

"The Last Shall Be First: Human Potential in Genetic and Theological Perspectives."

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Introduction

I come to this task with a slightly unusual background – a theologian who has done genetic research. I spent my undergraduate years as an organic chemist – immersed in the study of chemistry and lab research for the better part of four years. I loved it. I still love it. But toward the end of my college days, God stole my heart and called me to become a theologian, and so I did, taking Kierkegaard's leap with my eyes tightly closed and fingers crossed, hoping it would all work out. After graduate study in theology and ethics and a couple of years researching medical ethics, I was given an opportunity to spend a year in a genetics lab at the University of Iowa. It began as a three month NIH/ELSI fellowship at a lab involved in the human genome project. The fellowship was designed to teach those writing about the ethics of genetics something about genetics but because of my lab background, the lab director asked me to stay on for the rest of the year and take charge of a specific project, and so I did. It was a great year. I again loved the science and the lab work, and it was fascinating to enter the world of research at that level, to live for a year somewhat as an anthropologist among the natives (about which I could say more). But, vocation called, and I returned to being a theologian.

So I come to questions like those posed in this symposium as one who has lived in both worlds, and in some ways still does. I have an ongoing passion for science, and particularly genetics, but I am a theologian and today I will bring a theologian's eye to one of the main foci of this symposium, the question of human potential. My analysis will proceed in three parts. I will begin by considering the word 'potential' itself, for it is in fact a very powerful word. I will then turn to our broader culture to survey some of the ways the notion of 'genetic potential' is used. In conversations like these, I think it is more important to pay close attention to cultural rhetoric than to the work of genetic scientists, because most of us in this audience (I imagine) are not geneticists. But genetics, as you know, has enormous cultural currency. Public rhetoric and, as we'll see, commercial products is where people like us most often encounter genetics. This public incarnation of genetics has enormous formative power on our minds and hearts and perhaps even souls. It is here where much of the dialogue between genetics and religion actually needs to occur. Finally, I will turn to scripture to see how the notion of 'human potential' plays in this key source of Christian insight and identity. As Ron Cole-Turner said earlier: "Genetics challenges us to rethink basic religious assumptions." I am going to suggest that theology equally challenges us to rethink basic assumptions that shape how we think about and appropriate genetics.

1. Parsing "Potential"

[click] I want to begin by considering, for a moment, the word 'potential' itself. Assisted by the *Oxford English Dictionary*, we find that 'potential' has two major meanings.

[click] It's adjective and noun forms are almost synonymous, suggesting: something "possible as opposed to actual; having or showing the capacity for growth, achievement, future development; a capacity or possibility which is latent."

[click] The root of the word potential, however, is the Latin *potentia*, the same root behind words like "potent" or "potentate." **[click]** Thus, while more rare in contemporary parlance but quite important for historical purposes, the word potential can also mean "possessing potency or power; potent, powerful, mighty, strong; commanding." **[click]** These meanings come together in the more recent scientific use of the word in the phrase known by all students of physics, "potential energy": that "property or attribute that a body possesses by virtue of its position or state, but which is only manifested or released under changed conditions," the energy or power latent in a body that, under the right conditions, will be released.

Thus, in speaking of potential, or more specifically, human potential we are speaking of: possibility, an innate, internal yet latent capacity or ability, for... growth, progress, development, an achievement in the future, an achievement which is generally associated with power, might, strength. Allow me to highlight six features of these meanings. **[click]**

First, potential is generally a very *positive* term. Growth, progress, development – these are things to pursue. They are good. We do not customarily speak of a potential for something negative – for failure or evil. There we generally speak of possibility or probability, of a misuse of potential, a thwarting of potential, barriers or limits to realizing one's fullest potential.

Growth, progress, development – these suggest that potential is a *teleological* term – it is goal-directed. It moves its bearer *toward* something, toward a particular end which is usually deemed to be a good or worthy end or goal. As such, it is a highly normative term. The word potential carries with it the moral pressure to bring out these latent capacities, to realize the goals to the fullest extent possible, to maximize the goods at issue. Those who have achieved the highest potential—intellectually, financially, physically, athletically, morally, socially—these people are held up as exemplars, as paragons of excellence. Even if not stated explicitly, we as a society deem those who have achieved the highest potential (in most fields) to be the greatest worth.

Behind this teleology lie particular—and variable—*philosophical anthropologies*, particular visions of who the human person is supposed to be. Thus, for example, within our post-Enlightenment culture with our Kantian anthropology centered on human rationality and autonomy, we seek relentlessly—through our parenting, our educational systems, our biological interventions—to unleash or maximize our childrens’ potential for intelligence. The individual self-sufficiency of Kant’s anthropology lends itself to value those practices and interventions—social or otherwise—that maximize personal independence.

