importation on Australian radio recently, one scientist said: “It’s pretty dangerous to play God, especially with complex eco-systems.”

The reference to Utilitarianism suggests a scenario that can be extended well beyond philosophical disputations. The great achievements of science and the prospects they open up for us can lead us to an exaggerated sense of what we know, to misplaced confidence in our powers to change the world and blindness to our own moral deficiencies. The point about knowledge concerns the knowledge of the consequences of our present discoveries and inventions as much as, if not more than, the security of our grasp on the present realities. A degree of humility about how much we now know needs to go hand in hand with a frank regard for the uncertainty of future developments consequent upon the application of our present knowledge or theorizing. Scientists are among themselves very often suitably aware of the tentative and revisable nature of much of their thinking and experimenting. But the public image of science tends to be much more triumphal and dogmatic. Part of this is the result of the media’s relish for scientific “breakthroughs” and the public’s appetite for the wonderful, though scientists are themselves no less prone to the Hobbesian temptations of competition and glory than the rest of us. But
part of it is the work of that pervasive contemporary phenomenon, public relations. Scientists of all kinds need funding, and a public image of ongoing triumphs can be a powerful recipe for success. In addition to this, applied science is marketed by companies that need to make profits; an emphasis on the fallibility, unpredictability, and potential dangers of science and technology is seldom good for sales.

We may conclude that when people worry about the application of the latest scientific and technological discoveries and put this worry in terms of “playing God”, they are concerned that these applications may embody an unjustified confidence in knowledge, power, and virtue beyond what can reasonably be allowed to human beings. How should we then judge the pertinence of this worry? In the first place, it should be seen as a cautionary criticism. If indeed there is insufficient knowledge of outcomes and consequences, or no social or institutional regulatory regime for prudent implementation of the innovations and for continuing scrutiny of their effects, or no room for overview of the commercial exploitation of the innovations, then the critics clearly have a point. I have no doubt that much of the hype and some of the reality associated with the rise of biotechnology are vulnerable to this style of criticism. On the other hand, in particular cases, these problems can equally clearly be addressed. Of course, they cannot be infallibly or impeccably addressed. Any technological innovation will have risks and our information about future effects of present interventions is always limited. Hence the demand that we have absolute certainty about outcomes is too strong. We do well to be on guard about exaggerated claims, public relations hype, and insufficient efforts to discover what can be known about effects and implications. We are also generally right to insist on safeguards and regulation, both scientific and ethical. The cautionary attitude is appropriate since we need to be aware of deeply-seated human limitations. This awareness may well lead to the rejection of various proposals and the cautious, safeguarded introduction of others. But the warnings can be heeded. In the first instance, so it seems, the critique of playing God is primarily a criticism of an attitude and only derivatively of a programme or proposal. It is the attitude of

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9 This is a point similar to that made by Ruth Chadwick when she describes the criticism of “playing God” as “a counsel”. See Ruth Chadwick, “Playing God”, in Bioethics News, vol. 9:4, 1990, 45. (The article was reprinted from Cogito, 1989.) In this connection, she also makes reference to the idea of aspiring to divine attributes, notably omniscience and omnipotence (though not omnibenevolence).
hubris or, in homely English, “being too big for your boots”.

We may admit that the temptation is to be avoided and be glad of the warning, but can we go further and regard certain proposals and programmes as inherently committing their proponents to “playing God”? This question, in its sharpest form, asks whether certain limits should not be exceeded, even where we have the power to do so, act with a good will, and know that our benevolent aims can be achieved. As Ronald Dworkin has put it: “Playing God is thought wrong in itself, quite apart from any bad consequences it will or may have for any identifiable human being. Nevertheless, it is deeply unclear what the injunction really means . . . .”

To keep the question interesting we should, as mentioned earlier, set aside cases that can already be easily condemned on straightforward moral grounds. If hubris leads people to use science to murder others, as was the case with Mengele and the other Nazi death doctors, the comment that they are playing God is at least discordant, since they are better described as playing Satan. If it were appropriate to talk of playing God, the criticism would be secondary, if not redundant, since the actions are deeply wrong on other grounds. The best cases to consider are those in which the intentions of the agent are benevolent, but are criticized for seeking to transcend the legitimate limits on what it is to be human.

