

The abstract reflections of theologians and philosophers have often had little impact on the work of practicing business managers. O'Brien, Collier, and Flanagan's *Good Business* seeks to bridge that gap. . . . The authors provide a useful summary of basic concepts (such as human dignity, the common good, justice, subsidiarity, and solidarity) and survey some of the issues that surround them. But beyond that they do a rare thing, which is to make a serious and determined attempt to explain how these basic concepts might play out in the practical management of business enterprises . . . illustrated by a set of case studies that helps to ground theory in application.

—Robert G Kennedy  
University of Saint Thomas  
Saint Paul, MN

In an era when so much of business ethics treats only issues within the firm, O'Brien, Collier, and Flanagan's *Good Business: Catholic Social Teaching at Work in the Marketplace* employs Scripture, tradition, and contemporary Catholic social thought to provide a lively and more expansive vision of what businesses are called to be. An excellent resource for the classroom.

—Daniel Finn  
St. John's University, Collegeville, Minnesota

O'Brien, Collier, and Flanagan's *Good Business* strikingly illustrates how Catholic social teaching challenges the overemphasis on individualism and profit for a few in contemporary American capitalism. In eight chapters the book develops and applies . . . Catholic social teaching to the structure of economic life. . . . The authors admirably bring together theory and practice by relating in each chapter a different approach to economic enterprises illustrating . . . the [teaching] developed in that chapter.

—Charles E. Curran  
Southern Methodist University

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# GOOD BUSINESS

Catholic Social Teaching at Work in  
the Marketplace

Thomas O'Brien  
Elizabeth W. Collier  
Patrick Flanagan

  
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# Preface

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When the topic of business ethics is raised, someone is sure to make the joke that business ethics is an oxymoron. After everyone nods and has a good laugh, the discussion turns to a litany of recent moral offenses perpetrated by businesses. Usually, a long list of negative case studies is offered as proof that modern business leaders treat ethics as irrelevant. These interactions often conclude with the refrain that modern businesses somehow must behave immorally and anti-socially in order to exist in the dog-eat-dog world of competitive capitalist markets. The most disconcerting part of the scenario is that many business leaders and business school students are among the first to make this joke and among those who laugh the loudest at its telling.

This cultural bias treats the marketplace like some kind of lawless moral dystopia that is entirely irredeemable. In other words, it considers the modern capitalist marketplace as an utter failure—an utter moral failure—and a kind of curse on human society. It implies that society would be much better off without it. Not surprisingly, when presented with this argument, the same business leaders and students who laughed the loudest and proved the most adept at conjuring examples of the sins of capitalist businesses, in the next moment, sober up and sing the unbridled praises of the marketplace. They recast the capitalist marketplace as an abundant provider, a lab for human creativity, the last bastion of genuine freedom, and the best of all possible commercial worlds.

The authors of this book consider both extreme cynicism and unquestioning esteem misguided and dangerous attitudes when evaluating the moral worth of the capitalist marketplace. Many business ethics textbooks unconsciously play into the hands of both the cynics and the sycophants by focusing too much on case studies that highlight evils in the marketplace and not enough on those that highlight outstanding moral leadership. One could easily finish reading a standard business ethics textbook and conclude that business is an amoral enterprise at best and that the only reasonable attitude is either to give in to the culture and become amoral oneself or to abandon any hopes of becoming a business leader for fear of becoming ethically bankrupt.

To combat the impression that the business context is rife with bad behavior that can barely be kept in check, this book uses predominantly positive case studies that highlight many wonderful things that businesses do around the

world. The text assumes readers are aware that capitalist businesses can behave badly and sometimes engage in very destructive behavior and certainly does not shy away from bringing up some of these examples as it discusses the principles and theories of Catholic social thought. However, a primary aim of this book is to spark the moral imagination of students by demonstrating the ethical impulse behind many capitalist enterprises around the world today. In this way, the book aims to serve as an instructional and inspirational volume that motivates future business leaders to pursue enterprises that are successful both morally and financially.

This book expounds on the major themes that arise from the substantial and august body of work known as Catholic social teaching. Each chapter examines one of the central theoretical themes of Catholic social thought and applies it to contemporary business practices and critical issues that arise in the global economy today. Each then presents two actual business cases and encourages readers to insert themselves into these situations to explore solutions that make sense in the light of the high moral standards set by the Catholic social tradition. It is the hope of the authors that this approach will inspire readers and broaden their moral imagination regarding what a business should be and how it should operate within the novel conditions of global markets.

# Introduction

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*Thomas O'Brien*

## **The Tradition of Applied Ethics**

Before applying Catholic social teaching (CST) to business enterprises and the marketplace, it is important to survey the field of applied ethics and to review how Catholicism has informed that tradition from its own perspective. Ethicists evaluate human activity to determine the relative goodness or evil (right or wrong) of an action that has either taken place or is being proposed. Applied ethics is a subset of ethics that focuses on applying ethical principles and theories to a specific set of circumstances. So, for instance, medical ethics is a type of applied ethics that applies established ethical principles and theories to circumstances and dilemmas that arise in hospitals, clinics, and medical research facilities. Business ethics, also a type of applied ethics, applies established ethical principles and theories to the circumstances and dilemmas that arise in the marketplace.

Undoubtedly, applied ethics has been around since the beginning of human society. People seem to naturally assess the fairness of their interactions with others, and they normally do so by using common sense and practical measures to determine who was helped or harmed, and by how much, in various controversial situations. Over time, people became more sophisticated at evaluating and categorizing ethical offenses and this refinement developed into the discipline of ethics. The first section of the introduction will introduce the basic outlines of that discipline and some important technical terms that will appear throughout the book. It will be followed by a discussion of the way Catholics have interpreted these standard ethical perspectives. Finally, the introduction will offer a brief overview of the history and development of CST, relating this more specific tradition to the broader discipline of ethical analysis.

## **The Basics of Applied Ethical Reasoning**

Systems of applied ethics fall into two general categories: decision-making systems and character-based systems. Decision-making systems answer the

question, “What should I do?” Those using these systems aim to make the right decision when faced with a moral dilemma by applying a guiding principle and choosing the best option. They tend to focus on the task at hand and, therefore, do not address longer-range goals of moral development and perfection. Because these systems emphasize achieving the right or good in a single moment in time, the principles must be applied again and again as moral dilemmas arise. A number of the theories described in greater detail in the following pages, such as consequentialism and Kant’s categorical imperative, fall under the decision-making category.

In contrast to decision-making systems, character-based systems answer the question, “Who should I be?” or “Who should I become?” Although often used to resolve moral dilemmas and guide practical action in a current situation, the real value of character-based systems lies in their capacity to foster moral growth and promote character development. These systems tend to lead people to focus on longer-range goals associated with the moral improvement of individuals or societies. Normally, people using these systems employ a scale of increasing moral achievement as a map that points one toward a final goal of ethical perfection.

## Consequentialism

Consequentialism is a decision-making ethical theory that focuses on the results, or consequences, when evaluating the moral worth of a particular course of action. Consequentialists ask questions such as, “What happened?” or “What is likely to happen?” when they approach an ethical dilemma. They are most interested in maximizing the beneficial outcomes and minimizing the harm done to everyone involved in a particular circumstance. Consequentialists tend to be relatively indifferent to abstractions such as principles, virtues, or moral imperatives. Instead, they have a more practical interest in assuring that the outcomes of a particular case will increase the overall welfare of those impacted by the consequences.

In its application, consequentialist logic is very similar to the logic of comparison shopping, in which the shopper chooses between various products by comparing their features. Ultimately, comparison shoppers choose the product that they believe will maximize their happiness after weighing and comparing the options available. In a similar way, consequentialists face moral dilemmas by comparing various courses of action and choosing the one they think will produce the greatest satisfaction, happiness, or utility. This weighing of consequential options is especially effective and convincing when one has reliable information about what actually did happen or what is likely to happen in a given case. It proves much less useful in novel or unprecedented situations or when the outcomes of actions are otherwise not easily predicted.

The term *consequentialism* describes a category of ethical approaches that can be further broken down according to how broadly one defines the group of people affected by a moral dilemma. If the group consists of only oneself, then this kind of consequentialism is called egoism. This standpoint focuses solely on whether the expected outcomes are going to be good for a person or a group of people to whom the primary decision maker is closely associated. It is not so much an ethical theory as a description of self-interested behavior. Some confuse *egoism* with *egotism*, an exaggerated conception of one's own importance. While egoists might have a big ego, they might just as easily have poor self-esteem. Sometimes *egoism* is also confused with *selfishness*. While egoists might behave in very selfish ways, it should be noted that some of the most generous corporate actions, i.e., philanthropic gifts to the arts and social welfare, are motivated by egoistic concerns—promoting the company in the eyes of the public.

An egoist chooses the options with the best results for oneself and one's close associates, which is a fairly good description of the way most people make decisions in their daily lives. Most individuals do not normally make choices based on how an action will impact other people outside their own identity group, or for that matter, the entire global family. Think, for example, of college students who choose a major because of how it will promote their personal career aspirations and improve the lot of their family rather than because of its benefit to the wider community. Egoism becomes an ethically problematic stance only when the pursuit of one's own interests conflicts with the welfare of others.

Egoism itself is not an ethical theory with a developed logic and a loyal following among scholars. It is really just a descriptive term pointing to behavior that is essentially self-interested. On the other hand, consequentialism describes a category of ethical analysis that tries to take into account the good of all those being influenced by a decision. One ethical theory within the consequentialist family is known as utilitarianism. This doctrine demands that people choose the option that will result in the greatest possible balance of good over evil for everyone affected by it. Utilitarians want to maximize the overall utility of decisions so that human society flourishes as a result. They evaluate both the number of those affected as well as the quality or intensity of the goodness and harm experienced.

In this way, utilitarianism consists of more than mere majoritarianism, which is based on a simple exercise of counting heads and claiming that the interests of the majority always trump those of the minority. Nevertheless, utilitarians sometimes find themselves at a loss to condemn cases in which a minority is being oppressed in a way that significantly benefits a much larger majority. Therefore, the classic ethical dilemma presented to stump utilitarians is one in which the enslavement of a relatively small minority results in a much higher standard of living for a much larger majority. Utilitarians would acknowledge that slavery is a bad situation; however, because only a relatively small number of people

experience it and because the good is so generally distributed, they have difficulty condemning it without going outside of their normal logic, which usually considers only results as legitimate in making an ethical evaluation.<sup>1</sup>

## Deontology

The word *deontology* comes from the Greek root *deon*, which means, “duty or obligation.” Deontologists focus on evaluating individual cases based on certain expectations about the principles people should apply when making decisions about what to do in a given dilemma. These expectations can take the form of universal moral principles, such as the principle to avoid harming others, which can be found in virtually every major moral system. However, deontological moral expectations can also be tied to more specific and local roles that people play in a certain society. So, for instance, soldiers may still be held to the universal moral duty to avoid gratuitously harming others, while at the same time, may be duty bound to follow orders that require them to maim and kill an enemy of the nation so as to maintain the good order of the state.

In its application, deontological logic resembles the logic of the job description in the business world, in which the supervisor evaluates the performance of workers by comparing their actual work record to the expectations in the job description. If employee performance does not measure up to the expectations in the job description, the employee is deemed deficient. Similarly, if the behaviors of those acting within an ethical dilemma do not measure up to the various principles that the deontologist deems critical in that situation, then those behaviors are judged morally suspect.

A critical difference between consequentialists and deontologists is that most deontological systems emphasize the application of principles and the examination of intentions. While consequentialists look exclusively at the concrete results of actions, deontologists often view these results as distractions because of their unpredictability. For this reason, results cannot be considered the sole criteria in the moral equation.<sup>2</sup> Consequentialism takes an inductive approach, much like the experimental sciences. Something is good or bad depending on the results or data that come from practical applications of an idea. Conversely, deontology takes a deductive approach, much like the theoretical sciences. The

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1. It should be noted that utilitarians have responded to this “slavery objection” in a variety of ways. Most often, they simply claim that only fictitious idealistic versions of slavery could ever be justified in a utilitarian analysis. These authors assert that situations in which people were actually enslaved would result in a society that was much worse off than one in which people were justly remunerated for their labor. See R. M. Hare, “What Is Wrong with Slavery,” *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 8.2 (1979): 103–21.

2. Consequentialists respond to this criticism by claiming intentions themselves are the truly unpredictable part of the moral equation.

goodness or evil in any given circumstance can be inferred from a set of universal principles shown to be true in all circumstances.

Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) was one such deontologist. He believed that the moral worth of an action could be assessed only by considering the intentions of the actors in a case. He maintained that the only acceptable action in any given circumstance was one that yielded a maxim, or principle, that could be universalized—one that would be endorsed by any and all reasonable observers.<sup>3</sup> This first formulation of what Kant called the categorical imperative eventually yielded a second formulation that seems very close to the Golden Rule that schoolchildren have learned for generations: “so act as to treat humanity, whether in your own person or in that of any other, in every case at the same time as an end, never as a means only.”<sup>4</sup>

## Virtue Ethics

Virtue is an ancient ethical concept that assigns moral value to both behavior and character traits that conform to notions of “the good.” A virtue is a trait of either a person or an action that makes that person or action stand out as morally good. Virtue ethics determines the morality of an action by assessing how well people’s behavior and character conform to these standards of perfection. Virtues can be applied to behavior—in which case, they function as a kind of practical moral wisdom. So, for instance, one particular course of action might be honest, courageous, and forthright while another might be cowardly, deceptive, and cunning. The ancient Greek philosophers referred to this as *phronesis*, an application of virtue as a practical guide to behavior.

In a similar way, virtues can also be applied as character traits to describe a person and assign that person a standing in the moral universe. Therefore, people who regularly boast excessively about their own meager achievements might be branded arrogant, while those who do not seek excessive attention despite their outstanding achievements might be seen as exhibiting the virtues of modesty and humility. The ancient Greeks knew this as *arête*, using virtues to analyze the character of individuals.