These anthropologies are set within particular—and variable—*sociologies*, particular understandings of what society should ideally look like, how it ideally functions. Within a late capitalist culture, we seek to maximize our childrens’ potential to make profit; thus, the Girl Scouts are now all about creating budding little entrepreneurs. Because our social context has changed since I was a Girl Scout, it no

longer seems as important to maximize our daughters' abilities to know how to knit, embroider, cook, or even how to survive in the wild.

Fifth, even though these teleologies are sociologically-shaped, the term potential tends to be *individually*-oriented term: billiard balls have potential energy, rulers have power, warriors or athletes have might or strength, and in general individuals are those who have internal capacities for growth, development, achievement. The term 'potential' is certainly used analogously to speak of systems, nations (growth in GDP), but here potential lies within individuated entities.

Finally, the term potential is *future*-oriented. It is conditional, expressing possibility, possibilities that will only be maximized under certain conditions. This again renders the term potential highly normative, of ethical import. For ethics is the art of the ought, the art of the that-which-is-not-yet-but-could-be-and-should-be, and the art – in part – of discerning the relationship between conditions and those oughts.

The phrase "human potential," then, frames the question from the beginning in a particular way and in a certain sense prejudices the discussion. For who is going to say no?: "No, we ought not maximize human potential." That seems grammatically incoherent or socio-politically corrupt. Though perhaps the content of the anthropology and sociology presumed in the phrase may initially remain unspecified, the phrase itself carries with it normative momentum. Once the notion of human potential is attached to an intervention or endpoint, it generally presumes consensus is on its side, and the burden of argument is on those who would oppose it. The burden, in other words, is on those who would rather have their children discover their abilities and identities

through practices, drills, and hardwork than through a genetic test that identifies their potential for speed, intelligence, or perfect pitch.

2. Genetics and Human Potential

These characteristics of the phrase ‘potential’ shape both genetic research as well as the public rhetoric that surrounds it. For today’s purposes, I will leave serious research aside and highlight examples of how genetics is related to human potential in our wider culture.

[click] We begin with...a Sony Playstation game named...“Genetic Potential”!

[you can’t make this stuff up]

<http://starwarsgalaxies.station.sony.com/players/content.vm?id=66911&resource=features>

Now, even though I have an 8 year-old son, I know very little about Sony Playstation games. Based on this website, I think what is at issue is not human genetic potential but rather some variant of arachnid genetic potential. There is, of course, the anti-hero Dr. Vigh, “... the chief scientist of the GeneTech Syndicate, a freelance research and development team that specialized in radical, and often dangerous, biological projects.” Although it involves genes and science, it’s not entirely clear to me what this game has to do with ‘genetic potential’ but maybe one of you gamers out there could download it and let me know.

I begin with this one mostly because I found it amusing but also because – of course – it’s schooling the children who use it in a particular narrative about genetics

and biological potential. Moving to the human realm, **[click]** we find another website entitled “Genetic Potential.”

<http://www.geneticpotential.com/>

Here we find no radical and dangerous doctors of genetics. Here instead we find services “for all your coaching, fitness, and coach education needs.” For a fee, I imagine, the folks at Genetic Potential will tailor an individual training programme or coaching session to fit with you or your child’s innate, particular genomic configuration. They do not specify that they will test for specific sports-ability related alleles (more on that below), but there is at least a resonance or implication that one’s personal genome is involved in the process, in a way more specific or at least tailored than is at issue in the Cedarburg Wisconsin Recreational Soccer League where my children labor under the old regime of discovering their fitness and athletic potential the hard way.

Beyond mere genetics, we find **[click]** Metagenics:

www.metagenics.com

Philosophers take note! Who needs metaphysics when you have metagenics! The staff at Metagenics wish to help individuals realize their full genetic potential...through nutrition. It’s not actually clear to me what these services here have to do with genetics, at least directly. Apart from references to ‘personalized,’ ‘diseases’ and ‘science,’ I find no actual references to genetic testing or genomics. Rather, this paragraph gives a general sense of their direction (click on “About Us”):

“Back in 1983, we had a big idea: the right nutrition could help people realize their best health possible by positively influencing what makes them unique—

their genes. We called it realizing "genetic potential" for good health. Today, it's known as the science of nutrigenomics—the study of food as one of the most important environmental modifiers of gene expression in determining health and disease patterns. Through our substantial and ongoing commitment to nutrigenomic research, we've been able to identify natural compounds with powerful therapeutic applications, to be used in our science-based TLC programs, medical foods, and nutraceuticals.”

Now, nutrigenomics might not be a terribly bad idea, but it's the shape of this story that I found illustrative – here we find all the characteristics of the narrative of potential tidily presented in a package: it's positive, it goal-oriented, there's a vision of the human person as genetically unique and designed to be as healthy as possible; here society is kind of the bad guy – giving us all these genetically improper foods and bad habits; but, with the right intervention, we have power over the future.

