

Bioethics & Imagination

By ERIC M. MESLIN, PH.D.



Like many people whose professional lives are occupied with the life sciences, I have access to an almost inexhaustible supply of material to which I can apply my imagination every single day. To some extent it's my job to imagine what the impact of science and technology will be on people. And it doesn't take especially clear insight or amplitude of mind to understand how the life sciences provide the fuel to power the imagination—the issues are all around us.

Hear **Eric Meslin** in a Spirit & Place event November 9.

More than 40 years after Christian Barnard performed the first heart transplant, surgeons are now developing artificial organs that the body won't reject.

Imagine the possibility that with the use of these new-age organs (including those of animals) we might eliminate waiting lists for organs.

More than 50 years after Watson and Crick first described the structure of DNA, genetics researchers can now identify “misspellings” in the individual letters of the genetic alphabet of the human genome that are markers of possible future disease. Imagine a routine visit to the doctor during which a simple test (involving spitting into a cup rather than a blood test with a needle stick) provides enough information to decide which drug to prescribe for high blood pressure with the assurance that it is guaranteed to work and without side effects.

On the day I was completing this essay, the Court of Arbitration for Sport ruled that Oscar Pistorius, a double-amputee South African sprinter was eligible to compete with his carbon-fibre prostheses at the 2008 Beijing Olympics against able-bodied sprinters. The case launched a debate about whether this is an enhancement that constitutes an unfair advantage over other runners. Imagine how attitudes about competition, discrimination, stigma, and human rights might be turned on their heads if Mr. Pistorius were to meet the qualifying time standard for the Olympics. What if he medaled?

These and countless other examples stimulate the science-fiction imagination—that part of us that wonders about the marvels of science and what could

possibly happen next. In fact, it's precisely because science could imagine the possibilities of organ transplantation, or the mapping and sequencing of the human genome, or bio-engineered space-age materials that the technology now exists.

Indeed, I first became interested in ethical issues in medicine and health 30 years ago when Marty Greenberg, a very entertaining high school biology teacher in Toronto, asked his students to study a topic in the biological sciences for a year. I selected in vitro fertilization after reading a story in *Life* magazine about the future prospects of this experimental reproductive science. Imagine my surprise to learn a year later of Louise Brown's birth, the world's first test-tube baby. And so began my own personal travels of imagination about the power and possibility of science and its impact on society—a journey that has taken me from academic to government workplaces; from hospitals to boardrooms. At each stop I've learned more about the possibility of a bioethics imagination—the part of us that wonders about the ethical implications of science and technology. Science might generate awe and wonder, but it goes nowhere without the public's consent.

I know that my personal ethical and political values were first honed at my parents' dinner table, but my bioethics imagination was cultivated by countless teachers, students, mentors, and colleagues from all political and theological persuasions, each of whom played a singular role. Still, one of my favorite images is from John Rawls' *A Theory of Justice*, in which he proposes a thought experiment called the original position: If people were asked to meet and decide how they would want to live in society, and were put behind what he called “a veil of ignorance” in which they didn't know anything about themselves or each other—whether they were young or old, wealthy or poor, male or female, sick or healthy, religious or secular—what principles would they adopt? Would they be utilitarian principles of maximizing overall well-being? Principles of virtue and good character? The Kantian categorical imperative? Libertarian or capitalist principles?

Nope. Rawls believed these original social contractors would adopt certain principles of justice as fairness with specific guarantees to protect the least well-off first. This idea continues to resonate with me precisely because it reflects Wordsworth's description of imagination as Reason “in her most exalted mood.”

Imagine that.

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