Playing God with genes

The revolution in genetics has since its beginnings provided good grist to this mill. As early as 1970, the Princeton theologian Paul Ramsey railed against the genetic optimism about transforming human nature that was even then gaining ground. One of the objects of his criticism was the idea that science could and should change human nature itself. Since then, the advance of genetics has brought this spectre (or prospect, if you are that way inclined) somewhat nearer than Ramsey could have thought, though

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it is remarkable how prescient some of his concerns were. Even so, of course, much of the debate about genetic transformations of the human condition remains in the sphere of science fiction. Yet it is important to discuss the prospects, partly because yesterday’s science fiction is sometimes today’s science fact, and also because even remote possibilities can provide the stimulus for significant moral reflection.

Let us look at two areas of concern raised by genetic technology that may help clarify the worry about playing God. First the use of human genetic material for the “improvement” of food that human beings may eat. Many people find this disturbing. Some of the reasons for their anxiety concern the possibility of bad consequences and relate to the knowledge strand in the playing God accusation. But let us suppose that this can be satisfactorily addressed. One study reported by the former Vice Chancellor of East Anglia University, and Chairman of the Advisory Committee on Novel Foods and Processes (1989–1997), Professor Derek Burke, considered the introduction of a human gene for Factor IX, which is involved in blood-clotting, into sheep.12 The project requires injecting fertilized sheep eggs with the gene. The experiment is successful in only one animal in 100 in that only one in a hundred develops the IX Factor to a significant degree. A survey found widespread unhappiness amongst the public even with eating sheep from the programme that contained no novel gene or inactive novel genes. Amongst the religious groups involved in the survey, only Jews were unconcerned—“If it looks like a sheep, then it’s a sheep!” was what most of them said. The sheep with the gene would have only one human gene in 100,000 (at least by the method of counting genes then in fashion).13 Leaving aside the possibility of bad health consequences, what could be the moral objection to eating such meat?

Perhaps the idea is that we should resist changing the nature of God’s creation (or the natural world) in anything like this way. The intrusion of this one human gene into the sheep’s make-up is seen as changing the sheep’s nature (and perhaps human nature?). But this conclusion is hardly warranted. Improving the health of sheep (or of humans) by making them less prone to certain diseases can hardly be thought of as a radical alteration in what they are. Perhaps there is lurking in the background here the idea

13 Ibid., 26–7.
that is often promoted by various versions of popular science to the effect that “we are our genes”. But human beings (and, for that matter, sheep) are more than a bundle of genes. But what if there were a proposal to put so many human genes into the sheep that 50 per cent of their genetic make-up was human? Burke considers this and thinks that everyone would be concerned about it. But it is not altogether clear what Burke’s imagined scenario means, since, as I understand it, we already share much more than 50 per cent of our genes with sheep. Maybe he means 50 per cent of the genes we otherwise don’t share with sheep. But even here, abstracting from the proposal’s practical feasibility, it presumably depends upon what difference this genetic importation makes to the sheep’s dispositions and behaviour. Perhaps the reported Jewish response is a little narrow. If it looks, thinks, and acts like a sheep, that may be enough to forget about the genes. But, of course, it may be that such a lot of genes make too much of a difference.

The example raises some more interesting issues. Suppose it was suggested that we should eliminate some unwanted species by genetically transforming them into another more wanted species—turning them from pest to pet, let’s say. There are no doubt huge scientific and practical problems with this, and it may be much more sensible simply to exterminate the pests (at least the really dangerous ones) and make do with the pets we have, but would there be anything wrong with it? Or with the analogous proposal to alter those features of certain plants that make us call them weeds, so that we could now have them as flowers? I confess that I cannot see anything intrinsically problematic about this sort of suggestion. After all, rabbits are pests in Australia and harmless, and often loved neighbours elsewhere. And even where they are pests, some of them are kept as pets. There are even people who keep rats as pets, and many a mouse is a pet-like hero of children’s books. But, it may be objected, such changes involve no genetic transformations, merely those that are circumstantial or attitudinal. The response is reasonable, but there has been plenty of traditional genetic manipulation by breeders in the evolution of such pets as dogs. Categories like pest and pet are so geared to human interests and particular circumstances that it is hard to believe that the transfer from the troublesome to the enjoyable category by any means that do not harm the animal can be an interference with God’s purposes or an exercise in hubris, unless there is some over-confident ignoring of
potentially bad consequences. This, of course, there might often be, since a proposal, for example, to change some predating species into mild-mannered vegetarians is very likely to have disastrous effects on ecological balance.