According to virtue ethicists, the ultimate purpose of all this virtuous behavior is *eudaimonia*, or human happiness. The ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle (384–322 BCE) used the term *eudaimonia* to describe the deep satisfaction that someone ought to feel at the end of a life well lived—that is, a life lived according to the virtues. For Aristotle, a life lived according to ethical

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3. Kant’s First Formulation of the Categorical Imperative: “Act only in accordance with that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it become a universal law.” Immanuel Kant, *The Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* (Mississauga, ON: Broadview Press, 2005), 81.

4. *Ibid.*, 88.

principles was equivalent to living the happy life. Happiness was not achieved through the accumulation of wealth, the exercise of power, or the gaining of recognition and fame. Rather, Aristotle observed that happiness seemed almost entirely dependent on the moral worth of the decisions one made throughout one's life. Conversely, those whose lives lacked *eudaimonia* almost always had vices such as greed, avarice, selfishness, cowardice, and pride. Therefore, happiness was achieved through moral discipline, and the pursuit of happiness was, at the same time, the pursuit of the good.

Western religious traditions take up ancient Greek notions of virtue and appropriate them for use within their moral systems. For this reason, virtue ethics exists in Judaism, Christianity and, to a lesser extent, Islam in ways that closely resemble the original formulations. For example, the Catholic Church lists four cardinal virtues as essential to the Christian life: prudence, justice, fortitude, and temperance.<sup>5</sup> In addition to the Abrahamic traditions, the notion of virtue survives in almost every major religious tradition as well as in the smaller, local ones. For instance, the *sanatana dharma* in Hinduism is one example of virtue in a major non-Western religion. According to the *sanatana dharma*, all Hindus have a duty to adhere to the following virtues:

- Altruism: Selfless service to all humanity
- Restraint and Moderation: Sexual relations, eating, and other pleasurable activities should be kept in moderation
- Honesty: One is required to be honest with self; honest with family, friends, and all of humanity
- Cleanliness: Outer cleanliness is to be cultivated for good health and hygiene; inner cleanliness is cultivated through devotion to god, selflessness, nonviolence, and all the other virtues.
- Protection and reverence for the Earth
- Universality: One shows tolerance and respect for everyone, everything, and the way of the universe.
- Peace: One must cultivate a peaceful manner in order to benefit oneself and others.
- Reverence for elders and teachers

## Justice

Morally evaluating economic relationships almost always raises issues associated with fairness and equity, and therefore, a discussion of justice ensues. In modern

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5. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1805, [http://www.vatican.va/archive/ccc\\_css/archive/catechism/p3s1c1a7.htm](http://www.vatican.va/archive/ccc_css/archive/catechism/p3s1c1a7.htm).



philosophical discourse, justice is understood from many different perspectives, but the one most applicable to business ethics is *distributive justice*. Theories of distributive justice guide the allocation of the benefits and burdens of economic activity in order to achieve some acceptable level of fairness and equity. The mode of reasoning for the principles of allocation is analogous to a “lifeboat” exercise that encourages participants to imagine themselves adrift on an ocean with insufficient resources for everyone’s survival. The participants must decide who gets the resources and what standards should guide the decision making. Such exercises, like theories of distributive justice, shed light on the values and moral priorities of a group and how they get implemented in ways that privilege some and disadvantage others.

Generally speaking, there are six schools of distributive justice: strict egalitarianism, resource egalitarianism, desert-based justice, libertarianism, utilitarianism, and Rawlsian justice. Egalitarian principles stress equality and the need to establish structures that ensure impartiality.

### **Strict Egalitarianism**

Strict egalitarians demand that everyone in a society receive exactly the same income and resources. Although a very simple and straightforward requirement, such a demand has never proven practically realizable in actual circumstances. It is very difficult to enforce absolute equality in circumstances in which individual strengths and weaknesses are diverse and in environments in which the constant introduction of novel elements throws the equilibrium off kilter.

### **Resource Egalitarianism**

For that reason, most egalitarians are limited-resource egalitarians, demanding equal distribution of only certain resources in a society. For example, many resource egalitarians believe that in a truly just society, all people would begin life with essentially the same set of basic resources, such as nutrition, housing, clothing, education, and so on. What one did with that initial set of basic resources supplied gratis by the state would determine one’s fate in that society.

### **Desert-Based Justice**

In this way, resource egalitarians are similar in spirit to certain other schools of justice that believe people should be rewarded for their activities in accordance with their contribution to the social product. These desert-based principles focus on effort, ingenuity, and productivity, recognizing that some members of society deserve a larger share of society’s benefits because of their more substantial role in building and maintaining the social order. In other words, if someone works hard at something society values, then that person should be richly rewarded. On the other hand, if someone contributes little, or contributes only in ways

that are not valuable to that society, then that person should languish in poverty. Desert-based principles like these, however, do not account for the randomness, chaos, messiness, and unpredictability of human life and society. Some people who work very hard and contribute a great deal to society still fail due to unforeseen circumstances such as illness, accidents, or the collateral damage inflicted by family members who need their assistance.

Desert-based principles also do not have a developed notion of social value and social utility. They assume that societies always value things that are beneficial and useful, when clearly this is not the case. Societies frequently reward wasteful, useless, and even counterproductive activities. One only needs to look at the economic meltdown of 2008 to identify banking executives who were richly rewarded for contributing to this disaster. From the perspective of justice, do people who contribute to waste, destruction, and frivolity still deserve out-sized compensation? Furthermore, societies often undercompensate for activities they claim to value highly. For instance, aspects of US society tell its military personnel that they are held in the highest esteem; however, soldiers earn little more than most service-sector workers, and many veterans struggle to get basic health care needs met. Does US society value the destructive “contributions” of bankers more than the self-sacrificing service of military personnel?

### **Libertarian Justice**

Libertarian notions of justice place greater emphasis on freedom and less on the capacity of a society to engineer equality through law, policy, and regulation. In fact, libertarians are skeptical that equality can be achieved through the imposition of laws, regulations, and other restrictions on otherwise free commerce. Therefore, from a libertarian perspective, justice is achieved only within a society that guarantees the state will not interfere with individual pursuits, assuming those pursuits are themselves not interfering with the rights of others to pursue their own goals. The state should protect individual rights to acquire, control, and transfer property but, otherwise, should play no proactive role in ensuring, supplementing, or regulating the use of property.

Libertarianism, sometimes called empirical negative liberty, is based on the notion of radical self-ownership, which tends to run counter to more generally accepted ideas of mutual rights and responsibilities that members of a society owe one another. On a practical level, the concept of radical self-ownership denies the obvious social construction of the self and of one’s role in the larger context of society. In truth, people don’t own themselves. Selfhood is beholden to a myriad of human relationships that teach, influence, assist, resist, challenge, counsel, and so forth. These human relationships include known relationships with family, teachers, friends, doctors, lawyers, counselors, and others. However, a fuller accounting of our socially constructed selves would reveal a vast hidden

world of unseen and unknown actors who have had some kind of influence on our lives and who together comprise an incalculable impact on people.

### Utilitarian Justice

One theory of justice that takes the larger web of social relationships very seriously is utilitarianism, an ethical idea briefly introduced earlier. Utilitarianism is a consequentialist system that seeks the best and most useful results for everyone concerned. This basic ethical ideal of general welfare can easily be scaled to include entire societies or even the global community. Therefore, justice for a utilitarian consists of choosing the policy alternatives that will result in the greatest good for society as a whole. Taken at face value, utilitarianism seems laudable; however, sometimes utilitarianism has difficulty condemning alternatives that clearly sacrifice individual rights and liberty, when it judges those alternatives as resulting in the greatest overall good for the majority of the members of society. In the lifeboat exercise, someone following a strict utilitarian analysis might justify throwing someone (or even a small group) overboard if that meant the rest would be more likely to survive and even thrive while awaiting a rescue.

### Rawlsian Justice

Finally, without going into too much detail, there is the *difference principle* and John Rawls's theory of justice, which is based on the welfare of the least well-off in society. John Rawls (1921–2002) was a philosopher who spent most of his career at Harvard teaching and writing about the principles that would inform a genuinely just society. According to Rawls, the relative justice of a society can be determined by the fate of its poorest and most marginalized members. The more just a society is, the better off the poor in that society will be, relatively speaking. This theory led some to accuse Rawls of being a strict egalitarian in disguise and his system of justice mere window dressing over a core of utopian socialism. Rawls responded that a strictly egalitarian system might be the most just, but the real test consisted of comparing the lots of the least well-off in different systems. It might be the case that a society that tolerated some disparity in income could actually result in a more productive economy overall and, therefore, end up distributing more wealth to the poorest members of that society. Rawls asserted that differences in income and wealth were only tolerable when it benefited the poor in some way. Hence, capitalism might be more just than socialism but only if it could be shown that the poor fared better in that system than in the collectivist egalitarian ideal. The main weakness of Rawls's theory of justice is that it is a thought experiment rather than a practical theory. While some have attempted to use his theory in concrete situations, its real purpose is to draw attention to the meaning of justice and the demands that it places on society.

## Teleology

An introduction to common approaches to applied ethics would not be complete without discussing the family of theories known as teleology. Like many other ethical terms, this one has its etymological roots in ancient Greece. *Telos* is a Greek word meaning, “final purpose, goal, or end.” Therefore, this ethical perspective concentrates on the ultimate purpose of human striving. It asks the question, “What is the ultimate goal of human life and how does one arrange intermediate goals, purposes, and ends so that they align with that ultimate purpose?” Many confuse teleology with consequentialism because both focus on “ends” and “goals,” but these systems are distinct in that they seek entirely different goals. Consequentialism is concerned with the immediate results of an action, sometimes referred to in philosophical circles as the *efficient cause*. Teleology is concerned about only the immediate results to the extent that they are properly ordered toward a larger purpose, sometimes referred to as the *final cause* by medieval philosophers.

Teleological systems demand that humans order their actions toward a long-term, transcendent purpose or goal, and frequently, that goal takes the form of an exemplar or a model of perfection. One can find many examples of exemplars in the religions of the world. In Christianity, Jesus is the model of perfection, and Christians are frequently referred to as followers of Christ. Christians are encouraged to model their behavior after the example of Jesus, and this becomes a type of shorthand method of determining the moral path for Christians. In the present, one can see teleology at play in the popular Christian meme printed on a wide variety of T-shirts and bracelets—*WWJD*—“What Would Jesus Do?” More precisely, teleology is concerned with who Jesus was and how one can become more Christ-like through a more mindful approach to everyday behavior. Christian discipleship, therefore, serves as one of many examples of teleology in a major world religion.

Not all teleological systems are religious. In fact, one of the most popular psychological theories of ethical development has teleological elements. Lawrence Kohlberg, a psychologist at Harvard University in the 1970s, claimed that every person who progresses toward moral maturity does so by moving through a series of predictable stages. Kohlberg derived this theory of moral development, in part, from the work of his mentor, Jean Piaget, who used stages to describe human cognitive development. Kohlberg’s system as a whole assumes the existence of such a thing as moral maturity and the highest standard against which all other stages can be compared and judged. The highest stage in Kohlberg’s theory, stage 6, is a level of moral perfection that few have achieved.

## Catholic Interpretations of Applied Ethical Reasoning

The ethical theories outlined previously constitute the foundation of most conversations about business ethics today. Although almost every Catholic university in North America teaches some form of business ethics, few resources specifically analyze this field from the perspective of the Catholic moral tradition. This section of the introduction will give a brief overview of the Catholic moral tradition, pointing out the areas of agreement and divergence from those theories discussed in the previous section, “The Tradition of Applied Ethics.” Before the book addresses the Catholic social tradition and how it applies to businesses and the economy, it is important for the reader to understand how Catholics analyze the behavior of individuals acting in commercial markets. The social tradition is, in part, an outgrowth of the broader moral tradition, and it frequently references elements of the moral tradition when making its arguments for certain policies and practices.

### Divine Command

An obvious way that the Catholic moral tradition differs from secular traditions has to do with the belief in God and the conviction that God is concerned about human behavior and the consequences of that behavior. Catholics believe that God even demands certain types of behavior and that believers face divine approbation and punishment, depending on the quality of choices they make when faced with moral dilemmas. In many circumstances, the reason a Catholic may deem something right or wrong may depend on whether something is approved or rejected by God.

The belief in divine command raises the question of how one determines the will of a God who is believed to be above and beyond human understanding. The answer, in short, is revelation. Catholics believe that, while God is beyond the normal confines of human comprehension, aspects of the divine will and mind have been revealed so that humans might better know what is expected of them. Catholics believe that God has pulled back a part of the veil of human ignorance that conceals the otherwise overwhelming presence of the divine so that they might catch a glimpse of those things required for their salvation.

One way God is revealed is through Scripture, and the portion of Scripture that first comes to the mind of many Christians when they think of morality is the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:1–17).<sup>6</sup> Christians and Jews share the story of the giving of the Ten Commandments, and it offers a good example

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6. A more complete discussion of the Ten Commandments can be found in James F. Keenan, *Moral Wisdom: Lessons and Texts from the Catholic Tradition* (Kansas City, MO: Sheed & Ward, 2010), 99–116.

of one type of moral revelation, in which God made the divine will abundantly clear by etching ten moral proscriptions on the relatively permanent medium of stone tablets. Moral direction for Christians is drawn from the New Testament as well as the Old Testament and can be found in nearly all of the various literary forms found in the Bible—poems, song lyrics, myth, history, chronicles, letters, proverbs, parables, prophecies, and gospels.