Finally, let us turn to one last example, a company with the very basic name of “Genetic Technologies.” **[click]**

<http://www.gtg.com.au/HumanDNATesting/index.asp>

Genetic Technologies appears to be a company offering a variety of genetic testing services. One of particular interest for our purposes is their mail-in test for sports performance. In 2003, scientists announced the ability to test for a gene known as ACTN3, which produces a structural protein alpha-actinin 3, found in fast-twitch muscle fibers. As their brochure notes, testing for particular variants of this gene, may help one “optimize one's (natural) genetic potential.” **[click on 'brochure']:**

“So whether you’re an athlete, or young athlete-to-be, the *ACTN3* Sports Performance Test will help direct you toward achieving your maximum natural potential. This test does not discriminate good athletes from bad athletes. *ACTN3* Sports Performance Testing is designed to assist athletes with identifying the type of events, distances or sports in which success is more likely. The association of different genetic variants with power / sprint versus endurance events appears to apply in a wide range of sports, including track and field, swimming, cycling, rowing, judo, etc. Testing may also assist athletes in tailoring their training for optimal performance within their sport of choice.”

Elsewhere in their materials, Genetic Technologies includes the usual caveats about how this test is but “one aspect of a range of elements that contribute to sports performance,” such as the old-fashioned techniques of coaching, nutrition, training, fitness and sports psychology.¹ Nonetheless, there’s an assumption that the information provided by this test is meaningful, in conjunction with all those other factors, and more importantly, is worth paying for. And of course, this doesn’t hold only for athletic abilities. In theory, there are “genetic variations that influence ability to excel in opera singing, ballet dancing, musical composition, musical performance, writing, engineering, and a great many other pursuits” (futurepundit website). As such variants are discovered, we can imagine Genetic Potential adding such tests to their menu of options for purchase.

¹ <http://www.gtg.com.au/HumanDNATesting/index.asp?menuid=070.110>

In all these examples, genes are construed as playing a positive role, as providing a biological substrate for excellence that remains untapped through now vincible ignorance. If only we knew....we could point people in a particular direction, enhance their personal flourishing and contribution to society by determining what, exactly, they are good at, avoiding the old method of trial and error, saving time, money, and experiences of frustration or failure as they try pursuits for which they are not made, pursuits in which they will not be able to excel.

[click] flip side of what we might call “aptitude” genetics is the field of “behavioral” genetics, wherein we find claims to test for behaviors as diverse as aggression, risk taking, impulsivity, nurturing and aspects of sexuality.² Here tests seek markers not as much for performance as flaws, for biological factors which may either inhibit our potential to move toward particular visions of who we ought to be or how we ought to flourish, or that enable a latent capacity for excellence...in a vice. Take anger, for example. Perhaps it is the variation in my gene DARPP-32 which enables me to be particularly excellent at expressing anger. Maybe there’s a genetic basis for what I have always called “getting my Irish up.”

<http://www.impactlab.com/2009/05/04/blame-your-genes-when-you-get-angry/>

Ah, but of course, anger is not particularly considered a good, an end worth pursuing, an excellence worth cultivating. And thus here, potential is something to be moderated, regulated, controlled. Perhaps through the discovery of genetically-tailored pharmaceuticals—the next blockbuster lifestyle drug—or through genetic intervention

² http://www.ornl.gov/sci/techresources/Human_Genome/elsi/behavior.shtml#4

down the line, this aberrant potential or – alternatively -- barrier to growth and achievement might be overcome (would this be therapy or enhancement?).

This last example, I hope, shows how slippery the relationship can be between human potential and genetics. We could also complicate this relationship further by turning to proposed forms of genetic enhancement, techniques designed to compensate for one's lack of inherent potential. For now I won't pursue that further, though we can in discussion. But I hope that these examples suffice to establish the point: part of the narrative surrounding genetics and human (or broader-than-human) potential certainly conjures its dark side—that genetics accounts for pathology as well as potential and that if we intervene, we might lose control over our creations. But in general, the narrative surrounding genetics and human potential broadly is very positive: that within our individual bodies makeup lies the substrate for improving health, advancing well-being, fine-tuning performance, achieving more. Genetic Potential, Metagenics, and Genetic Technologies promise to move individuals toward particular visions of what the human person can or ought to be – healthy, flourishing, enduring, indeed, “better, stronger, faster.” Equally operative are visions of society, interestingly mostly as impediments – bad habits, bad social structures and lifestyles. But fear not, these limitations of cultural context can be overcome through genetic knowledge aided and abetted by those scientists or otherwise skilled experts who can coach the *individual* as they move into the *future* that can be theirs.