Some might still insist that, even in the absence of such harmful consequences, genetic changing of animals is a disrespectful usurping of God's role, so we may get further by directly examining the human case. Those who resist the validity of genetic changes to animals will presumably resist even more strongly genetic changes to human beings, and they will be joined by others who do not share their concern about the animal proposal. There are many problems associated with proposals for genetic changes to human beings. Some people worry that effecting a genetic change in an embryo or fetus with the good intention of eliminating the existence of or tendency towards a disease will have various effects on future generations. They could put this point by invoking the injunction against playing God. For the religious, the idea is that we would be determining the future in a way that is basically up to God. For the non-religious, the problem is more difficult to frame, but it would be the concern that we are going beyond the proper limits of human endeavour. Just what this could mean, we will explore below.

But first, it is surely important to distinguish mere genetic change from harmful genetic change. The idea that one should avoid passing on any genetic change to future generations is hard to take seriously. Suppose there were some medical technique that acted on the current generation's genes in some sample population so that they developed resistance to a lethal disease and would pass the resistance on to successive generations. Someone who objected that this was wrong simply because of the change being transmitted would surely be irrational. It would not help to insist that we must leave it up to God or Nature to decide on what disease resistance people were going to have. This is far too close to saying that we must leave it up to God to determine what diseases people will have, a position that rejects all programmes of preventive medicine in the name of God. A further story about harms, potential or actual, needs to be told.

Elsewhere, Loane Skene and I have criticized the suggestion, implicit in some writing of C. S. Lewis's, that future people are somehow harmed by the present genetic intervention simply because they will have different
“dominated” choices than the ones they would otherwise have had. This line of criticism is difficult to sustain, though it is related to a more complex view of Jürgen Habermas that will be considered later. It is true that the absence of that disease will mean that some people will not have the opportunity to care for those diseased, to exercise compassion for them and so on. But there will be plenty of opportunities for the exercise of good dispositions on the victims of other diseases and disabilities. In any case, surely no one thinks that the diminishing of such opportunities for currently existing people by saving some others from disease constitutes any form of unjustified “domination” of their choices or those around them. Why should our attitude be different to future people?

It also needs to be recalled that we are altering the choices available to future people by all manner of non-genetic interventions in our social and physical environment that it would be absurd to consider illegitimate on that account. The development of widespread education, modern medicine and anaesthetics, and domestic labour-saving gadgets has had these sorts of choice re-arrangements as consequences, but this is no objection to them. Indeed, many of our perfectly legitimate choices affect what people will actually exist in the future. Statistics show that more extensive education for women leads to lower birth rates, but the resultant loss in future population is not by itself an argument against female education.

Changing human nature?

A deeper fear of genetic interventions comes from the idea that we cross the limits of human sovereignty when we decide to change human nature itself. Ramsey’s book in protest against playing God by scientists was called “Fabricated Man” and he is explicitly anxious about the value of any project to bring about deep changes in what human beings are. This is a widely shared apprehension, even when playing God is not invoked. There are several important issues here.

The first is that when we move beyond obviously beneficial or remedial changes to the make-up of individual human beings (and possibly their