For Christian ethics, the most compelling Scriptures recount the life, ministry, death, and Resurrection of Jesus. The four Gospels retell similar, though not identical, versions of his life. As mentioned previously in the section on teleology, Jesus provides the primary Christian model of moral perfection, and observant Christians try to conform their lives to the example he set. Catholics expand on the teleological thrust of their moral universe by including saints, who also serve as models of exceptional virtue. In addition to Christ's ethically archetypal behavior, the Gospels preserve many important moral sayings that help guide the character and behavior of Christians. Followers of Christ are regularly admonished to love one another, show forgiveness to offenders, demonstrate mercy toward the poor and marginalized, abandon lust for power, and serve one another. Christian ethicist Joseph Fletcher, in his book *Situation Ethics*, went so far as to say that all of Christian morality could be reduced to the simple command to love.<sup>7</sup>

## Magisterium and Tradition

Although divine command constitutes an important element of the Catholic ethical tradition, it is not the only source of moral authority. Catholics believe that God's will is also revealed in the ongoing tradition of the Christian community reflecting on moral duty and acting in inspirational ways to improve the lives of others and establish institutions that serve the poor and vulnerable. The term *magisterium* comes from the Latin root for teacher, *magister*, and refers to the teaching *charism*, or vocation, of the church.<sup>8</sup> The Catholic tradition believes that God confers the teaching vocation in special ways to theologians and members of the hierarchy. Therefore, when Catholics refer to "the teaching church" they refer to these groups of clergy and theologians who have been gifted and tasked with the vocation to teach the divine truths. Moral theology is one of the important subdivisions of the magisterial office in Roman Catholicism.

Given the importance of magisterial tradition in the Catholic Church, many of the moral beliefs and practices espoused by Catholics have their source in the

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7. Joseph Fletcher, *Situation Ethics: The New Morality* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1966), 69.

8. A more complete discussion of *magisterial* authority in the Catholic Church can be found in Francis A. Sullivan, *Magisterium: Teaching Authority in the Catholic Church* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1983), 24–51.

Church's recorded history, laws, policies, doctrines, and documents. In fact, the Catholic social tradition had its origins in book-length documents issued by the Church known as encyclicals. Applying the broader moral tradition to individuals and groups dates back to the beginning of the church in the first century of the Common Era. Documents such as *The Shepherd of Hermas*, *The Didache*, *The Epistle of Diognetas*, and the countless sermons of the earliest Christians offer documentary evidence of the centrality of the moral life for these first believers.<sup>9</sup> In these texts one discovers recurring moral directives to care for the poor, feed the hungry, clothe the naked, avoid avarice, renounce power and wealth, share property, and treat even the lowliest with honor.

Over the course of almost two millennia, the church has continued to reflect on the moral duties of its members and eventually an impressive body of work emerged with relatively consistent principles, theories, and practices that have become the distinctive timber of a uniquely Catholic ethical voice. Catholic moral thought stresses the need for actions to be consistent with the natural purpose laid out by God the Creator. Therefore, the Catholic moral tradition has a strong natural law tradition that judges actions based on the degree to which they conform to a divine will that can be discerned from nature itself. Catholic ethics also demonstrates profound respect for individual conscience and the formation of a virtuous character. Conscience introduces the idea that God directs the thoughts and actions of believers and that each person has access to this divine guidance, which is referred to as conscience. As stated before, Christian ethics can have a teleological focus, for it demands that followers conform their lives and actions to the perfect model of Christ. Catholics have taken up this teleological impulse and expanded on it by introducing saints—people who were outstanding Christ-like examples in their lifetime. Eventually, all of this reflection on the moral life was written down and codified in practical manuals and church laws. Catholic moral thought, therefore, is not only theoretical, but also practical and pastorally focused. In the rest of this section, three key aspects of the Catholic moral tradition will be reviewed more closely.

### **The Natural Law**

The natural law in Catholic moral theology is the belief that a moral order exists independent of human creative intervention. Natural law theologians do not view ethics as a product of human culture but rather as something humans discover in the same way that they discern the laws of other preexisting orders like those in the physical universe. In this way, the best analogies for the logic of the natural law are the physical sciences. The natural law infers what is right and wrong from observable evidence in the world of human society, which natural

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9. All of these texts and more can be found at the Early Christian Writings website, <http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/index.html>.

lawyers treat as a given of nature itself.<sup>10</sup> This may seem counterintuitive to most modern readers, who have been brought up in an age of ethical relativism. Popular media generally treat ethics as a merely personal bias: what one person deems right or wrong is grounded solely in personal choice. While many recognize that society may influence personal moral choices, those social influences themselves are conditioned only by history, habit, and human psychology and are not in some way necessary or built into the “nature” of human society. The natural law, therefore, is an entirely different perspective on the purpose of human behavior and the development of particular character traits.<sup>11</sup>

Natural law theology claims that everything that exists has a specific purpose within the natural order and that the entire natural order itself is purposeful and ordered toward achieving a certain end. In the case of Catholic natural law, that purpose is union with the divine. Natural law morality claims that there is a moral order ordained by God and that humans have access to and can understand this order by observing how humans behave in community—inferring right and wrong from the behaviors and character traits they witness. This ethical worldview deems things “natural” because they lead to the general welfare of the group and contribute to overall human flourishing. Likewise, “unnatural” acts frustrate welfare and human flourishing, thus obstructing the beneficent divine will. What is good is—at the same time—natural, because it fulfills its intended purpose of being in harmony with the will of the divine. As a matter of course, those things considered unnatural are evil because they frustrate their intended design or purpose.<sup>12</sup>

Therefore, in addition to Scripture and tradition, Catholic moral theology also has been informed by the notion that all personal, interpersonal, and social behaviors are structured according to a divinely created natural order, which is governed by natural laws that set parameters on human behavior. The natural law, like all other ethical systems, suffers from limitations and flaws in both the construction and implementation of the theory. One of the main sticking points for natural law theologians is demonstrating how their particular rendition of what constitutes “natural” and “unnatural” is not simply a sophisticated veneer over what ultimately amounts to personal biases for or against certain character traits or behaviors. So, for instance, in the past, natural law has been invoked to condemn homosexual behavior, a position that was generally accepted as doctrine before Vatican II. However, during the latter half of the twentieth century,

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10. Richard M. Gula, *Reason Informed by Faith: Foundations of Catholic Morality* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1989), 222.

11. For a more in-depth overview of how the natural law is distinct from relativistic notions of post-modernity, see Steven Brust, “Ancient and Modern: Natural Law and Universal Moral Principles,” *Catholic Social Science Review*, 14 (2009): 65.

12. For a more extensive treatment of this theology, see Charles E. Curran and Richard A. McCormick, *Natural Law and Theology: Issue 7 of Readings in Moral Theology*, (New York, NY: Paulist Press, 1991).



a significant constituency within the Catholic Church began to raise questions about this categorization and assert the goodness of human sexuality in general, calling for the tolerance of many sexual expressions that had been heretofore declared anathema. Those listening to these voices had to either reject the natural law in its entirety or redefine what is and is not “natural.” This led many to rightfully accuse the natural law of being philosophical window dressing on relativistic personal prejudice.<sup>13</sup>

In spite of these recent challenges to its credibility and authority, the natural law remains an important element of the Catholic moral imagination. Even many Catholic theologians who reject the particulars of the natural law still hold fast to the idea that humans and their societies are governed by a kind of moral order—one that has consequences not only for physical life in this world but also for eternal life in a heavenly realm.

### Conscience

Whether in a Catholic context or not, references to conscience abound in contemporary culture, but when pressed to define or describe this concept, many struggle to come up with an adequate response. Generally speaking, conscience describes that internal voice possessed by each individual that serves to guide and correct behavior and form one’s moral character. It is a person’s moral compass or, to use a more contemporary illustration, a moral GPS.

For Catholics, conscience is God’s way of speaking to individuals at the deepest level of their being during times of duress and especially when confronted with choices of good versus evil. It is inviolable and must be respected, even when the choices that ensue are not endorsed by the official teachings of the Catholic Church.<sup>14</sup> Although an autonomous function of an individual’s authority within the moral sphere, conscience is not entirely alienated from external authority. For Catholics, the external authority of official church teaching can and should play a positive role in forming and guiding conscience.<sup>15</sup>

The act of conscience has three distinct steps: *synderesis*, moral science, and conscience.<sup>16</sup> The Greek term *synderesis* highlights the innate, or instinctual, moral impulse of the human person.<sup>17</sup> It directs attention to that moment in the

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13. John J. McNeill, *The Church and the Homosexual* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1993), 89–108.

14. See Charles Curran, *Faithful Dissent* (Kansas City, MO: Sheed and Ward, 1986), for an extended case study on the inviolability of conscience.

15. For a more complete discussion of conscience in the Catholic tradition, see Jayne Hoose, “Conscience in the Roman Catholic Tradition,” in Jayne Hoose, ed. *Conscience in World Religions* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1999). See also Keenan, 27–44.

16. This three-part structure is taken from Gula, 131.

17. For more about the meaning and development of the idea of *synderesis*, see Robert A. Greene, “Synderesis, the Spark of Conscience, in the English Renaissance,” *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 52, no. 2 (Apr.–Jun. 1991): 195–219.

moral dilemma when a person first senses something is wrong. *Synderesis* is a visceral moment before any reflection or reasoning has come to the fore to analyze the situation and synthesize a response. It is an awareness, an emotion, a reaction, a feeling of suddenly being thrust into a situation in which the stakes are high, someone is intending to harm another, and that person has the means to carry out that intention. *Synderesis* is followed by moral science, the step during which a person takes the time to question the situation at hand, make sure that his or her initial reactions were on target, evaluate the situation more thoroughly, and deliberate on what is right and wrong in that given situation. Finally, after one has felt strongly that something is wrong and has thoroughly deliberated about the moral response, one confronts the choice of whether to follow through with the right course of action or not. It is this moment of judgment—a moment always informed by the virtues—that is rightfully labeled *conscience*.

Catholics believe that over the course of a lifetime of difficult choices, conscience has a formative influence on a person's character. Eventually, moral choices become matters of integrity—a person either acts in character or out of character.<sup>18</sup> *Character* identifies the responsive orientation of a person. It becomes a way of seeing and responding to the world. A person's character determines whether that person sees the world as a hostile or friendly place, whether that person acts in a way that is loving and helpful or fearful and selfish. Character is a predisposition but not the sole determinant of behavior in any given situation. Character functions as a personal hermeneutic—a way of seeing, interpreting, and valuing the world. The theology of conscience reminds Catholics that most of what people see does not lie before their eyes but behind them where they interpret these images to fit into a framework of meaning. Conscience influences an individual's choices, while at the same time is formed by them. Catholicism is very conscious of the need to take care in forming a person's conscience so as to direct it toward the divine will.

### **Practical Moral Reasoning**

Although Catholic moral theology has its roots in the life and ministry of Jesus and his earliest followers, it becomes an actual discipline under the more practical circumstances of the penitential rites that developed in the church in the fourth century and beyond. Penance is the sacrament of reconciliation in which individuals seek forgiveness for transgressions against others or against God. This process was made into a ritual practice over the course of the first few centuries of the church. The first documents recording the practice were the Irish Penitentials, which were created by missionary monks who had gone to Ireland to convert and minister to the Druids but who found themselves

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18. Gula, 139.

instead thrust into social roles for which they had not been fully prepared. When the Romans drove out the Druid shamans, they unknowingly also drove away those who adjudicated conflicts within these communities. The shamans were also the judges who heard cases, discerned who was at fault, and meted out fair and just consequences. With the disappearance of the shamans, the communities frequently fell into chaos, and many began turning to the monks to fill the vacuum in law enforcement and justice. The penitentials were records of the “trials” held by the monks, listing the offenses and the punishments imposed.<sup>19</sup>

Eventually, the Church used the Irish Penitentials in other contexts, and they became more complex and sophisticated over time. They were ultimately incorporated into the sacramental practice of reconciliation, in which Catholics attempt to sacramentally right wrongs they have committed. The majority of these wrongs, or sins, are moral in nature or has moral elements. For this reason, a good deal of moral theology in the Catholic tradition has a practical thrust: it is meant to be used as a guide in the confessional where the priest meets in confidence with the believer and helps that individual understand right and wrong, good and evil, as they exist in that context. In order to perform this important task, priests need training in moral reasoning and, more importantly, in practical moral reasoning—the type they can readily apply and explain to people who may have little background in philosophy or metaphysics.

Over the course of centuries of development, the Catholic Church established a practical method for approaching moral cases and eventually employed a kind of casuistry, or case-method approach, in which the case at hand could be compared to paradigm cases that had already been resolved. This moral method has similarities to the casuistry used in legal practice today in which settled cases serve as precedents to help argue a solution to a legal dilemma. While not as commonly taught in seminaries as it once was, casuistry is still used by pastoral theologians to help prospective Catholic ministers understand how to approach common moral quandaries they are likely to encounter in their specific context. So, for instance, ministers training to work in a hospital will take courses that deal specifically with issues arising from that context, and students will be exposed to countless actual cases in which doctors, nurses, patients, and their families have been confronted with perplexing ethical quandaries. For this reason, Catholic moral theology is, in many respects, a kind of professional ethic; it is practically oriented toward pastoral application in the professions. Likewise, this book addresses practical and applied issues within the context of the business environment.

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19. Timothy E. O’Connell, *Principles for a Catholic Morality* (Minneapolis, MN: Seabury Press, 1978), 12–13.

## The Catholic Social Tradition

Just as the Catholic moral tradition provides an ethical vision for the human person in relation to others, so the Catholic social tradition gives an ethical vision for society. It acknowledges that the structure of a society has an impact on the welfare of those within it. A poorly structured society can do great harm; while one built on sound principles can help members flourish and advance. The principles that undergird CST are rooted in Scripture and the writings of the earliest followers of Jesus. The chapters of this book will go into greater detail about the development of the individual principles and their ancient roots in Scripture and tradition. This introduction will instead examine the more recent history when these previously disparate principles were collected into a thoroughgoing social theory.

### Historical Development of Catholic Social Teaching

Catholic social teaching as a systematic social theory has its roots in the Catholic transition from a mindset wedded to the medieval economic, social, and political establishment to one that embraced, at least in part, the liberal, industrial, and democratic structures that were replacing the *ancien régime*. Since the Protestant Reformation beginning in 1521, the Catholic Church had progressively lost its grip on the levers of political, social, and economic power across the Western European landscape. Feudal systems were giving way to modernity in virtually all of the major urban centers of Europe. Only small towns and rural areas persisted in the old ways of life, and even these areas were showing signs of the impact of the new social, political, and economic order.

