

Summary of Roundtable Conversation

Participants in the Roundtable were effusive in their gratitude for Marc Muskavitch's paper. They appreciated his commentary about what the study of genetics portends for thinking about human personhood, and his humility in recognizing the limits of a purely scientific approach. Many agreed that a multidisciplinary approach was needed in light of the questions he raised.

Initially the Roundtable conversation focused on the immediate relationship between genetic determinism and a person's self-understanding. Raising the question of grace as Muskavitch did in his paper leads to the obvious question: is the issue simply what a person *perceives* to be reality, regardless of the genetic, epigenetic, or other factors at play? One participant observed, for example, that a Catholic university can affect the way a person views the world by pointing to grace, and go on to raise the theological question of what grace actually is. Such an approach might mean, for example, that the university community could point to what scientists understand contributes to health: exercise, prayer or meditation, good sleep, avoiding excess alcohol, and so on—inviting students to consider deeper questions as a consequence. The participant used the example of spring break to make his point: it is possible to point to studies suggesting that service experiences, rather than weeks spent at typical beach venues, contribute to overall health in both the short and long term. A university community might point to the health benefit of such experiences, but also use them to leverage larger questions, say, about social justice or the demands of the moral life.

Yet another participant observed that instrumentalizing grace in this way (that is, saying “do good things because they will make you healthy”) short-changes the kind of transformation we hope to encourage in students. Ultimately, the participant observed, what we hope for is a perspective that reflects what Saint Ignatius of Loyola articulated in his *Spiritual Exercises*: the sense that neither health nor sickness are ends in themselves. Rather, we invite students to discern what great goods they can undertake, in sickness or in health, in service to the greater glory of God.

In a related vein, another participant brought up the field of positive psychology and its engagement of the various factors at play in human well-being, including perception. In contrast, he observed, is the language of Saint Paul in Galatians 5, on the fruits of the spirit. A wide horizon of understanding the dynamics of grace allows the Christian to focus less on the immediate goods (bodily health, a good outlook on life, etc.) and more

on the fruits of living in a manner reflective of a commitment to faith.

Muskavitch observed that scientists must have a humility in their approach to the world, following Karl Popper's premise that good science is about disproving earlier theories, and is always in some sense imperfect. Another participant observed that this point has implications for the teaching of the sciences at a Catholic institution, for it suggests the possibility—and perhaps even the need—to raise questions beyond the expertise of the scientist. Later, another participant expressed the hope that this kind of openness to larger questions would characterize the teaching at Catholic institutions, perhaps even to the point of finding ways for philosophers or theologians to be part of the conversations among scientists or students of science.

From these related points—namely, the theological perspective on fruits of the spirit and the limited understanding that positive psychology or genetics or epigenetics provides—there emerged another thread in the conversation. One participant cited Aldous Huxley's famous novel *Brave New World*, which described a dystopian society in which genetic differences were the basis of an entire social order. He went on to point to the human tendency to use (perceived) genetic differences as ways to write social policies, even in contemporary debates around issues such as selective abortion or euthanasia. What we say about such issues reflects basic assumptions about what we understand about being human, and about our (perceived) valuation of a human life. Examples of saints like Mother Teresa or Damien of Molokai point to a greater good: a valuation of being human that is not related directly to health or social utility.

Another participant pointed to Pope Francis' recent apostolic exhortation, *The Joy of the Gospel*, to amplify this point. He noted Francis's use of the Book of Lamentations in the document (paragraph 6):

My soul is bereft of peace; I have forgotten what happiness is.... But this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope: the steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning. Great is your faithfulness.... It is good that one should wait quietly for the salvation of the Lord. (*Lam* 3:17, 21-23, 26).

This kind of hope, he suggested, is very different from an optimism that might emerge from an embrace of healthy living. It is the willingness to suspend one's judgment of the meaning of one's life in the hope that God is good. Another participant, echoing this sentiment, stated forcefully: this is hope in the face of complete collapse; hope in the absence of reason for hope. And what makes it so powerful, yet another participant suggested, is the willingness to "lean into the difficult moments in life"—to go where there is suffering precisely because that is what Jesus calls us to do.

The conversation circled back to the question of what all this means for teaching and doing science at a Catholic college or university. There was agreement that the import of science does not stop at the boundary of a discipline, be it genetics or neuropsychology or others. Many agreed that there was value in finding ways to invite people with different disciplinary perspectives to be part of conversations about the implications

of cutting-edge scientific research. Some remarked that they had never been part of such conversations, either instigating them or being invited to them. One participant recalled the theme of the first Roundtable, namely hospitality,¹ and how the practice of that virtue could have real implications for the kinds of conversations that unfold in a learning community. Some participants cited examples of these types of conversations at their institutions: in two cases they were informal lunchtime programs of various faculty. Another observed, however, that there can be deep distrust about such attempts at conversation, perhaps because of the fact that designing formal courses this way involves departmental politics, budget lines, and other administrative challenges. In the end, however, participants agreed that the question of what it means to be a human person—and all the implications of that question—are too important, too far-reaching, to be addressed within the limits of any single discipline. Perhaps it is precisely the interest of Catholic colleges and universities to address the integrity of inquiry that is fertile ground for exploration of this important question.

1 See *Integritas* volume 1 (Spring 2013).