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successors) we raise critical questions about what constitutes a human defect. The elimination of a tendency to breast cancer seems perfectly legitimate if we can be reasonably assured that it has no negative side-effects, but what of dwarfism? What also of deafness? In both these cases, and in other disability areas, there are arguments from people affected that claim either that any disability they have is simply the result of bad social arrangements imposed by the wider community or that, although they have certain inbuilt disadvantages, their lives are worth living and programmes to prevent people being born with those disadvantages show a disdain for this fact. I cannot deal with these claims fully here but some few comments seem appropriate. First, there can be no doubt that a great deal of improvement in the effect of disabilities on the disabled can be achieved by improving their social circumstances rather than any form of genetic engineering, and it may well be that an emphasis on the whiz-bang prospects of genetic intervention obscures this fact and impedes this progress. This can be conceded without conceding that disability is entirely a "social construct". Second there is a world of difference between disvaluing an existing human being who has some handicap, defect, or disadvantage and trying to ensure that others are not born or become handicapped in the same way. Those currently disabled are tempted to deny this "world of difference" because they fear that the negative attitude to the handicap entailed by the desire to eliminate it will carry over to a negative attitude to them as so handicapped. This would indeed be deplorable, but I see no reason to think it inevitable. So the second argument seems to me to fail, even though its emotional power is understandable. In the case of deafness, the evident disadvantages of lacking a basic sensory orientation to the world that most others possess speak in favour of eliminating it if you can. Against this, the deaf community raise many issues about the beauty of deaf language, the need to maintain the bonds of the deaf community and so on. I don't doubt that there is something in all of this, but not enough, I think, to sway the scales. In the case of dwarfism, the issue is much more difficult. Certainly, exceptional height or lack of it is not a defect in the way that lack of a sensory modality is. The question turns therefore on what other health consequences, if any, there are to dwarfism. Others argue that people with certain disabilities have developed qualities of character and achievement that might not have been possible had they not suffered from the handicap. Some valuable qualities may indeed inherently accompany the disability, such as the emotional warmth and
lack of inhibition that seems to go with Down’s Syndrome. I have no simple answer that will accommodate every putative case of defect or disability; we need to examine the cases and the arguments in their particularity. Nonetheless, I am sceptical of the general form that the arguments tend to take. This is to point to achievements, qualities, virtues that have come about, at least in part, because of the disability, and to suggest that eliminating the disability amounts to eliminating, or at least devaluing, these traits. The problem with this is that all sorts of bad things can be made good use of without thereby becoming good things. Consider the remarkable achievements of many people afflicted after accidents with quadriplegia or paraplegia. Not only do they display remarkable qualities, but they often evoke impressive responses in their carers. But none of this means that we should cease to try to reduce or eliminate car accidents. Or consider the parallel with the effects of injustice. Some victims of injustice find in their condition the source of new strength and capacity. It may even be that in the absence of the suffering unjustly inflicted, they would never have achieved the insights and strength they now have. But this does not mean that the injustice was a good thing and it would be preposterous to claim that, on these grounds, we should cease efforts to prevent injustice. Orthodox Christian teaching on suffering has usually held that suffering can be an occasion for spiritual growth, but mainstream theologians have never suggested that suffering was in itself good. Nor has it been orthodox teaching that suffering should be sought for its spiritual benefits, though the ascetic tradition perhaps come close to this in its advocacy of certain discomforts and self-denials in pursuit of detachment from the world.

Of course, beyond the moral case, there are further issues about respecting choice and autonomy in a liberal, pluralist society that would need to be addressed. Such respect needs to be extended to parents though there are clearly limits to the freedom that the community can allow parental choices, as the child abuse problem illustrates. This political issue becomes acute when there are reasonable grounds for suspecting that something widely regarded as a defect is not so at all.

Next, there is the issue of improving, rather than rectifying, by genetic intervention. This is sometimes characterized as the difference between positive and negative eugenics. Mention of “eugenics” needs of course to be treated with care. The word rightly has bad connotations because of those eugenic programmes, such as the Nazis’, that proceeded to murder
people judged defective. Nothing that I am interested in here involves anything of the sort. Another cause of the infamy of eugenics was its racism and the assumption of a superior knowledge about what were defective forms of human life. The failings of that earlier eugenics movement should rightly give us pause about genetic interventions to remedy or improve, but I am assuming that the cautionary model of playing God legitimately requires us to think twice or more about such matters. That said, can we reject any proposal to enhance human nature by biotechnology? Can any such proposal be rejected out of hand as playing God?