When the French Revolution in 1789 overthrew the last major citadel of the old order, the Catholic Church's last significant ally among the old European aristocracy disappeared almost overnight. Throughout most of the ensuing nineteenth century, the Church experienced a split between those who nostalgically attempted to maintain allegiances with the old, dying aristocratic class—along with the social principles that upheld that order—and those who tried to demonstrate that a harmony existed between the best principles of the new democratic order and those of the Gospels. This second faction within Catholicism would eventually prevail and become the progenitors of the emerging CST.

A number of notable individuals and movements within Catholicism had an enormous influence on the Catholic Church as it made this difficult transition to more modern notions of proper social order. Among these early voices were the Social Catholics, and one of the first proponents of a more open approach to new social, political, and economic ideas was Frederick Ozanam, a literature professor at the Sorbonne in Paris. In his years as a student, he founded the

Society of St. Vincent de Paul, an outreach to the urban poor who were predominantly industrial workers. He stressed the need for the Church to have a voice of its own and, therefore, an existence independent of the modern state. At the time, this was a radical departure from the Church's traditional position that the only legitimate state was the confessional state—one that embraced Catholicism and gave the Church a place in the halls of power. Ozanam was among the first to assert that one could be both a loyal Catholic and a believer in the efficacy of modern liberal democratic institutions.<sup>20</sup>

Unfortunately for Ozanam, he would die before ever seeing this vision of a modern Catholic Church realized. Pius IX, who had become pope just a few years before Ozanam's death, would lead the Church in a reactionary direction, working against all things modern and progressive during the three decades of his reign. While the rest of Europe shed the last remnants of feudalism and monarchy, Catholicism would remain a bastion of conservatism, attempting to convince its followers that a return to the medieval church-state union was still possible. During this same period, from the middle of the nineteenth century to the end of Pius IX's reign in 1878, others in the Church continued to work diligently to realize a Catholic Church that challenged, rather than merely rejected, the modern state.<sup>21</sup>

Under the leadership of the Bishop of Mainz, Wilhelm Emmanuel Von Ketteler, the Social Catholics began to develop a more theologically complete vision of the issues the Church needed to address and the principles it should espouse in order to challenge the emerging liberal states. Von Ketteler and his cohorts fought for the prohibition of child labor, the limitation of working hours, the separation of the sexes in the workplace, the closing of unsanitary workshops, Sunday rest, care for disabled workers, and state inspection of factories. They also maintained that charity was not sufficient to meet the needs of modern society and was conceived of too individualistically in a modern context. They did not believe that private property was an absolute value and argued that the state needed to rein in laissez-faire capitalism through regulations and taxes. They rejected both individualism and collectivism as solutions to the role the state should play in society, stressing instead the *via media*, or "middle way," to balance these conflicting visions of the ideal society. They emphasized that citizens had duties as well as rights in relation to the state, and they promoted the traditional theological notion of the common good as the guiding principle of the state.<sup>22</sup>

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20. Thomas O'Brien, "Pioneer and Prophet: Frederick Ozanam's Influence on Modern Catholic Social Teaching," *Vincentian Heritage Journal* 31, no. 1 (2012): 29–46.

21. For a concise overview of this era, see Owen Chadwick, *Oxford History of the Christian Church: A History of the Popes, 1830–1914* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1998), 93.

22. Marvin L. Mich, *Catholic Social Teaching and Movements* (Mystic, CT: Twenty-Third Publications, 1998), 5–28.

## A Documentary History

Eventually, these ideas would be incorporated into the inaugural official document of modern CST, *Rerum novarum* (*RN*) (On the Condition of Labor), issued by Pope Leo XIII in 1891. The first in the long series of Catholic social encyclicals, it was concerned with the harsh conditions industrial laborers were forced to endure, both at work and in their squalid homes. It was critical of capitalism, while at the same time, fearful of socialism. Like his Social Catholic predecessors, Leo XIII imagined the ideal state would steer a middle way between the extremes of socialist collective control and capitalist laissez-faire. He believed that peace and harmony could be achieved between the rival social classes in society if the rich owners would only reach out generously to the poor workers. He advocated self-help organizations for the workers through the establishment of unions, or as he termed it, “associations.” *Rerum novarum* insists that these unions or associations have a religious as well as a social purpose. In the end, Leo XIII laments the passing of the medieval guild system, which comes across as somewhat nostalgic to a contemporary reader. Subsequent encyclicals will, for the most part, abandon the idea of a proper medieval order to society.

It is hard to overestimate the impact *Rerum novarum* had on Western society and its notions of church, state, and economic organization. Most Catholics did not expect the pope to espouse such ideas. The grand majority of Catholics believed that a papal encyclical would continue the tradition of condemning all modern developments in social structures and maintaining their old, aristocratic alliances through carefully worded praise of the feudal order. Instead of siding with the old elites of the landed aristocracy or the new elites of the captains of industry, the Church chose to align itself with the concerns of the poorest in nineteenth-century European society—the urban industrial worker. After shedding their disbelief, people of the world, both Catholic and non-Catholic alike, found themselves surprisingly edified by an official document of the Church. *RN* quickly became a rallying cry for labor organization, outreach to the poor, and opposition to the abuses of capitalism. Over the ensuing decades, it would become the catalyst for positive social, political, and economic change in Europe and around the world.

However, in time, *Rerum novarum* began to show its age. It had addressed issues and promoted solutions that most developed countries incorporated into their customs and laws during the first couple of decades of the twentieth century. In the meantime, new, equally critical issues had emerged that had not existed at the end of the nineteenth century. Innovations and new social ideals had also come to the fore, and these needed to be analyzed and challenged. By the time of the Great Depression, the world was ripe for an update of this seminal document, and Pope Pius XI delivered with *Quadragesimo anno* (The Reconstruction of Social Order) in 1931. Despite being the second document, it set the stage for

the Catholic social tradition to continually update the insights of the Church on social, political, and economic issues. Had it not been for *Quadragesimo anno*, *Rerum novarum* might have gone down in the annals of Catholic theology as a wonderful, yet singular, moment of inspiration. Since *Quadragesimo anno*, the popes have considered it a duty of their office to regularly evaluate and comment on the major events and movements of the era and to offer a moral perspective on these developments. The following is a list of some of the Catholic Church's major social teaching documents:<sup>23</sup>

- 1891—*Rerum novarum*, *RN* (On the Condition of Labor), Pope Leo XIII
- 1931—*Quadragesimo anno*, *QA* (The Reconstruction of Social Order), Pope Pius XI
- 1937—*Divini redemptoris*, *DR* (On Atheistic Communism), Pope Pius XI
- 1937—*Mit brennender Sorge*, *MBS* (On the Church and the German Reich), Pope Pius XI
- 1961—*Mater et magistra*, *MM* (Christianity and Social Progress), Pope John XXIII
- 1963—*Pacem in terris*, *PT* (Peace on Earth), Pope John XXIII
- 1965—*Gaudium et spes*, *GS* (Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World), Second Vatican Council
- 1967—*Populorum progressio*, *PP* (The Development of Peoples), Pope Paul VI
- 1971—*Octagesimo adveniens*, *OA* (A Call to Action), Pope Paul VI
- 1971—*Justice in the World*, Synod of Bishops
- 1981—*Laborem exercens*, *LE* (On Human Work), Pope John Paul II
- 1987—*Sollicitudo rei socialis*, *SRS* (On Social Concern), Pope John Paul II
- 1991—*Centesimus annus*, *CA* (One Hundred Years after *Rerum novarum*), Pope John Paul II
- 2009—*Caritas in veritate*, *CR* (Charity in Truth), Pope Benedict XVI

The rest of this book will unpack the Church's social teaching by examining recurring themes and applying these to the marketplace, using specific examples from various levels of business structures. The text focuses on eight key themes in this tradition. CST can be adequately understood through a careful analysis of these themes and the organic connection and interdependence that exists among them. The eight themes, reflected in the titles of the eight chapters in this book, are human dignity, common good, stewardship,

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23. These documents are available at the Vatican's website: [www.vatican.va](http://www.vatican.va).

option for the poor, economic justice, subsidiarity, solidarity, and rights and responsibilities.

Like many business ethics texts, this text not only engages decision making at the level of the board of directors and the CEO, but also analyzes the experience of employees in the warehouse, in the workshop, and behind the cash register. The marketplace is the responsibility of all participants, even if some play more elite and privileged roles than others. Many inspiring stories about business practices exist, and this is reflected in the case studies featured in the chapters. Most business ethics textbooks use cases to show how businesses have failed to meet the basic standards of morality. While this text does refer to cases like these, it also includes many cases that are meant to spark the moral imaginations of readers and possibly inspire them to emulate instances of moral business practice as they prepare themselves for business-related careers in corporations, nonprofit organizations, and government.



# Human Dignity in a Technological Age

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*Thomas O'Brien*

## Introduction

As I was composing this chapter, I sat at my desk multitasking as I often do in order to gather my thoughts, rest my brain, get unstuck, or just relax the synapses. There I was, bouncing between outliner, word processor, computer game, and buying bicycle parts, when it occurred to me that technology has made my life essentially different from the lives of even my most recent ancestors. In fact, it has made my life fundamentally different from what it was just twenty years ago.

I have always loved bikes and always wanted to tinker with them, but short of giving up my academic aspirations and going to work as an apprentice at a bike shop, I had little access to bicycle parts and the necessary repair and maintenance information to fulfill that vision. Today I have all this at my fingertips as I click a button to order parts that will transform my klutzy three-speed cruiser into a single-speed commuter. Technology has not only changed my bicycle, it has also genuinely transformed me by providing easy access to any and every bike part, a wealth of “how-to” and “do-it-yourself” information, as well as the blogged experiences of others trying to do the same thing with their bikes. In this case, technology has played a humanizing role supplying the tools for me to become a genuinely active producer of bikes, rather than merely a passive consumer.

Although not all encounters with new technologies can be characterized as positive, let alone successfully humanizing, enough of them must be in order to explain the enthusiastic demand for these products and services. However, the rapid and relentless advance of modern technology also poses myriad

challenges to the ways people conceive, perceive, and make sense of the world. Cutting-edge technologies are both pervasive and invasive; they touch every aspect of life whether one is aware of it or not. The spread of technology in modern Western societies raises questions not only about appropriate use, efficient application, and useable interface but also about technology's capacity to alter the ways people think about themselves and other humans.<sup>1</sup>

Many argue that advanced technology is at a critical crossroad, where its power to alter the environment and one's very self is such that each new advance has a sort of ontological, or fundamental, potential to transform the definition of what it means to be a human living on this planet in the context of a community of humans and other living creatures.<sup>2</sup> Many also claim that as technology progresses further and as the definition of the self becomes more and more distinct from the relatively stable conceptions of humanity that have held sway for eons, the understanding of human dignity will likewise evolve.<sup>3</sup> The key lies in the capacity to develop technologies that are both efficient and humanizing, effective and dignified.<sup>4</sup> Some would claim that technologists focus more on the former than the latter and that questions about humanity and dignity will always require the attention of those creating and consuming the latest technological advances.

## The Historical Roots of the Human Dignity Tradition

The belief that humans, by their very nature, are valuable in ways that are both quantitatively and qualitatively different from all other creatures has been a consistent theme since the dawn of Western philosophical and theological traditions.<sup>5</sup> This conception of the human as uniquely valuable has formed the foundation for most ethical systems in Western culture and has undergirded

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1. Oswald, Bayer. "Self-Creation? On the Dignity of Human Beings," *Modern Theology* 20, no. 2 (April 01, 2004): 286–87.

2. Similar arguments are being made in other academic disciplines. See David Gurnham, "The Mysteries of Human Dignity and the Brave New World of Human Cloning," *Social & Legal Studies* 14, no. 2 (June 2005): 197–214.

3. Others have recently made similar claims: Elaine Graham, "The 'End' of the Human or the End of the 'Human'? Human Dignity in Technological Perspective," in *God and Human Dignity* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2006), 263–281; and Christoph Schwöbel, "Recovering Human Dignity," in *God and Human Dignity*, 44–58.

4. UNESCO has recently called on developers of advanced technologies to consider the impact of their creations on human dignity and human rights. "Reflections on the UNESCO Draft Declaration on Bioethics and Human Rights," *Developing World Bioethics* 5, no. 3 (September 2005): 197–209.

5. J. Prescott Johnson, "The Idea of Human Dignity in Classical and Christian Thought." *Journal of Thought* 6 (January 01, 1971): 23–37.

conceptions of social justice and human rights.<sup>6</sup> All Western governments rely on this conception of the human to support their most important laws and democratic structures. In fact, it is hard to overestimate the importance of the notion that all persons share a dignity that is equal and inviolable. If some stroke of dark magic were to erase this concept from humanity's collective memory, it is not hard to imagine human existence devolving into the solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short state of war that Thomas Hobbes wrote about in *Leviathan*.<sup>7</sup>

## Biblical and Theological Roots of Human Dignity

Western theories of human dignity have their theological origins in the creation stories of Genesis, which present the human as the climax of God's creative activity. In addition, Genesis affirms that humans are purposefully created to resemble God and that this semblance is rooted in the dominion humans have over the rest of creation.

Then God said: Let us make human beings in our image, after our likeness. Let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, the birds of the air, the tame animals, and the wild animals, and all the creatures that crawl on the earth.

God created mankind in his image;  
in the image of God he created them;  
male and female he created them.

God blessed them and God said to them: Be fertile and multiply; fill the earth and subdue it. Have dominion over the fish of the sea, the birds of the air, and all the living things that crawl on the earth. (Genesis 1:26–28)

The second chapter of Genesis begins the long scriptural exposé of the dimensions of human nature, explicating both the glorious and the dangerous elements of what God has bestowed on this special creature. Humans have choice and the power to guide their own destinies, but these characteristics carry with them the potential to choose foolishly and the capacity to inflict great evil.<sup>8</sup>

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6. Martin A. Bertman, "The Theoretical Instability and Practical Progress of Human Rights." *International Journal of Human Rights* 8, no. 1 (Spring 2004): 99.

7. Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, edited with introduction by J. C. A. Gaskin (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 84.

8. Oswald Bayer more fully explores the negative side of this will to create in his article, which attempts to theologically unpack the human impulse to "self-create" in the age of advanced genetic technologies. Oswald Bayer, "Self-Creation? On the Dignity of Human Beings," *Modern Theology* 20, no. 2 (April 2004): 275–90.

It is because of this frightening potential for evil that Christians believe God sent Jesus in order to redeem humanity from the grip of sinfulness. Jesus reminds his followers that every hair on their heads has been counted and that the God who cares about all living creatures cares for humans more than any other creature (Matthew 6:25–34). Jesus reinforces the notion of human dignity by taking a special interest in the poor and explicitly choosing to live, preach, and minister to the poor rather than associate with social peers and the upper classes. Many Christians believe that Jesus’ preferential association with the poor highlights the truth that it is human nature and not wealth or social status that gives humans value in the eyes of God (Mark 9:33–37). This interpretation sees Jesus as opting for those who have no wealth or status because the poor represent humanity stripped of the artificial and superficial value placed on humans by social structures. The poor represent naked humanity—both literally and figuratively.

From these and other scriptural seeds springs Christian theological anthropology. When viewed from the context of the entire witness of the creative event, Christian theologians have concluded that, in a special way and unlike other creatures, “human persons are willed by God: they are imprinted with God’s image.”<sup>9</sup> Each human carries the spark of the divine, which endows persons with dignity, purpose, and grace. It also entitles every person to treatment befitting this unique status. The belief that the human is a sacred being, who uniquely represents the divine, demands a response of reverence by those who hold this belief. The same reverence is expected when a believer encounters an icon or celebrates a sacrament. Every person is deserving of reverence; treating humans as anything less than, or other than, an image of the divine is a type of desecration of this singularly sacred symbol.

## Philosophical Roots of Human Dignity

Although the Bible provides a powerful witness to the Christian notion of human dignity, theology is not the only source for this fundamental moral insight. Numerous philosophers over the centuries have established their ethical systems on the foundation of the special and immeasurable value of human life. One obvious relative of human dignity theory is Immanuel Kant’s categorical imperative, which he defined in his *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*. Kant bases his ethical theory on the idea that the moral justification for an action lies in whether it could be tolerated by all other rational creatures in all other conceivable settings. In other words, one has to act in

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9. John Paul II, *Centesimus annus* (1991), [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/john\\_paul\\_ii/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_enc\\_01051991\\_centesimus-annus\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_01051991_centesimus-annus_en.html).

such a way that the maxim of one's action could be made into a universal law of nature.<sup>10</sup> In his second formulation of the categorical imperative, Kant affirms that people should always treat other rational creatures as ends unto themselves and never merely as a means to an end.<sup>11</sup> Using precise philosophical language, Kant makes essentially the same point about the dignity of human life as the Genesis narratives, that is, "every human person has an inherent worth from the very fact that they are rational creatures."<sup>12</sup>

In the twentieth century, the existential philosopher Gabriel Marcel took up the cause of human dignity. Marcel distinguishes between those people who are "available," or aware of the full human presence of others, and those who are "unavailable," or not fully present to the humanity of others. The *unavailable* person reduces other people to "examples" or "cases" rather than seeing them as whole and unique individuals. In the *unavailable* state, other selves are encountered as objects—as a "He" or a "She" or even an "It."

The other, in so far as he is other, only exists for me in so far as I am open to him [sic], in so far as he is a Thou. But I am only open to him in so far as I cease to form a circle with myself, inside which I somehow place the other, or rather his idea; for inside this circle, the other becomes the idea of the other, and the idea of the other is no longer the other *qua* other, but the other *qua* related to me. . . .<sup>13</sup>

Encountering the other person as a "Him" or "Her" means treating that person, not as a presence, but as absence. According to Marcel, treating the other as a "He" or "She" rather than a "Thou," renders one incapable of seeing oneself as a "Thou," and in deprecating the other, one deprecates oneself.

The *available* person, on the other hand, encounters another self in his or her full subjectivity—as a "Thou." Marcel writes, "If, on the contrary, I treat the other as 'Thou', I treat him [sic] and apprehend him *qua* freedom. I apprehend him *qua* freedom because he *is* also freedom and not only nature."<sup>14</sup> This *available* person "cannot think in terms of *cases*; in its eyes there are no cases at

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10. Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*, ed. Lara Denis (Toronto, ON: Broadview Press, 2005), 81.

11. *Ibid.*, 87. "Now I say: the human being and in general every rational being exists as an end unto itself, not merely as a means to be arbitrarily used by this or that will, but in all his actions, whether they concern himself or other rational beings, must be always regarded at the same time as an end."

12. Paul Borowski, "Manager-Employee Relationships: Informed by Kant's Categorical Imperative or Dilbert's Business Principle," *Journal of Business Ethics* 17 (15) (November 1998): 1626–27.

13. Gabriel Marcel, *Being and Having*, Trans. Katharine Farrer. (Westminster, UK: Dacre Press, 1949), 107.

14. *Ibid.*, 106–107.

all.”<sup>15</sup> Persons who are *available* to others have an entirely different experience of their place in the world in that they acknowledge their interdependence with other people. Relationships between *available* people are characterized by presence rather than absence; in the communication and communion between persons, they somehow transcend the physical gulf between them without merging into an amalgam of some kind. According to Marcel, “It should be obvious at once that a being of this sort is not an autonomous whole, is not in [the] expressive English phrase, self-contained; on the contrary such a being is open and exposed, as unlike as can be to a compact impenetrable mass.”<sup>16</sup> To be *available* to the other is to be present to and for the other, to put one’s resources at the other’s disposal, and to be an open and permeable character. In the words of Catholic social teaching (CST), Marcel’s *available* person recognizes the human dignity of others.

## Human Dignity in Catholic Social Teaching

Catholic social teaching develops the philosophical and theological perspectives on human dignity together. Because of the historical circumstances within which these documents were drafted, the theory of human dignity was developed in relation to philosophical concepts about the dignity of human labor. The earliest documents of this tradition develop the theology of the *imago dei*<sup>17</sup> (image of God) in the context of neo-Thomistic natural law philosophy.<sup>18</sup> Humans not only are iconic representations of the divine, but also their work is analogous to God’s creative activity. When a person mixes his or her labor with raw physical material to create a product, then “on it he leaves impressed, as it were, a kind of image of his person” (*Rerum novarum*, no. 15). Thomistic philosophy establishes personal ownership of property either through “occupancy” or by means of labor. Using this philosophical foundation, the Church claimed that dispossessed laborers, like early industrial factory workers, had been robbed of their dignity precisely because they did not enjoy the full fruits of their labor. CST affirmed that the role of the government consisted in

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15. Gabriel Marcel, *The Philosophy of Existentialism*, Trans. Many Harari (New York: Carol Publishing Group, 1995), 41.

16. Gabriel Marcel, *The Mystery of Being*, vol.1, *Reflection and Mystery*, Trans. G. S. Fraser (London: The Harvill Press, 1951), 145.

17. *Imago dei*, is a Latin phrase that can be found in a passage in the book of Genesis in which God creates humans in the image of the divine. It is used to highlight the belief that humans stand out as exceptional elements in the created world. This exceptional status is the foundation for treating all humans, no matter their social standing, as equal and uniquely valuable in the eyes of the Divine Creator.

18. Neo-Thomism, a distilled version of Thomas Aquinas’s philosophy, was developed by the Catholic Church in order to make Aquinas’s thought accessible to people with ordinary intelligence. This simplified Thomism was used to train and prepare clergy after the Council of Trent in 1565.

restoring the rights and property of the laborer without negating the property rights of the owner of capital.

Nowhere is the union of the philosophical and theological perspectives on human dignity clearer than in the social encyclicals of Pope John Paul II. In the 1981 encyclical *Laborem exercens* (On Human Work), John Paul II combines traditional creation theology with the personalist philosophy of Max Scheler, which informed his own teaching and writing as a professor of moral theology and social ethics.<sup>19</sup> The encyclical is an extended theological and philosophical reflection on what he calls the objective and subjective meaning of work. For John Paul II, work attains its fullest meaning not in its objective sense, that is, not in the work done and the products produced, but rather in the subjective sense, that is, in the persons who do the work and the humanization that results from the doing of the work. “As a person, man is therefore the subject of work. As a person he works, he performs various actions belonging to the work process; independently of their objective content, these actions must all serve to realize his humanity, to fulfill the calling to be a person that is his by reason of his very humanity” (*LE*, no. 6).

## Modern Applications to the Business Setting: Emerging Technological Challenges to Human Dignity

In his article, “Why the Future Doesn’t Need Us,” Bill Joy, computer guru and cofounder of Sun Microsystems, takes on futurists who imagine only utopian results from the ongoing development of certain powerful technologies. Joy sees just the opposite. He fears these technologies could just as easily lead to a dystopian or even disastrous future.<sup>20</sup> He claims that the power of emerging technologies has the potential to be exponentially more lethal than any technology humanity has encountered before—even nuclear energy. Joy fears that certain emerging technologies present humankind with a Pandora’s box brimming with temptations that could lead to dire consequences in spite of the best of intentions. After spelling out in detail the various ways that robotics, nanotechnology, and genetics could doom humanity, Joy concludes that technologists and the businesses that produce cutting-edge products must embrace an ethic of relinquishment, refusing to pursue certain lines of inquiry because these have the potential to inflict such enormous harm.

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19. See the official biography of Pope John Paul II at the Vatican website, [http://www.vatican.va/news\\_services/press/documentazione/documents/santopadre\\_biografie/giovanni\\_paolo\\_ii\\_biografia\\_prepontificato\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/news_services/press/documentazione/documents/santopadre_biografie/giovanni_paolo_ii_biografia_prepontificato_en.html).

20. Bill Joy, “Why the Future Doesn’t Need Us,” *Wired* 8.04 (April 2000), <http://www.wired.com/wired/archive/8.04/joy.html>.

Many people found Joy's "new Luddite"<sup>21</sup> reasoning compelling. He was, after all, the last person one would expect to propose that businesses and engineers freeze development on some of the most promising technological advances. If one of the world's leading names in technology speaks out against the trajectory of this industry, then the rest of the less technically inclined population had better sit up and take notice. Indeed there are dangerous technologies that have the potential to destroy and even obliterate, but some technologies go even further toward eclipsing existing notions of human dignity, even when they do no physical harm.

For some, something about Joy's recommendation to relinquish technological development did not seem right from either a moral or a philosophical perspective. First, relinquishment as a strategy runs headlong into the essential curiosity of human nature. Resisting the impulse to know and investigate does not seem to be a drive that can be repressed indefinitely. Repressing this impulse also raises the question of how to impose and police this ethic globally across an immense geographical expanse as well as the myriad of cultures that might not accept its logic. More importantly, would an ethic of relinquishment harm the contemporary understanding of human agency<sup>22</sup> and, in turn, ideas about human dignity? Relinquishment seems to assume ubiquitous incompetence or, even worse, a tendency toward evil in human nature. Is humanity such a blundering horde? Is it so inclined toward its own destruction? Does humanity not trust itself with this powerfully important task?

In the end, Joy's thesis seems to be informed by some of the same concerns voiced by the original Luddites—that humans are meddling in matters beyond their limited understanding and metaphorically "playing God."<sup>23</sup> What John Caiazza calls "techno-secularism," which includes "an ethical vision that focuses on healthful living, self-fulfillment, and avoiding the struggles of human life and the inevitability of death," also informs Joy's perspective.<sup>24</sup>

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21. The original Luddites were factory workers in early nineteenth-century Britain who demonstrated their opposition to being displaced by new industrial machinery by attacking the factories and destroying the machines. Since that brief outburst of violence, the term *Luddite* has been used to describe anyone who reflexively opposes new technologies, especially those who raise fears that the new technology will destroy a way of life and usher in a dystopia of one sort or another.

22. Human agency is important here because Joy's argument might lead one to conclude that humans cannot be trusted to behave in ways that will result in human flourishing. An ethic of relinquishment could be used to conclude that humans do not have the capacity to be responsible for their own destiny—this would constitute an abandonment of the idea of human agency and that humans should have control of their own future.

23. For a more thorough critique of this perspective see Cynthia S. W. Crysedale, "Playing God? Moral Agency in an Emergent World," *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 23, no. 2 (June 2003): 243–259.

24. John C. Caiazza, "Athens, Jerusalem, and the arrival of techno-secularism," *Zygon* 40, no. 1 (March 2005): 9.



It attempts to supplant the abstract, reflective, and noninstrumental answers offered by the more reflective disciplines of science,<sup>25</sup> philosophy, and religion with the magical mindset of the technological fix or, from Joy's perspective, the technological disaster. Whether one envisions technological utopia or dystopia, the theory informing those conclusions remains the same: technology magically transforms the world, leaving humans either blissfully happy or facing miserable decay in its wake.

Science, philosophy, and religion tend to be critical of the totalistic claims of techno-secularism.<sup>26</sup> The common assumption that improvements in wealth and technology inexorably lead to better, happier lives has been questioned by philosophy and religion for eons. Now the sciences are providing polling data that supports these less empirical assertions<sup>27</sup> and calling into question the assumption on the part of futurists that advances in technology could lead to some prospective Eden or, for that matter, a destiny marked only by perdition and anguish. The reflective disciplines recognize that happiness is a complex human condition and that the excitement induced by technological advances simply proves too fleeting to deliver on the promise of true and lasting satisfaction. Religion and philosophy have long held that happiness can be found in a life well lived, which often has more to do with establishing and nurturing right relationships than access to wealth or technology. As Barbara Strassberg points out in her essay, "Magic, Religion, Science, Technology, and Ethics in the Postmodern World," technology will have an important, but not a solitary, or singularly deterministic role to play in the way human society shapes its future.<sup>28</sup>

Moral dilemmas abound in the production and application of modern technologies, and some technological fields do not seem to offer a clear-cut ethical path forward. Like Joy's article, the following section of this chapter will examine three broad technological categories, evaluating their trajectories according to the standards set by the ideal of human dignity. It will assess challenges and threats to key aspects of human dignity theory and explore possible alternative

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25. Science is included among the group of reflective disciplines because of the increasingly abstract nature of some of the inquiries of scientific theoreticians. For a more complete discussion of the increasingly close relationship between these two odd bedfellows, see Ervin Laszlo, "Why I Believe in Science and Believe in God: A Credo," *Zygon* 39, no. 3 (September 2004): 535–539.

