

Conversations That Matter

The Crossroads of Science and Human Dignity

A Discussion on Genetic Determinism

Discussion Questions

1. How do you understand the relationship between our genes and our characteristics?
2. Have you or anyone you known used a service for genetic sequence, such as *23andMe* or *Ancestry.com*? What did you learn? Did that change anything about your self-understanding?
3. What problems can arise from genetic determinism, especially when we think of Christian understandings of grace and free will?
4. Consumer genetic testing promises that it will reveal things we did not previously know about ourselves based on an analysis of our genes. Even if this were true, what is the difference between the *information* provided by genetic testing and the *knowledge* that leads to genuine understanding? In other words, what **can't** genetic testing tell us about ourselves?
5. Stories of cold cases solved by law enforcement using DNA dragnets and combing through online ancestry and DNA sites have mesmerized the public. Do you think the benefits of this power outweigh the risks (including the risk of invading innocent people's privacy, the gathering by the state of sensitive genetic information, and the likelihood that such information, at scale, might shift the way the criminal justice system approaches the standard of innocent until proven guilty)?
6. If a culture embraces the idea that much of who we are and how we behave is predetermined by our genes, what implications might this have for the healthy functioning of a heterogeneous democracy? How might it impact our understanding of equality? And what might it mean for the spiritual health of a nation that is already growing more secular?
7. Why must Christians believe that humans are free and not 'trapped in their genes'?
8. In his talk, Baglow said that 'language produces reason in its users'. Is this permissible for a Catholic to believe, as long as they do not add the word 'only' to this explanation?
9. God eternally uttered a word, and the word was His Son. How might this eternal truth cause us to consider how we use language?

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Resources

1. Website: [National Human Genome Research Institute](#)
2. Book: [Genes, Determinism, and God](#), by Denis Alexander (Cambridge University Press, 2017)
3. Book: [The Mismeasure of Man](#), by Stephen Jay Gould (Norton, 1996)
4. Article: “[DNA Dragnets: The Uses and Abuses of Genetic Information](#),” by the Editors of *New Atlantis*, *The New Atlantis*
5. Article: “[Me, My Genome, and 23andMe](#),” by Austin L. Hughes, *The New Atlantis*
6. Book: [The Brothers Karamazov](#), by Fyodor Dostoyevsky and translated by Constance Garnett (Penguin Classics, 1986)
7. Book Chapter: “Animals and Us” in [The Good Life: Ethics and the Pursuit of Happiness](#) by Herbert McCabe (Bloomsbury, 2005)
8. Book: [Lost in the Cosmos: The Last Self-Help Book](#), by Walker Percy (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1983)