Suppose scientists discovered a gene for intelligence. I suspect that this idea, like that of a gene for criminality, is not altogether coherent, but let that pass. Would it be usurping God’s role (or a role that could only be played by God, were there a God) to offer this enhancement to parents? Well, there are already various devices that parents use in the hope of enhancing the intellectual and artistic capacities of their children. It is unclear how well they work, but playing Bach to the pregnant mother, getting her to take various vitamins and so on, do not seem to most people to be any usurpation of God’s prerogatives. Intelligence is perhaps universally prized, so what about characteristics that are valued by some parents but not others. What about genetic manipulation for red hair? Or for powerful muscles? Or for musical talent? There is indeed the problem of unknown side-effects. Perhaps the intelligence enhancement comes at some cost to other capacities. But two things need to be said about this. One is that we are asking whether the enhancement is wrong because of God-playing regardless of these other possible consequences, and the other is that there are surely acceptable and unacceptable costs. On the latter point, if we were reasonably assured that the costs would be low then going ahead need not constitute God-playing.

Damaging autonomy?

But if it is not God-playing because of excessive confidence in our powers of understanding, there might yet be another perspective on such “designer babies” projects that needs to be considered. This is the fact that parents are deciding in such cases issues about important endowments for their children that would otherwise be contingently bestowed by nature (or
God?). Might not children so endowed have a sort of grievance against those who deliberately chose these endowments and these pathways for their orientation to life? Jurgen Habermas puts it this way: "...genetically programmed persons might no longer regard themselves as the sole authors of their own life history; and second, (that) they might no longer regard themselves as unconditionally equal-born persons in relation to previous generations."16 This interesting objection concentrates upon the potential invasion of autonomy that genetic intervention can bring about.

Consider the child who is contingently naturally endowed with musical talents, but who would prefer to be an athlete. She has a gripe against nature but cannot blame her parents or other human agents. At least, she cannot blame them for her natural endowments. She may blame them for the intensive training in music they put her through as a child and various other incitements, disincentives, and so on that went with their desire for her musical future. But at least, she reserves some room for further free choices not to pursue the musical path. Habermas wants to contrast this with the case of genetic choice, but, as he acknowledges, the contrast is not sharp, though he thinks the genetic example is more reprehensible. In both cases, the degree to which the social training or the genetic modification is irreversible seems to him to be what is crucial for moral disapproval. What both (but especially the genetic interventions) threaten is what he calls "the irreducible ethical responsibility that one bears for one's own life, and the assumption (even if counterfactual) that each of us is able to appropriate our own life histories critically, rather than being doomed to the fatalistic acceptance of the consequences of socialization."17

This case against "alien co-authorship"18 as he calls it raises important issues just because it puts the focus on morally significant issues of autonomy and freedom. Autonomy and freedom are, moreover, plausibly regarded by those religious people who value them (and some, of course, don't) as special gifts of God, and this gives particular point to the criticism of "playing God". Nonetheless, I do not think the objection from autonomy is as powerful as Habermas imagines. No one can regard themselves as the sole authors of their own life history, there is too much contingency and inevitable dependence on others for that claim to be plausible. There is

17 Ibid., 84–5.
18 Ibid., 85.
also a problem about shifting issues to do with autonomy from the arena of interfering with the autonomy of palpably existing persons to that of setting the conditions under which such persons will come to be. Presumably a child has no legitimate moral complaint against her musically gifted parents who were attracted to each other partly because of their musical gifts and wanted to have a musically gifted child. But, if not, why would she have a legitimate complaint against parents who, with benevolent intent, genetically engineered musical talent for her? In either case, she may be unhappy with the outcome, but she doesn’t have to use the talents, so she is left plenty of room for authoring her life in so far as this phrase makes sense. She need not be condemned to “fatalistic acceptance” nor to failure to “appropriate her own life history critically”.

What of the claim that such a child may not regard itself as having unconditional equality with previous generations? It is not altogether clear what this means but if some sort of moral or political equality is at issue, then there seems no reason to deny such equality on the grounds of differential parental choices, whether genetic or otherwise.

It is interesting to consider the situation in which the techniques are available for such modifications, but parents decide not to avail themselves of the choice, preferring to leave the talent outcome to nature. Could not a child who later became interested in a musical career, but had only the modest talents of its parents, complain that they had opted for the natural outcome with much less prospect of high musical talent? They had the option and rejected it. In context, letting nature take its course is no longer a neutral response. Is it nonetheless somehow fairer, given that no one can know what a future person’s response to the relevant talent will be?