26. For a more detailed discussion of the dangers of technological and cybernetic totalism, see Michael W. DeLashmutt, "A Better Life Through Information Technology? The Techno-Theological Eschatology of Posthuman Speculative Science," *Zygon: Journal of Religion and Science* 41, no. 2 (June 2006): 267–87.

27. James Surowiecki, "Technology and Happiness," *Technology Review* 108, no. 1 (January 2005): 72–76. *Computers & Applied Sciences Complete*, <http://www.ebscohost.com>.

28. Barbara A. Strassberg, "Magic, Religion, Science, Technology, and Ethics in the Postmodern World," *Zygon: Journal of Religion and Science* 40, no. 2 (2005): 307–32.

trajectories. Each case will entertain future possibilities, hopefully without getting caught in the trap of either utopian or dystopian thinking. Balance will be maintained by recalling that the future of humanity will likely be as thoroughly and richly human as its past and, therefore, determined by more than merely the development of new technologies.

## Biotechnology

In effect, humanity is damned if it goes ahead with the production and use of a technology and yet also damned if it follows Bill Joy's recommendation and relinquishes development of it altogether. Nowhere is this truer than in the flourishing field of biotechnology, with its constantly changing borders between life and death, its ever-increasing capacity to alter the quality of life through genetic manipulations, and now even its capacity to create new life forms as the understanding of these sciences progresses.<sup>29</sup> Each of these technological trajectories confronts ethicists with a definition of human nature that is far more protean than the one they are used to endorsing and defending. This, in turn, makes applying human dignity theory to cases involving the latest biotechnology advances more problematic.

In her article, "Created Co-creator and the Practice of Medicine," Ann Pederson states, "at both the beginning and end of life, new technologies are changing the way we define life and death."<sup>30</sup> Here she refers to a constellation of technologies applied earlier and earlier in the lives of children, and later and later in the lives of seniors, in order to extend and preserve life. For instance, artificial womb technologies,<sup>31</sup> among many other advances in neonatal care, preserve the lives of children who, not so long ago, would have certainly faced death or disability due to premature birth. While the preservation of life seems morally unproblematic, the application of these technologies has raised many unanticipated issues. On a number of occasions, for example, these technologies have helped to save the life of a child born to a drug-addicted mother, who subsequently abandons the child. According to Renee Denise Boss in the *Journal of Palliative Medicine*:

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29. Modern biotechnology also raises the issues of the affordability of health care in the United States and how the financially exclusive system of distribution is, in itself, an affront to human dignity. For a more lengthy discussion of these issues, see R. McDougall, "A Resource-Based Version of the Argument That Cloning Is an Affront to Human Dignity," *Journal of Medical Ethics* 34, no. 4 (April 2008): 259–261.

30. Ann Pederson, "Created Co-Creator and the Practice of Medicine," *Zygon: Journal of Religion and Science* 39, no. 4 (2005): 801.

31. Frida Simonstein, "Artificial Reproduction Technologies (RTs)—All the Way to the Artificial Womb?," *Medicine, Health Care and Philosophy: A European Journal* 9, no. 3 (2006): 359–365.

Decisions to limit life-sustaining therapies for neonates are regularly made together by parents and physicians who agree that the predicted quality of life is extremely poor. Why then, when parents abandon a baby whose quality of life is also predictably grim, are those in charge unable to make decisions to limit that infant's suffering?<sup>32</sup>

Another example is the dilemma created by the excess embryos produced when infertile couples use *in vitro* technologies. Although the gift of life given in these cases to otherwise barren couples again seems morally laudable, embryos produced by this method will most likely be stored in a freezer until they become unviable.<sup>33</sup> What is the status of those lives and what is the moral value of a procedure that produces so much of this kind of waste?<sup>34</sup> If the end result is death after a decade in the deep freeze, then is it ethically acceptable to use these embryos in scientific experiments or to harvest stem cells from these otherwise doomed embryos? More importantly, these cases present an affront to human dignity no matter what course of action is taken, whether that consists of indefinite storage, destruction, or experimentation.

Just as thorny as the technologies applied at the beginning of life are those applied at the end of life in order to extend, preserve, or enhance the quality of life for individuals who, in another age, would have already died. One cluster of technologies receiving a great deal of attention recently has been artificial life systems, like feeding tubes, and artificial lungs, hearts, kidneys, and other vital organs. Biomedical technology has rapidly become adept at keeping the physical body alive—so rapidly, in fact, that it has occasionally outstripped the human capacity to reflect on its obvious consequences. New classifications have appeared in the literature in order to account for these newfound powers. Terms such as *brain dead* and *persistent vegetative state* now join the old medical standbys such as *coma* and *unconscious*, in order to help determine the right path to take when confronted with an unresponsive, but ostensibly alive, body.<sup>35</sup> When people say that they value life, what sort of “life” does that mean? Does a body with functioning organs qualify as human life? As the

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32. Renee Denise Boss, “End-of-Life Decision-Making for Infants Abandoned in the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit,” *Journal of Palliative Medicine* 11, no. 1 (2008): 109–11.

33. Marcia Clemmitt, “Couples Reluctant to Abandon Their Frozen Embryos,” *CQ Researcher* 16, no. 2 (2006): 710.

34. For a more extended discussion of this issue, see Giuseppe Benagiano and Maurizio Mori, “Evolution of Thinking of the Catholic Church on the Beginning of Human Life,” *Reproductive BioMedicine Online* 14 (2007): 162–68.

35. For more background on the historical evolution of this medical terminology, see N. D. Zasler, “Terminology in Evolution: Caveats, Conundrums and Controversies,” *NeuroRehabilitation* 19, no. 4 (December 2004): 285–92.

capacity to preserve and extend organ function continues to improve, won't the number of people preserved in these states of suspended animation increase? Will there be a day when society warehouses the living dead? Is that the same as valuing life?

Valuing life, or at least a certain quality of life, is the promise offered by the latest genetic therapies. Most genetic manipulation is presently geared toward preventing and correcting inherited diseases and syndromes in order to improve the quality of life.<sup>36</sup> Again, it is rather difficult to find anything morally suspect about this kind of technological intervention. However, some applications of genetic science pursue the more controversial goal of “enhancing” and “improving” the personal traits of individuals who fall within the normal limits of human functioning.<sup>37</sup> This kind of genetic manipulation raises many questions, especially when such modifications are made to the germ line; and they become more than simply alterations for that particular individual, but traits inheritable by subsequent generations.<sup>38</sup>

Given the embryonic stage of development of this science, society is not at the point of confronting actual cases, and scientists assert that it will be decades before such questions need to be answered. Nevertheless, many talented and well-funded technologists are pursuing technologies that will allow individuals to live longer, run faster, jump higher, be smarter, be musically gifted, and so on.<sup>39</sup> Even if only a few of these projects ever come to full fruition, humanity will confront a flood of ethical concerns. For instance, who gets access to these technologies?<sup>40</sup> Right now the vast majority of technologists working on these projects work for companies interested in making money off of these long-term ventures, which suggests that access to these genetic modifications will be limited to those who can afford to pay. Is it possible then, that in the future a group of wealthy families will launch a branch of humanity that is qualitatively different from the rest of the population?<sup>41</sup> Even worse, is it possible that in this same future humanity will also face real genetic

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36. James S. Larson, “Medicine, Government, and the Human Genome,” *Journal of Health & Human Services Administration* 24, no. 3/4 (Winter2001/Spring2002): 323–25.

37. Elizabeth Fenton, 2008. “Genetic Enhancement—A Threat to Human Rights?” *Bioethics* 22, no. 1 (January 2008): 1.

38. David Heyd, “Human Nature: An Oxymoron?” *Journal of Medicine & Philosophy* 28, no. 2 (April 2003): 166.

39. Fenton, 7.

40. Dov Fox, “Luck, Genes, and Equality,” *Journal of Law, Medicine & Ethics* 35, no. 4 (December 2007): 712–726.

41. For a lengthier discussion of these issues, see the *Tikkun* interview with Michael Sandel, “The Problem with Genetic Engineering,” *Tikkun* 22, no. 5 (September 2007): 40–85. Academic Search Premier, <http://www.ebscobot.com>.

discrimination against disabled individuals or even against those who simply do not possess extraordinary engineered traits?<sup>42</sup>

This rapidly increasing capacity to produce, preserve, extend, clone, and manipulate human life raises questions about the very concept of the unique and mysterious gift of individual human existence. In his article “Genetic Frontiers: Challenges for Humanity and Our Religious Traditions,” Philip Hefner points out that “the most critical challenge is to our understanding of human nature and values.”<sup>43</sup> The degree to which humans can choose the beginning and end of life, as well as desirable traits for themselves and their children, will in large part determine the extent to which they conceive of human life as a product rather than a gift.<sup>44</sup> The ability to choose life or death and even which desirable traits to keep and which undesirable anomalies to delete as is done for avatars in online gaming platforms, ontologically transforms the human from a mysterious subject of infinite worth into a manipulable consumer item of definite and marketable value. The question becomes how to prevent this devolution of human dignity and recover a sense of the “priceless” quality of human life<sup>45</sup> given the trajectories of current technological development.

## Cybernetics and Robotics

Today the success of knee replacement surgery depends in no small part on advances in cybernetic and robotic technologies. Because of these advances, those who undergo this surgery can expect to feel up to almost any task at the end of recuperation. However, a mere twenty years ago the prognosis for the full recovery of knee function would have been much less certain; and only forty years ago, a person would face the prospect of spending retirement years hobbling around with a painful, gimpy joint. Such is the pace of advancement in reverse-engineering the human body using nonbiological materials.

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42. Karen Eltis, “Genetic Determinism and Discrimination: A Call to Re-Orient Prevailing Human Rights Discourse to Better Comport with the Public Implications of Individual Genetic Testing,” *Journal of Law, Medicine & Ethics* 35, no. 2 (Summer 2007): 282–83.

43. Philip Hefner, 2007. “Genetic Frontiers: Challenges For Humanity and Our Religious Traditions,” *Zygon: Journal of Religion & Science* 42, no. 1: 183.

44. Relying on the founding secular philosophical traditions that inspired the US Constitution, Robert P. George makes more or less the same point in his short articles in the journal *Social Research*. Robert P. George, “Ethics, Politics, and Genetic Knowledge,” *Social Research* 73, no. 3 (Fall 2006): 1029–1032.

45. Maureen Junker-Kenny, “Valuing the Priceless: Christian Convictions in Public Debate as a Critical Resource and as ‘Delaying Veto’ (J. Habermas),” *Studies in Christian Ethics* 18, no. 1 (April 2005): 55.

Once again, many rightfully feel grateful for these kinds of technologies and ask what could possibly be ethically problematic with pursuits that yield so many wonderful benefits. However, robotics and, to a greater extent, cybernetics raise questions about blurring the distinction between human and machine.<sup>46</sup> Replacing more and more of the given biological self with chosen, nonbiological parts threatens the concept of human nature and, therefore, of human dignity. These issues become logarithmically more convoluted when the discussion focuses on replacing the human brain by transferring the scanned contents of consciousness to software that can be loaded into a computer.<sup>47</sup> In these cases, technology and techno-futurists challenge the meaning of the term *human*, begging the question, “At what point does the term *human* no longer accurately describe these cybernetic creations?”<sup>48</sup>

Returning to the example of a person with a brand-new knee, probably no one would question her humanity after her operation; there would be little or no superficial evidence that something fundamental had changed. Even if she had multiple joints and organs replaced, most would not struggle to identify her core humanity. In fact, the technologies used in these cases are designed to fool people into thinking the new mechanical parts are no different than the originals. But what if her biological brain was replaced? And what if, years down the road, obvious problems with the “brain” changed her behavior in public and she had to be taken in for a software reboot? Is the person still a human in this instance—or is this just an illusion? Does the person have a mind, or is “he” or “she” just a very clever software program?

The founding belief of most cybernetic endeavors is that humans will eventually be able to construct a better version of themselves—a faster, stronger, smarter, and, therefore, happier version. For Christians, this scenario raises theological questions about God because it relegates God to the role of the maker of an inferior product. In essence, human ingenuity surpasses the divine. In so doing, it poses the conundrum of the created surpassing the creator, thereby negating the very notion of a superior being. It also raises questions about the dignity of human nature similar to those raised by genetic engineering.<sup>49</sup> If science can engineer humans, either genetically or mechanically, then the value of the human lies not in the human *qua* human, but in the excellence of scientific technique and the number and quality of features

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46. For a discussion of this issue from the perspective of someone who does not think cybernetics necessarily results in this sort of blurred moral vision, see Henk G. Geertsema, “Cyborg: Myth or Reality?” *Zygon: Journal of Religion & Science* 41, no. 2 (2006): 289–328.

47. Christof Koch and Giulio Tononi, “Can Machines Be Conscious?” *IEEE Spectrum* 45, no. 6 (2008): 55–59.

48. Raymond Kurzweil, *The Age of Spiritual Machines* (New York: Penguin Putnam Inc., 1999).

49. See Bayer, 286–287.

that one possesses.<sup>50</sup> Cybernetics must face the question, “How does humanity avoid the commodification of itself and, therefore, the demotion of its own nature as it progresses further and further down the road toward its technological future?”

