The Meaning of Being Human: A Discussion on Religion and Medicine
by Sarah James, Rice University ‘12

What does it mean to be human? Once an esoteric issue left to the purview of philosophers and religious leaders, beliefs about the foundations of humanness are central to the ongoing debate about reproductive genetic technologies - scientific advances enabling people to choose their children's genetic traits. On March 14, the Religion and Public Life Program (RPLP) hosted a discussion about these issues at "The Meaning of Being Human: A Discussion on Religion and Medicine" at Rice University. The event featured a discussion between Elaine Howard Ecklund and John Evans. In his research on the sociology of bioethics, Evans addresses the ways in which ordinary religious people understand the moral implications of reproductive genetic technologies, which range from screening for genetic disorders to selecting a child's hair color.

While the prospect of choosing children's genetic makeup incites strong feelings among Americans, there is hope for a productive dialogue before these technologies become widely available. Evans believes that "the most developed ways of talking about [ethical issues] come from religion," and ethical frameworks in modern religious traditions are the product of hundreds of years of moral understanding. But despite this rich religious history, physicians and scientists are often the primary voices in current discussions about the future of reproductive genetic technologies.

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Upcoming Events

Our programming theme for next semester will be "Religion in Higher Education." We will have various events on the Rice University campus and in the greater Houston community that will discuss topics related to this theme from November 3-5, 2011.

Our guests will include George Marsden of Notre Dame, Julie Reuben of Harvard, and Amy Binder of University of California, San Diego.

George Marsden is the Francis A. McAnaney Professor of History at the University of Notre Dame. His primary academic interests have been in the history of the interaction of Christianity and American culture. His major areas of study have concerned American evangelicalism and the role of Christianity in American higher education. He teaches American Religious and Intellectual History along with other related subject matters.

Julie Reuben is a Professor of Education at Harvard. She is interested in the role of education in American society and culture. Her teaching and research address broad questions about the purposes of education, the relation between educational institutions and political and social concerns, and the forces that shape educational change.

Amy Binder is an Associate Professor of Sociology at the University of California, San Diego. Her work consistently centers on the meaning-making processes enacted in her research settings. Professor Binder's work concentrates on the effects that cultural beliefs have on human action, and how these beliefs contribute to various forms of power in society.
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Evans sees that though "physicians are given a bigger soapbox in the public sphere [...] they are not necessarily good judges of what the values of American society are." Evans' work in demystifying what Americans think about medical ethics fills this gap as a type of "empirical research [which] can inform philosophy" and dispel incorrect assumptions about the public's views on these complex issues. Importantly, Evans finds that both those in support of and opposition to various types of reproductive genetic technologies use a similar "moral vocabulary" to discuss these issues. This pattern is distinct from that of the abortion debate, in which "people lack a moral language to even communicate" about their opposing viewpoints; by starting a dialogue during the early stages of the technology, reproductive genetics may be able to avoid reaching the same impasse. Evans' work in demystifying what Americans think about medical ethics fills this gap as a type of "empirical research [which] can inform philosophy" and dispel incorrect assumptions about the public's views on these complex issues. Importantly, Evans finds that both those in support of and opposition to various types of reproductive genetic technologies use a similar "moral vocabulary" to discuss these issues. This pattern is distinct from that of the abortion debate, in which "people lack a moral language to even communicate" about their opposing viewpoints; by starting a dialogue during the early stages of the technology, reproductive genetics may be able to avoid reaching the same impasse.

Ecklund and Evans' discussion resonated with the attendees of the event, which included scholars and undergraduates from Rice and leaders in the Houston medical and religious communities. In a testament to the high caliber of the discussion, Jeff Kripal, the Chair of Rice University's Department of Religious Studies, remarked that, “The event was one of the best examples of public scholarship that I have seen.” Pierre Elias, a senior undergraduate sociology major who will attend medical school in the fall, feels it is vitally important to understand medicine “beyond diagnosing and treating disease” and found Evans' talk to be an ideal venue to engage in broader intellectual conversations about the work of medical doctors. Evans emphasizes that such discussions must occur now, before issues of reproductive genetic technologies become divisive. “We as a society should definitively take a position [on these issues], because things that affect the collective should be decided by the collective. [...] If you don’t like what’s about to happen with the new genetic future, fifty years from now is too late.”