John Broome has considered an analogous case where the complaint of “playing God” is sometimes raised, namely, that of determining who shall receive scarce medical resources, in particular; kidney dialysis. Some people say that recipients for the scarce treatment should be decided randomly because to decide on the basis of, say, likely longevity on receipt of the treatment, is to play God. They say this because they think that it is not up to human beings to decide that some lives are worth more than others. If anyone can make such a decision, it must be God. In the absence of God, the decision is avoided by resort to random means. Allocating the treatment in any other way than by a random procedure is to deny the equal worth of human beings. Suppose we decide to treat patient A rather
than B because A will live forty years with the treatment whereas B will live only twenty. Then we are deciding that A is more worthy of life than B and this denies their equal worth as human beings. Random selection involves no such denial. Broome claims that the argument is confused because deciding randomly is to make a decision about differential worth, namely, that "twenty years of one person's life is roughly equal in value to forty years of the other's. A year of one person's life is worth roughly twice as much as a year of the other's." This is an interesting rejoinder, and serves to remind us that devices for avoiding reasoned choice can implicitly invoke the reasons supposedly avoided. Even so, in this case, it seems to me that Broome's response is not entirely successful, since the supporters of random selection do not seem to be principally concerned with the comparative worth of life spans, but with the equal worth of all human beings. It is not altogether clear what this respect for equal worth entails about the comparative value of life spans, and Broome's criticism at least raises a challenge for the equal worth school to meet. Presumably, a random procedure would be out of place for a choice between someone with the prospect of many years of life with dialysis and another who could only live a further two months with this support. Here, we touch upon the concept of futile treatment; this may be difficult to apply in some contexts, but cannot in general merit the criticism of playing God. Yet there is no purchase for the idea that treatment that extends life for twenty years is futile or pointless. On the other hand, respect for the equal dignity of all human beings does not seem to preclude judgements that some lives are more worthy or valuable than others—the life of a compassionate carer seems more worthy than that of a dissolute sadist.

Returning to the case of the choice between genetic intervention for talent and leaving it to nature, we can see that, once the technology is in use, the choice not to use it is something like choosing the random over the reasoned. And again, one might argue that this is better because deliberately choosing this or that talent for the child for reasons of one's own is somehow being unfair. But here it is hard to see in what the unfairness consists. It cannot be that the parents have done something that burdens the child with some talent they haven't chosen, because this will also be true of the choice of leaving it to nature.

One source of our alarm at such proposals, and of our sense that we may be playing God, is related to the way they shift the boundary of the choice and chance factors in our lives. Ronald Dworkin has called this "the spine of our ethics and our morality", and he adds that "any serious shift in that boundary is seriously dislocating." What we can be praised or blamed for takes place against a background that we have no responsibility for and the "givenness" of this background functions in a variety of important ways in our thinking. We take pride in our natural endowments of beauty, grace, or strength and we should probably have a different attitude to such attributes were they the product of human intervention (think of attitudes to the powerful bodies of steroid-dependent athletes). But although we can find such boundary-shifting disorientating, it is unclear that it must always be adjudged wrong. Shifting the boundary between what is given and what is made need not involve a damaging departure from what is truly valuable, though it may take some getting used to.

But none of these enhancements or talent interventions constitutes a change in human nature. They may constitute a change in that elusive entity, identity, but not exactly nature. What if that were in prospect? (Habermas’s book about these issues is called, interestingly enough, *The Future of Human Nature.*) Well, there are various difficulties in knowing what is meant by human nature, and there is no doubt that appeals to human nature are sometimes used merely as a device for propping up various versions of the status quo. But it is equally certain that human beings have basic needs and orientations just as do plants and animals. Just as plants need nourishment so human beings need richer forms of nourishment, as well as food and drink. So let us consider the prospect of altering human nature by changing such basic things as the human capacity for love, the human capacity for autonomy and free-will, the human capacity for connection to the human past, the human capacity for involvement in community. Suppose there were a programme for changing some or all of these in the interests of forging a superior being. A particular problem now emerges about the morality appropriate to judging the changes. If you believe that our moral perspective is profoundly linked in some complex way to human nature, then that moral perspective is linked to human nature as it is. We do not have to be "natural law”