## Environmental Impact

So far this chapter has focused on the intended consequences of actual or proposed technologies. In this last section, the focus shifts to the unintended consequences of technological advance—environmental destruction. Most of the technologies used on a daily basis are highly beneficial, and many people would find it hard to imagine a world without these conveniences. However, each of these technologies comes at a cost to the ecosystem. Aggregating these relatively small costs for an ever-increasing population of billions of people leads to concerns. For example, I am very conscious of my own energy consumption, yet I know that this is not sustainable over the long haul.<sup>51</sup> The gas heat I enjoy in the winter, the air conditioning I use sparingly in the summer, the electricity generated in a nuclear plant, the computer I use to write this chapter, and even the bike I use to commute, all depend, to varying extents, on a model of energy use and resource consumption that can be sustained for only a few more decades.<sup>52</sup>

Virtually every imaginable technology has some environmental impact that, if multiplied exponentially over the entire human population, could have potentially grave consequences for life on the planet. Twenty years ago, the environmental movement regularly pointed out that Earth could not support “another America,” suggesting that if the peoples of the undeveloped world began to mimic the production and consumption patterns of people in Europe and North America, then the planet was doomed. Per capita energy use and pollution rates were such that Americans were destroying the planet at a pace many times that of the average citizen in the developing world. Today, however, one rarely hears this phrase anymore because reality has quickly caught up to the direst prognostications. During this twenty-year period, China alone has produced tens of millions of new middle-class consumers, and some economists project that by 2015 China will have more than 300 million citizens

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50. Some philosophers in what is being termed the post-humanist school of thinking believe that it is necessary to begin imagining the dignity of the cybernetic person. In this way, they are speaking of a kind of post-human dignity. Nick Bostrom, “In Defense of Posthuman Dignity,” *Bioethics* 19, no. 3 (June 2005): 212–214.

51. Mathis Wackernagel et al., “Tracking the Ecological Overshoot of the Human Economy,” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 99 (14), 9266–9271.

52. Some would claim that there are already signs that humanity has reached such limits. For just one example see Moises Velasquez-Manoff, “Diet for a More-Crowded Planet: Plants,” *Christian Science Monitor* 100, no. 162 (July 16, 2008): 14.

living according to the standards of the Western middle class.<sup>53</sup> Whether Earth could support another America, it now is, due to the ever expanding global population growth and the massive expansion of the middle class, especially in China and India.

Fortunately, there appears to be growing awareness of the impact of humans on the environment, and a small but significant minority realizes that it might have dire near-term consequences. The question, from the perspective of CST, is how this awareness might challenge the traditional notions of human dignity. First, are humans really distinct from the rest of creation given the growing realization of radical dependence on the symbiotic web of relationships called nature? Second, given their destructive potential, are humans really the crowning achievement of this creation? Third, how can the species that has caused so much environmental degradation be understood as the stewards of this same Earth?

For reasons noted previously, contemporary ecotheology challenges traditional notions of human dignity, especially aspects of the tradition that stress human moral exceptionalism—the notion that humans have a unique moral value in comparison to all other creatures. Frequently, this challenge is only implied; the radical novelty of ecotheology's ideas about humanity and its relationship to the rest of creation is rarely explored in depth. Most ecotheologians recognize the inadequacies of traditional Catholic/Christian anthropologies in relation to the epic environmental challenges the planet faces. However, many of those same theologians, in the next instant, recall the tremendous value of these same traditional notions, which have been the source and sustaining inspiration for many of the most noble and progressive movements of the last few centuries.

The question confronting Christians then is whether this is an either/or dilemma: do humans either choose traditional conceptions of human dignity—and in so doing risk sacrificing life as we know it on this planet—or choose novel conceptions of human moral equivalency and risk undermining the moral and legal underpinnings of most of the Western religious and civil tradition?

Addressing this question requires identifying models of Christian ecotheology and examining the definition of humanity that emerges from each.<sup>54</sup> Five major categories of ecotheology emerge: traditional anthropocentrism, stewardship anthropocentrism, eco-justice, ecocentric deep ecology, and meta-ethical value theory. Traditional anthropocentrism, familiar to anyone conversant in traditional Christian moral doctrine, makes strict distinctions between the

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53. Peter Ford, "Consumer tidal wave on the way: China's middle class. (Cover story)," *Christian Science Monitor* 99, no. 25 (2007): 1–12.

54. There are many examples of other categorizations of ecotheology, such as Laurel Kearns, "Saving the Creation: Christian Environmentalism in the United States," *Sociology of Religion* 57, no. 1 (1996): 55–70, and Raymond E. Grizzle and Christopher B. Barrett, "The One Body of Christian Environmentalism," *Zygon* 33, no. 2 (June 1998): 233–253.



inestimable, intrinsic value of human life and the calculable, extrinsic value assigned to the rest of creation. It casts God as a monarch, or a feudal lord, and, therefore, subjugating the rest of creation. Humans are understood as subjects of the royal divinity whose duty is to respect and obey the will of God.

Stewardship anthropocentrism maintains the distinction between human life and the rest of creation to some degree but places greater moral weight on the value of nonhuman creatures than traditional anthropocentrism.<sup>55</sup> This perspective falls short of equating the value of human life with the value of the rest of creation; however, it does advance Christian theology toward a more inclusive value theory that takes the natural world into account.

Eco-justice levels the ethical playing field between humans and the rest of creation. It transfers moral notions usually reserved for discussions of human social ethics—such as fairness, equity, and justice—and applies these to human behavior toward nature.<sup>56</sup> The moral equivalency of this perspective can be seen in its advocacy for radical action on the part of human society to reform its unjust and oppressive relationship with the rest of the created order.

Ecocentric deep ecology turns the discussion away from a human-centered focus and attempts to reconfigure the moral universe by focusing on the symbiotic interrelatedness of nature. Goodness is that which contributes to the flourishing of the ecosystem.<sup>57</sup> Humans fade into the background of this philosophical landscape as a thoroughly integral part of a much wider web of life and existence.

Meta-ethical value theory radicalizes the ecocentric viewpoint in that it affirms the primacy of symbiotic interrelatedness but uses a more microscopic lens in its approach to nature. Often referred to as an “ethic of place,” it claims that the starting point for any genuine ecotheology must be one’s local and immediate encounter with nature.<sup>58</sup>

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55. Good examples of this model are David J. Bryant, “*Imago Dei*, Imagination, and Ecological Responsibility,” *Theology Today* 57, no. 1 (April 2000): 35–50, and Judith N. Scoville, “Fitting Ethics to the Land: H. Richard Niebuhr’s Ethic of Responsibility and Ecotheology,” *Journal of Religious Ethics* 30, no. 2 (Summer 2002): 207–229.

56. Larry Rasmussen has done the most work in this category with books such as *Earth Community*, *Earth Ethics* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1996) and articles such as, “Is Eco-Justice Central to Christian Faith?” *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 54, no. 3–4 (2000): 107–124. Other examples include John B. Cobb Jr., *Sustainability: Economics, Ecology, and Justice* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1992) and Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Gaia and God: An Ecofeminist Theology of Earth Healing* (San Francisco, CA: Harper Collins, 1992).

57. Examples of this perspective include the theology of Thomas Berry and his disciples. Thomas Berry, *The Dream of the Earth* (San Francisco, CA: Sierra Club Books, 2006). Another good example is Jan Deckers, “Christianity and Ecological Ethics: The Significance of Process Thought and a Pan-experientialist Critique of Strong Anthropocentrism,” *Ecotheology* 9, no. 3 (2004): 359–387.

58. Excellent examples of this type of ecotheology are Kirkpatrick Sale, *Dwellers in the Land: The Bioregional Vision* (San Francisco, CA: Sierra Club Books, 1985) and Douglas Burton-Christie, “The Spirit of Place: The Columbia River Watershed Letter and the Meaning of Community,” *Horizons* 30, no. 1 (Winter 2003): 7–24.

Models of Christian Ecotheology					
	Traditional Anthropocentrism	Stewardship Anthropocentrism	Eco-Justice	Eco-centric Deep Ecology	Meta-ethical Value of Place
<b>Locus of Value</b>	Human life has intrinsic value; nature has extrinsic value.	All creation has some intrinsic value; humans possess ultimate intrinsic value.	All creation has equal intrinsic value; there are no privileged species.	All creation as a constantly changing process has equal intrinsic value; differentiation and individuation are illusory.	The idea of intrinsic value only makes sense in a local, immediate context.
<b>Ethical Relationship</b>	Entirely one sided	Humans have greatest value although some reciprocity is implied.	Equality implied by the negation of privilege	Interdependence and reciprocity are central.	Restoration and reparation of sundered relationships
<b>Human Mission</b>	Humans should wisely use nature to achieve their goals.	Humans should manage the complex human/natural relationship so that all thrive.	Humans should overturn and radically reform their destructive and oppressive structures.	Humans need to rediscover their place within the symbiotic relationships of nature.	Humans need to encounter nature immediately both within themselves and in their ecological setting.
<b>God</b>	Feudal Lord	Benevolent CEO	Liberator	Pantheism	Animating Spirit
<b>Jesus/Christ</b>	Obedient Son of the feudal lord who sacrifices himself for all people	Agent or representative of the benevolent CEO who is sent as a teacher and exemplar	Agent or representative of the liberating God who fights oppressions and suffers the consequences	All humans are sons and daughters of God.	Spirit Guide
<b>Sacrament</b>	Nature is a mere instrument.	Nature is a valued instrument.	Nature reveals God's liberatory identity.	Nature is sacrament as nature reveals God.	Nature is sacrament as nature is animated by Spirit.
<b>Church</b>	Institution—Bride of Christ	People of God—Pilgrim People	Church of the Poor—Community of the Oppressed	Community of Creation	Communion with local ecosystem

This rather strict categorization of Christian ecotheology does not make clear the extent to which some ecotheologians have shifted freely between perspectives, and how most of them have done so unconsciously. Many authors have worked with multiple images of God, who could be a crusading liberator in one context and a few pages later be portrayed in very sterile, abstract, and transcendent terms as the animating principle undergirding the process of universal becoming. On the one hand, this fluidity of categories certainly leads to creativity and avoids the pitfall of theoretical notions becoming ossified or conceptually trapped.

However, these various theological models do not necessarily coexist peacefully, and some actually contradict the basic tenets of others. To talk in one context about God as a benevolent CEO who will ultimately guide humanity to eco-utopia does not always mesh well with the image of the church as a community of the oppressed in the next. Theoretical inconsistencies have the potential to lead to creative new insights, which is especially true when the authors are aware of them. However, more often, theoretical inconsistencies yield nonsensical theologies and lead to confusion, so it is important to have a clear map of the theoretical landscape.

Each of the ecotheological categories assumes a certain kind of natural order, which in turn presumes a place for human life in the cosmos.<sup>59</sup> The question is whether to endorse this vision and whether humans would even recognize themselves through this theoretical lens. Is there a privileged, special, or even identifiably distinct place for human existence in a realized ecotheological utopia? Is human dignity recognizably and qualitatively different from the dignity of other creatures, or is the difference only one of kind and not character? Does ecotheology demand a radical reconfiguration of the entire corpus of traditional Christian theology, or can remnants of that tradition inform and guide the way into an eco-friendly future?

One of the major unintended consequences emerging from humanity's awakening to its own toxic impact on the environment has been a thoroughgoing rethinking of philosophical anthropology. The longstanding notion that humans are qualitatively distinct from, and superior to, other creatures has been fundamentally challenged by an awareness of humanity's environmental sins, as well as a deepening scientific understanding of humans and their relationship to the vast web of life on Earth. More and more, it is becoming clear that only a deep ecological consciousness can rein in this destructive technological

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59. These categories have been gleaned from various sources in ecotheology and from conversations with others working in environmental theology. Significant insight into these categories came from conversations with my colleague Kay Read, who has visually mapped human attitudes toward the natural world and come up with her own scheme of eight categories. Also, recognition is due to Willis Jenkins of Yale University since during his talk at the Annual Meeting of the Society of Christian Ethics in January of 2009 the inspiration and outline for these categories finally congealed.

trajectory. The idea that humanity is essentially distinct from the rest of creation and can use and consume the whole of creation as it sees fit<sup>60</sup> seems to be giving way to recognition that humans are creation, and it is they.<sup>61</sup> Therefore, its use and consumption are no longer morally neutral, and an ethic of the subjectivity of creation is beginning to worm its way into the ethical consciousness of the major religions.

## Conclusion

Traditional Western notions of human dignity, which undergird much of contemporary social and political theories about the value and status of the individual person, are being challenged by the development of certain cutting-edge technologies that stretch the boundaries of established concepts of humanity. Some of these technologies affect the way the human is conceived and raise questions about the repercussions these changes might have on notions of human rights in the near future. Advances in the high-tech industries of biotechnology, cybernetics, and environmental science pose threats to Western ideas about human dignity as well as offer opportunities to re-vision the human in novel and more inclusive ways. In the end, one can respond to these challenges by retreating to the safe confines of current conceptions of human dignity or by seeing them as an invitation to open dialogue with new technologies in order to discover weaknesses and inadequacies in the traditional philosophical anthropologies so they can be exposed, updated, and corrected. Only then can these important concepts once again play their prophetic and humanizing role in society.

This is not the first time in history that ideas of human dignity have been challenged. Historical periods of disease, pestilence, famine, and natural disaster have all raised questions about the notion that humans possess a unique status, granted to them in the moral universe by a loving and powerful God. Social institutions like slavery and hierarchical social systems like royalty likewise compromised the belief in human dignity among recent ancestors. Certainly the Enlightenment stands out as one of the many historical moments when political, economic, and philosophical ideas about the individual had a profound impact on how Western culture understood the human and the way each individual ought to relate to the common good. The scientific discoveries of this

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60. "There is a growing awareness of the sublime dignity of human persons, who stand above all things and whose rights and duties are universal and inviolable." *Gaudium et spes*, no. 27.

61. "People will recognize the inherent value of creation and the dignity of all living beings as creatures of God." Catholic Bishops of the Pacific Northwest and Canada, "The Columbia River Watershed," p. 14, <http://www.thewssc.org/images/stories/Resources/Statements/colvr-e.pdf>.

same period, especially Galileo's rejection of a geocentric view of the universe, rocked Western notions of human exceptionalism and the widespread belief that the Earth was God's lonely little laboratory.

