

BIOETHICS

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CHRISTIAN ETHICS AND BIOMEDICAL INNOVATION by Stephen Goundrey-Smith. Lexington Books, 2025. 304 pages. Hardcover; \$130.00. ISBN: 9781666953602.

Stephen Goundrey-Smith is an associate tutor in Christian ethics and doctrine at Cuddesdon Gloucester & Hereford, England. His PhD research was in the Department of Theology and Religion at the University of Exeter, on transhumanism and medical/therapeutic ethics. That led to his book *Transhumanism, Ethics and the Therapeutic Revolution: Agents of Change* (Routledge, 2023). The book under review here continues the same theoretical methodology. Its most telling contribution is calling for dialogue about what helps people flourish, new medical technologies, and public policy.

Chapter 1 states three relevant topics in the Christian ethical tradition: the goodness of creation, humanity in the image of God, and human vocation in the material world. Chapter 2 argues that the currently dominant, utilitarian, and individual-driven method of health technology assessment should be augmented to consider “social justice and autonomy,” “embodiment and identity,” “status of the person and human dignity,” and “immortality and destiny.” Chapter 3 recognizes the importance of public institutions for how biomedical innovations are implemented. Chapter 4 advocates that public deliberation will be more successful if it is focused on values rather than on ethics. Chapter 5 calls for biomedical technology, ethics, and public policy to work together. The last chapter, chapter 6, lauds as a model Augustine’s early fifth-century book, *The City of God*. There we see appeals to “the common good.” Goundrey-Smith believes that, with concerted effort, pursuing the common good can develop an ethical consensus amidst pluralist societies then and now. While this book is centered on hope for such a consensus today, how that should be practiced is not specifically articulated.

Natural law also plays a substantial role in the author’s discussion, but not as the often-cited appeal to consider our first created form as a given and set ideal. Since Goundrey-Smith is considering technology that aims to alter our nature, which would then change what fulfills it, he appeals to natural law as pursuing God’s future purpose for humanity. The start of humanity was but a beginning, not a pinnacle to return to. “Humanity, as created co-creator, mediates God’s creative power in the material world” (p. 258).

While highlighting its titled topic is the book’s most important contribution, its greatest weakness is that it tries to encompass an already broad purpose, extending the inquiry even wider to make a plethora of dis-

tantly related observations. For example, to address the already daunting task of defining “the common good,” the text begins by discussing the modern nation-state as it was first formed in the sixteenth century. To help readers follow through such disparate musings, the book often offers directions such as those found in just one paragraph on page 71:

I will discuss this issue in greater detail in a later section of this chapter. However, in order to facilitate discussion on the ethical impact of biomedical technologies in subsequent chapters ... we need to acknowledge two important issues ... However, before addressing these issues, I am going to examine in more detail the concerns that different identity groups in human society might have ... the views, hopes, and fears of all diverse groups must be considered.

It takes much flipping back and forth throughout the book to assemble the lines of reasoning.

Pricing the book at \$130, its intended purchasers will probably be libraries that are prodded by constituents to obtain a copy. Most potential readers would find its dense bricolage impenetrable. Those who request the book might be graduate students or faculty specifically studying public policy or ethics, who are seeking bibliography, though most of the works are referenced only in passing. Augustine, Aquinas, Brian Brock, Philip Hefner, Neil Messer, Stephen Pope, and Brent Waters receive the most note. There might also be interest from those professionally addressing public policy, to search for a proposed theoretical methodology for Christian ethics and policy formation.

Where Goundrey-Smith is most salient in this book is in advocating that Christians as citizens, and as participants in a long and thoughtful tradition, should contribute to public policy. This reviewer says a hearty “yes” to that summons, especially for such a formative set of challenges as we find in the title’s reference to “biomedical innovation.” How biomedical innovation should be developed and implemented is not specifically addressed in this book but, whether we are ready or not, biomedical innovation is requiring a set of present decisions, with others quickly coming to the fore. Such does warrant our best attention.

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BIOENHANCEMENT TECHNOLOGIES AND THE VULNERABLE BODY: A Theological Engagement by Devan Stahl, ed. Baylor University Press, 2023. 252 pages. Paperback; \$54.99. ISBN: 9781481318273.