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20 Dworkin, op. cit., 444.
theorists to accept some such linkage, though an Aristotelian or natural law ethic will presumably accept a stronger link than other theories. Martha Nussbaum has argued, following Aristotle, that our perspective on morality is conditioned profoundly by our understanding of what it is for beings like us to flourish. Our quest for the good life takes place against a background of our natural limitations. We can shift and alter those limits in the process of seeking greater human achievements, just as the athlete surpasses what was thought possible by straining against the existing limitation of the human body. But we need the broad idea of such a limitation to make sense of the surpassing performance. Nussbaum considers the tale of Odysseus’s rejection of the goddess Calypso’s offer of immortality and divine status. In choosing to reject the superior status of a god, Odysseus sees clearly the fears and uncertainties that would be removed by the change in status and sees the delights that are on offer, but rejects them for the perils and pleasures of the human life that has already shaped his moral outlook.21

To make the issue more concrete, we have a powerful moral investment in obligations that are based on our deepest positive affections such as love and deep negative ones such as resentment. Our conceptions of well-being are broad and to a degree capable of divergence but they centre around various satisfactions and fears that are deeply anchored in the sort of beings we are. Proposals to change human beings at this level must themselves be based upon moral understandings that are prior to such changes. Of course, as we suggested in discussing Dworkin, some of the things we presently treat as the fixed background to our normative assessments could be changed without our moral outlooks being drastically disrupted. The fact that we live so much longer than our ancestors represents a change that has many reverberations in the way we confront our lives and deaths. Proposals to extend the normal life span even further should cause us to reflect carefully on what it would mean to lead a human life for 150 years in company with others doing the same, but it doesn’t damage the moral fundamentals in the way that a proposal to make us immune to the hazards of love would do. Proposals like the latter have provided material for many of the striking dystopian fables of the twentieth century, such as Huxley’s

Brave New World, wherein simplified pictures of human happiness have been imposed without regard for the complex moral possibilities inherent in human nature. Here the charge of playing God may move beyond the caution against hubris (though it includes it) to an intrinsic moral objection to the very idea of changing human nature.

Concluding—A mildly anti-clerical postscript!

Since the accusation of playing God is invariably made against secular agents, such as scientists, and very often made by clergy and theologians, it is worth reflecting on the possibility that the charge could be turned in the opposite direction. After all, it is often religious authority that claims to be representing God and God's purposes. Have the Churches been playing God in the crisis created by the new technologies?

If we return to the attitudinal understanding of "playing God" fleshed out earlier then there is some plausibility to this reversing of the accusation. The temptation to act in ways that ignore or make light of the in-built constraints on human knowledge, power, and benevolence is certainly one to which all humans are prone, including bishops, theologians, and priests. Indeed, those who believe that they are privy to God's purposes through revelation, inspiration, or tradition or all combined are perhaps especially open to the temptation. We should recall in this connection the sad history of religious wars, crusades, inquisitions, the preaching of erroneous doctrines, and the failure to preach important truths. I am a Catholic, and my own Church has its blemishes in all these regards. Rather than proclaim a litany of such offenses, it is enough simply to stress the difficulty of knowing God's will and truth in so many complex settings and the deep tendency of the righteous to simplify both in the interests of the perceived good, but also, often enough, in the interests of power. Of course, for any given issue, the clergy are not playing God if they are actually in receipt of genuine information about what God has decreed. But the evident temptations for religious people to play God should at least give pause to those who believe themselves in that fortunate representative position. Moreover, the current reluctance of clerical authorities to identify with much that was so confidently proclaimed in their institutional past suggests that these temptations do not merely inhabit the realm of possibility.
A similar point can be made about conservatism in the face of technological or social change, whether that conservatism comes from a religious source or elsewhere. A conservative stance on innovation is often seen as necessarily less prone to the assumptions of omniscience, omnipotence, and omnibenevolence. But this does not ring entirely true. The attitudes involved in playing God can easily enough find a home in the defence of the status quo. Those who resisted the modernizing trends that promoted the equality of women were surely playing God with people's lives. They were assuming knowledge about a women's role in the world that was presumptuous and ill based. The gleam of hubris is as likely to be found in the eye of the ardent traditionalist as in that of the fervent revolutionary.
Author/s: COADY, C

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