In the present moment, marked by a fascination with technological prowess, humanity faces a challenge similar to those encountered in other periods of human history. Because of rapidly advancing technology and its effect on humans and all other living creatures on the planet, traditional conceptions of human nature are no longer adequate and require reformation. Human dignity as an ethical formulation has been a reliable and inspirational tool for philosophers, religious leaders, policy makers, educators, and average citizens from a wide variety of cultures throughout the ages. It is an ethic worth preserving, but it cannot be preserved in amber. Like all other traditional philosophical and religious ideas, it will become dusty and useless if it is locked away like a museum piece. Human dignity theorists have to be willing to enter these dangerous dialogues and allow these precious ethical gems to be dynamically restored in the process.

## Case Study

### Designer Babies: The Fertility Institutes

A newlywed couple, madly in love, decides to conceive a child, but instead of turning out the lights and leaping into bed, they drive to the nearest fertility clinic for a genetic consultation. At the clinic, they are examined and tested. Eggs and sperm are taken from the prospective parents, who are then given a long form with a menu of checkboxes and asked to choose the various features they would like their child to have. Sound like a joke or a deleted scene from a sci-fi movie? Well this futuristic scenario is much closer than most people imagine. As Dr. Mark Hughes, the Director of the Genesis Genetics Institute, a large fertility laboratory in Detroit, and a pioneer of preimplantation genetic diagnosis (PGD), claims, "It's technically feasible and it can be done."<sup>62</sup>

Dr. Hughes goes on to say that no legitimate lab would offer such services because the scientific community would immediately ostracize it. However, assurances such as these offer cold comfort in a context in which one clinic, the Fertility Institutes in Los Angeles, has already flirted with offering its clients the ability to choose more than just the gender of their children.

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62. Gautam Naik, "A Baby, Please, Blond Freckles—Hold the Colic," *Wall Street Journal* (February 12, 2009), <http://www.online.wsj.com/article/SB123439771603075099.html>.

## Case Study

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Dr. Jeffrey Steinberg, a leading figure in the field of *in vitro* fertilization, runs the clinic. He is convinced that “we not bury our heads in the sand and pretend these advances are not happening.”<sup>63</sup> Dr. Steinberg and his colleagues claim that they can predict certain characteristics, such as eye color, hair color, and complexion, with 80 percent accuracy. They also feel certain that this is just the tip of the iceberg and have plans to implement every conceivable customization as these become available through the advances of genetic science.<sup>64</sup>

The Institute cannot change the DNA of the donating couple—if neither the mother nor the father has genes for green eyes, for example, then the Institute cannot give them a baby with green eyes. Yet within the constraints inherent in the DNA of the donating couple, The Fertility Institute is willing to screen embryos for these traits. The Fertility Institute wants to offer several other customizations, and many more are sure to be released in the coming years as the science behind screening for them is developed.<sup>65</sup>

In most contemporary technological societies, certain kinds of genetic selections are not only permissible but also desirable and beneficial in many instances. So, for instance, very few people have reservations about genetic screening for diseases and deformities before the implantation process; they want to ensure that the children born are not destined to lead lives of misery due to handicapping conditions that were easily preventable. Although more controversial than screening for disease and deformity, screening for gender has become customary in most countries, using the same PGD process in which a three-day-old embryo, consisting of about six cells, is tested in a lab.<sup>66</sup> Only embryos free of disease and of the desired gender—if the parents have also chosen to select for gender—are then implanted in the womb.

Take the case of Cindy and John Whitley. Their first child died at the age of 9 months from a deadly genetic disorder called spinal muscular atrophy. Genetic analysis uncovered that the Whitleys statistically had a 1 in 4 chance of creating a child with spinal muscular atrophy each time they conceived. Unwilling to risk having another child with

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63. “Designer Babies’ Ethical?” *CBS News* (March 3, 2009), <http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2009/03/03/earlyshow/health/main4840346.shtml>

64. Keith Kleiner, “Designer Babies: Ready or Not Here They Come,” *Singularity Hub* (February 25, 2009), <http://www.singularityhub.com/2009/02/25/designer-babies-like-it-or-not-here-they-come/>.

65. *Ibid.*

66. Naik.

## Case Study

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the deadly disorder, the Whitleys used PGD to conceive three children, all healthy.<sup>67</sup>

However, the science of PGD, like all other sciences, is in a constant state of discovery, and the potential services it offers to couples seeking assistance continues to expand. Embryo screening has recently been used to create “savior siblings”—healthy spare embryos left over from the screening process that can be harvested to treat serious illness in the implanted embryo. It has also been used to weed out embryos carrying markers for diseases, such as breast cancer or other diseases that might not strike a person until much later in life. There are also rumblings that the technology has been used in cases of so-called “negative screening” in which, for instance, a child born to deaf parents is selected to be deaf him or herself.<sup>68</sup>

This science also raises the specter of eugenics and the development of a “master race.” Even scientists who favor this kind of genetic choice recognize that only select individuals who live in highly developed technological cultures will have access to these types of procedures. Due to the costs and to the fact that, in most cases, these procedures will be deemed “elective” and, therefore, not covered by insurance or national health plans, only the relatively wealthy will be able to modify their offspring. Many ask whether this kind of genetic selection based on economic standing sets up a situation in which the process of natural selection will be replaced by a class-based evolution of the human species, in which members of a certain elite class will be able to generate offspring who are “superior” competitors and who represent a genetic “master race.”<sup>69</sup>

A recent poll conducted by the New York School of Medicine demonstrates some degree of support for the notion of designing a better child. A majority of 999 people who sought genetic counseling said they supported genetic screening for eliminating disease, mental retardation, and blindness. Once again, such opinions tend to be relatively noncontroversial in American culture. However, the same survey revealed that 10 percent of the respondents supported genetic screening for both athletic ability and height and that 13 percent would use the procedure to achieve superior intelligence.<sup>70</sup>

Given the current state of genetic science, successful and consistent characteristic enhancement is very difficult to achieve. Even the simplest

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67. Ibid.

68. Ibid.

69. Matt Collins, “The Need to Regulate ‘Designer Babies,’” *Scientific American* (May 4, 2009), <http://www.scientificamerican.com/article.cfm?id=regulate-designer-babies>.

70. Ibid.

## Case Study

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traits such as hair and eye color appear to be the product of multiple genetic and environmental factors, and knowledge of what these factors are and how they can be manipulated is incomplete, although increasing daily. More complex characteristics such as intelligence, athleticism, and happiness present enormous hurdles to geneticists attempting to identify the control mechanisms for these traits. Most of these characteristics require modification of the environment through development, rehearsal, and practice as children, adolescents, and adults in order to bear full fruit. Add to this complexity that there is no single cultural definition of “intelligence” let alone “happiness,” and one begins to understand the difficulties associated with trying to genetically manipulate these characteristics at birth.

A few short months after announcing his clinic’s ability and intention to offer hair, eye, and skin color as optional traits to their lab customers, Dr. Steinberg backed away from this commitment—after making “an ‘internal, self-regulatory decision’ to scrap the project because of ‘public perception’ and the ‘apparent negative societal impacts involved.’”<sup>71</sup> However, most commentators agree that this change of heart on the part of one person at one clinic in Los Angeles will have no appreciable effect on the ever-increasing capacity to choose the traits of offspring.<sup>72</sup> Many are calling for government regulation; however, others contend that with the globalization of genetic sciences, these regulations will not be enforceable unless they can somehow be enacted internationally. Barring this unlikely eventuality, any country’s national laws will have little or no effect on the inevitable march toward designer babies.

## Questions

1. How does the choice of personal characteristics for one’s children differ from choosing features for any other product?
2. Should parents have the right to purchase these traits from providers of fertility services as they purchase other consumer goods?
3. What does human dignity theory have to say about the increasing capacity to determine the characteristics of one’s offspring?
4. In this case, the values of scientific advancement, the freedom to choose, and the dignity of the human are weighed against one another, sometimes in contentious ways. How might all of these values be preserved without sacrificing one or the others?

71. Collins, “The Need to Regulate ‘Designer Babies.’”

72. Ibid.



## Case Study

### The People's Car<sup>73</sup>

Tata Motors of India was established in 1945 as a locomotive manufacturer and in 1954 branched out and began manufacturing commercial vehicles. It ended a fifteen-year collaboration with Daimler Benz of Germany in 2010, and now, at the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century, Tata Motors is one of the largest automobile manufacturers in India with annual revenues in excess of \$14 billion. Today the company makes passenger cars as well as multi-utility, light, medium, and heavy commercial vehicles. The company exports its vehicles around the world and employs more than 1,400 engineers and scientists in six research and development centers in India, South Korea, Spain, and the United Kingdom.

In 2003, Tata Motors decided to design and manufacture the Nano, a tiny car costing around \$2,500.<sup>74</sup> The company targeted the segment of the personal transportation market currently filled by motorbikes. The ideal consumer for the Nano would be individuals currently unable to afford a car and who use motorbikes as a form of family transportation. By 2009, the first Nanos began hitting Indian showrooms, and consumers immediately saw how this car offered all of the benefits of their automotive competitors, like Maruti and Suzuki, yet did so at an affordable price. The Nano was being touted as the car for the masses—at least that is what everyone at Tata assumed at first.

The automotive industry has been a major contributor to a number of airborne pollutants and has been identified as a significant factor in global climate change as well. Overall the transportation sector contributes about 24 percent to global carbon emissions. Cars and other light duty vehicles contribute about 10 percent to the global carbon emissions produced by carbon fuels, and in the car category, the small-car segment makes up the largest share of carbon emissions at 25 percent. Experts claim that this outsized contribution by the small-car segment is due to the fact that there are so many more of these vehicles on the road than of any other variety. The environment must also contend with the exponential growth in the number of vehicles of all kinds worldwide, from 50 million in 1950 to 580 million in 1997, a trend that seems unlikely to abate any time in the near future. If anything, the rate of vehicle production will likely increase as India and China add unprecedented numbers of new middle-class consumers every year. In fact, projections show that the number of vehicles on the road will triple between 2014 and 2050.

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73. This case study is based on a case study written by Shankar Narayanan, "Tato Nano: Environmental Concerns," which can be found at [www.caseplace.org](http://www.caseplace.org).

74. <http://tatanano.inservices.tatamotors.com/tatamotors/>.

## Case Study

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When it was unveiled in 2008 at the Auto Expo in New Delhi, the Nano was marketed as the People's Car. In spite of its diminutive size, the vehicle is designed as a family car, with seating for four passengers and generous interior space. It is an all-aluminum construction, which makes it exceptionally, light and the two-cylinder, fuel-injected engine and rear-wheel drive allow very good gas mileage. The Nano meets and exceeds all regulatory requirements in the markets where it is sold, which now includes most of the European Union. It has been touted as the product that will make car ownership an achievable goal for as many as 14 million Indian families, who currently cannot afford products from other manufacturers. The introduction of the Nano has lowered the cost of an entry-level car in India by 30 percent. Tata has broken through a major milestone in the mobility paradigm and is creating a whole new segment in the existing transportation market.

In addition to great gas mileage, solid safety, and low cost, the Nano also boasted having tailpipe emissions performance that exceeded all regulatory requirements of both India (Bharat III) and the European Union (Euro III). In fact, it had lower emissions than the motorbikes it was designed to replace. This combined with the lower fuel efficiency of most other cars meant that the Nano would provide low-cost transportation with a lower carbon footprint.<sup>75</sup>

However, in spite of all these positives, concerns emerged about the Nano's potential to degrade air quality and contribute to global climate change. The principal concern had to do with the potential popularity of an ultra-cheap car for the masses and how this would increase people's reliance on the automobile, rather than bicycles or mass transit, as their primary mode of transportation. J. D. Power Asia Pacific projected that the Nano will likely sell 100,000 units per year through 2013 and possibly double that number by 2014. An Indian rating agency claims that the Nano could increase overall automobile sales by 20 percent in its first year of production and has the potential of expanding the car market in India by 65 percent.

Additionally, some predict that the Nano will spur other manufacturers to slash prices on their vehicles and launch their own minicars, further exacerbating this trend toward greater reliance on cars. This expansion of the sheer volume of cars on the streets of India's crowded cities would intensify the already heavy congestion, which would, in turn, increase tailpipe

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75. The engine will require finer tuning in order to reach the highest and most strict emission standards of Euro IV. The company itself appears to be dedicated to being seen as an environmentally conscious manufacturer as can be seen at its website, [http://www.tatamotors.com/our\\_world/we\\_care.php](http://www.tatamotors.com/our_world/we_care.php).

## Case Study

(continued)

emissions. Average speeds in major Indian cities such as Mumbai and Delhi have already fallen to 10–12 km/hr., and with the deluge of cars that the introduction of the Nano portends, this figure could easily drop to 5–10 km/hr. A study by the World Bank demonstrated that car emissions rise dramatically when average speeds fall below 40 km/hr. and spike even higher once speeds drop below 20 km/hr. Fuel consumption was four to six times as high at 5–10 km/hr. as it was at 40 km/hr., with corresponding tailpipe emissions. Tata based its emission claims for the Nano on ideal driving conditions, which assumed drivers would travel above 40 km/hr. Under actual conditions in the most crowded areas of India, the environmental impact of the Nano appears much bleaker.

## Questions

1. Does the Tata Nano represent an egalitarian dream, as the company and its supporters claim, or an environmental nightmare, as environmentalists and others suggest? Explain.
2. In this case, two different principles of CST potentially clash. On the one hand, there is the egalitarian thrust of making a social good more accessible to a greater number of people who could not otherwise afford this product. On the other hand, this product could have a dramatically negative impact on the environment. How would you resolve this ethical dilemma?
3. If you were an executive with decision-making power at Tata, what would you recommend? How would you deal with these conflicting values?
4. If you were an Indian consumer with a small family that had to get around the busy and dangerous streets of Mumbai on a motorbike, what would your attitude be toward the Nano? Would you be tempted to buy one?

## For Further Reading

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