New biomedical technologies purportedly do things such as prolong life, heal infirmities, and increase the

overall quality of life. Often, these technologies appear limited due to their use by wealthy and privileged clients. In this edited volume, Devan Stahl, associate professor of bioethics and religion at Baylor University, along with a host of other scholars, present minority perspectives on bioenhancement technologies to “develop axioms for an ‘ontology of the vulnerable,’” (p. 11). Seeing in Jesus an invitation both to care for the vulnerable and to honor the image of God in each person, the contributors share their unique perspectives to consider “how Christians should understand enhancement technologies” (p. 15).

The writing occurred through a 2019 gathering of twelve scholars in Christian ethics, biotechnology, and medicine to address growing concerns around bioenhancement technologies and their impact on minority populations. The group established twenty-five working propositions addressing key problems, or conceptualizing human creatureliness, in response to bioenhancement technologies. They organized these propositions around five primary categories: problems/concerns, Christian responses to transhumanism and bioenhancement technologies, ontology/nature and grace/eschatology, ontology and techne, and, finally, embodying Christ and ecclesiology (pp. 9–10). The authors then used the propositions to organize writings into two sections that address the concerns of using bioenhancement technologies with people whose bodies seem outside the “norm” (p. 11).

Section one includes various philosophical arguments for the goodness of the vulnerable body within a Christian theological worldview. Jonathan Tran and Jeffrey P. Bishop utilize the term “ontology,” that is, any philosophy of being or existence, as shorthand for specific perspectives. The authors claim ontologies come from a specific time and place and that humans create ontologies to make sense of the world around them. A Christian ontology, then, might be that suffering is good because it conforms us to the person of Christ. A Western secular ontology, on the other hand, might assert that suffering serves as a hindrance to attaining happiness, and people should use medicine and technology to overcome and/or alleviate suffering. Persons living in a Western context often use technology and science to enhance the well-being of human bodies, assuming that such an approach is a good thing. People with privilege primarily adopt this ontology; the authors believe that this action can quickly lead to “social segregation” (p. 39). In contrast, Tran and Bishop assert that a Christian perspective recognizes the value of suffering, as well as the value of diversity and difference. This Christian view does not completely exclude the use of medicine and technology, but neither does it completely embrace it. A Christian ontology is firmly rooted in the

hope of bodily resurrection, rather than the hope provided by human technologies.

The authors of chapters five through nine demonstrate how Christ is present in and with the disabled. Christ is there to “suffer with” the disabled (p. 109), not necessarily to heal them and raise their bodies to a physical standard created by humans. Brian Brock gives real-world examples of the fundings of bioenhancement technologies that are later promoted by extremely wealthy men who use disabled people to cultivate the image of people healed and given new life by these technologies. Terri Laws discusses how medical institutions continue to treat Black female bodies differently from Anglo-European bodies. Kimbell Kornu asserts that the telos of the Christian life remains to attain deification through cruciformity. Letting Christ transfigure our bodies into something divine is the goal for all Christians, not fitting our bodies to the expectations of society. For Christian communities, the response to the presence of the disabled should create “an equitable ‘being with’ in a fulsome community of [the] vulnerable sharing life” (p. 145).

The authors clearly establish axioms for an ontology of the vulnerable in this volume. One axiom asserts that the body is the site of God’s presence. Commentary on the prelapsarian state of humanity in Genesis 2 proves enlightening on this issue. Through this commentary, linked with eschatological interpretations, disability comes to be framed no longer as a result of sin or a bodily defect to be left behind after the resurrection, but as a marker of God’s image and creative work in the human body.

The authors in this volume could elaborate on how sin prevents the recognition of God’s presence in vulnerable bodies. One author suggests that sin is primarily corporate in nature, existing as a series of structures which denigrate others. Therefore, one way to counteract sin may occur through political action on behalf of the disabled. Perhaps calling on churches to participate in a form of corporate repentance for the ways the church has historically treated the disabled would be helpful.

Another well-documented axiom calls for caring for the vulnerable. The authors insightfully identify racism and eugenics as having historical ties. Perhaps this book can generate unifying discussions on two issues which tend to fall on different sides of the political spectrum: racial justice and abortion. For example, eugenics takes on a new form by way of prenatal screening technologies, through which parents can choose to eliminate unborn children with Down syndrome. Churches can work against eugenics and thus foster discussions and actions that get at the underlying degradation of racism

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wherein some people believe that humans with certain traits or features are less worthy than others.

Those with an interest in technology and theology will benefit from reading this volume as the authors probe questions such as “what does it mean to enhance the body?” and “what does transcendence mean?” Pastors will also find helpful ways of thinking about how to fully incorporate the disabled into their church communities and ministries.

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THE CRITIQUE OF BIOETHICAL PRINCIPALISM IN CONTRAST TO A BLACK AFRICAN APPROACH TO BIOETHICS by Jude Thaddaeus Buyondo. Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2024. 270 pages. Paperback; \$37.00. ISBN: 9798385217441.

What can African theologians and philosophers teach the world about bioethics? Jude Thaddaeus Buyondo’s recent book offers an intriguing opportunity for the advancement of the global perspective and influence of the field of bioethics by putting African bioethical approaches and experiences into conversation with Western bioethical principlism. While this lengthy title with no subtitle points readily to a doctoral dissertation, the maturity of thought and depth of scholarship of this text somewhat exceeds what would be expected from a first post-doctoral published work. The text reviewed here appears to be the first of two books derived from Buyondo’s doctoral dissertation. The first book, *The Critique*, sets the stage for critical conversations between African and Western bioethicists, and the second book, *Holistic Bioethics*, published the same year but offered as a sequel or companion volume, describes in more detail the specific content and contributions of African bioethics.

Principlism is a framework for making ethical decisions in healthcare. It is based on four principles—respect for autonomy, nonmaleficence, beneficence, and justice—as delineated by Tom Beauchamp and James Childress in their classic text, *Principles of Biomedical Ethics*, originally published in 1979. Buyondo’s overall project entails a comprehensive critical analysis of African responses to Western bioethics, with specific and frequent attention to the thought of Cameroonian bioethicist G. B. Tangwa, author of *Elements of African Bioethics in a Western Frame*. The first chapter is an introductory overview of the problem under investigation, namely, that universalized Western bioethical principles do not find validation in the context of African local realities. From the outset, Buyondo establishes Tangwa as his key conversation partner. Throughout the book, Buyondo’s analysis of bioethical principlism is largely framed, guided,

and energized by his response to Tangwa’s critique of Western bioethics and view of African moral thought.

The remaining five chapters of *The Critique* are divided into two parts: Part I: “Critique of Bioethical Principlism in an African Context,” and Part II: “African Moral Thought: An African Interpretation of Bioethics.” Chapter 2 offers a brief general critique of bioethical principlism, with attention to the influence of four underlying moral theories: rights, virtue, Kantianism, and utilitarianism (consequentialism). In chapter 3, again following Tangwa, Buyondo presents case studies and examples of the shortcomings of bioethical principlism in Sub-Saharan Africa. His descriptions of HIV/AIDS and Ebola vaccine research, male circumcision, and other biomedical interventions provide convincing illustrations of the ineptitude of consequentialist utilitarianism in Black African contexts.

In the first instance, HIV vaccine research, based on African traditional practices of medicine using local herbs, progressed in clinical trials but failed to find global reception because of western resistance to collaboration. In the second case, male circumcision was generally practiced in Africa prior to the arrival of European missionaries, who denounced these practices as barbaric and incompatible with Christianity. But the World Health Organization (WHO) and Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS) sponsored a campaign to circumcise millions of poor African men, with mixed results. Local communities and leaders were not given a central decision-making role in planning these campaigns. Studies from the global South did not confirm the prophylactic effectiveness of circumcision in reducing HIV infection. Tangwa condemns circumcision as the “New Tuskegee,” with reference to 20th-century experimentation upon poor Black men in Alabama to study the effects of untreated sexually transmitted diseases.

Part II is much longer than Part I, mainly because Buyondo devotes much more attention to African critiques of principlism than to any discussion of principlism on its own terms. Chapter 4, “An African Interpretation of Bioethics,” is a substantive summary of the moral thought and bioethical practices of the Bantu of Sub-Saharan Africa, which further illustrates the contrast and conflict between the Global North and Global South in philosophical terms. In essence, western approaches to bioethics are highly individualistic and anthropomorphic. By contrast, African bioethical perspectives emphasize relationality in the three-dimensional community of the living, the dead (including the “living-dead” victimized ancestors of history) and those not yet born.