3. “Human Potential” in Scripture

Clearly, then, in much of the rhetoric and some of the research in the area of human genetics, the notion of human potential has extraordinary normative power.

Maximizing human potential remains an implicit goal of progressive thought. The notion of human potential derives from and fits within a fundamental narrative about who we are as persons and who we are called to be, a narrative that emerged around the time of William of Ockham and that found one of its most avid proponents in Francis Bacon.

That story has been told by many, and I will not rehearse it again here. The question I want to raise for today's discussion is this: how does the notion of human potential fit with a different narrative, namely, the fundamental Judeo-Christian narrative? How, in other words, might one theologically assess the notion of human potential?

[click] An essential starting point for any theological analysis are the Judeo-Christian scriptures. Certainly thorough theological analysis will incorporate other sources of reflection beyond scripture – the witness of almost 2000 years of Christian tradition and practice, the liturgy, philosophy, and more. Yet scripture is not simply one source among many. Attention to scripture remains a *sine qua non* of good theological method, and even though not sufficient unto itself, its witness carries normative weight.

Given my timeframe today, then, I wish to offer a scriptural perspective on the question of human potential, a perspective that, while not the whole analysis, cannot simply be dismissed. This perspective, I submit, poses a fundamental challenge to what I have presented thus far.

[click] It is especially important to turn to scripture in conversations on genetics in part because of specific claims made about genetics. The human genome (a la the Human Genome Project) has become commonly referred to as the Book of Life written in the hand of God. It was actually the title of the lecture Dr. Francis Collins was supposed to give at this symposium, “The Language of God” that suggested scripture at least needed to be part of this conversation. Because for a theologian—and one would hope for any Christian—the resonances between phrases like “the language of God” and “the Word of God” – another name for both Scripture and Christ – are too close to ignore. God speaks not with a forked tongue, I would imagine, so any new entity claiming to be God’s word, or in this case language, or even the book God wrote, will need to have significant resonances with the Word – the Second Person of the Trinity – and the scriptural Word that witnesses to that Person.

Now, in seeking to develop a scriptural perspective on the question of human potential, one immediately runs into a problem: the word ‘potential’ does not occur in Scripture [that alone should tell us something!]. Nonetheless, I would argue that Scripture speaks directly to our present question. I further argue that we can get at it not by finding those passages in Scripture that speak of potential or use the Hebrew or Greek correlate, but by stepping back and considering the story told by scripture as a whole. The Bible, of course, was not written as one long document; it is a collection of documents written in disparate places and times and by widely diverse persons over at least a thousand years. But as compiled, it does have an arc, an overall story, major themes that carry through from start to finish. A few hermeneutic clues for interpreting

this grand narrative are provided toward the end of the story, and we will get to those momentarily, but I will begin by examining the story's main characters. We will consider three cohorts of people: those people God chooses as leaders, exemplars, agents of salvation history, those people who become the fathers and mothers of the people of Israel and then the leaders of the early church; those who achieve success according to worldly standards; and those who achieve success according to worldly standards who are then chosen by God for some purpose. What can we say about a scriptural perspective on human potential in light of these characters?

[click] Group One: those people God chooses as leaders, exemplars, agents of salvation history, who become the fathers and mothers of the people of Israel and then the leaders of the early church. These men, as a whole, are those with the least potential to do anything that God calls them to do (the women, in general, are actually a slightly different matter, and we can talk about that). They are unlikely candidates, and because of their unlikeliness, they're also largely unwilling. Abram was a wandering Aramean who rightly assessed that it was hardly within his power to become the father of nations, one whose descendents would number as the stars. Sarah's potential to give birth was long past, and she therefore laughed (or rather scoffed) at the angel's suggestion that she might. Jacob – he who becomes Israel, becomes the father of the people of Israel --was a liar and a cheat and certainly not the kind of man I'd want my daughter to marry – or at least I'd make him serve seven years hard labor before I'd let him. Moses...he resisted God at every turn; he had no interest in liberating the Israelites, and he points out to God that, perhaps because of a biological speech

impediment, he is not the man to speak to Pharaoh. David – not your obvious candidate for king (youngest son, shepherd boy); one might argue that, perhaps, God saw his potential, youthful though he was. And he certainly proves to be a person who exceeds expectations, but he is not man without his moral flaws.

When we turn to the New Testament, we find the same pattern. Anyone familiar with the gospels knows how completely inept the disciples were – they certainly weren't chosen because they demonstrated that they were qualified or had any particular potential; they never seem to “get it,” even though they actually hung out with the Incarnate Son of God; and then even at the end, even after you think their latent, innate potential for spirituality had been growing for three years, they betray, deny, and desert Jesus at the last minute.

In other words, the people scripture identifies as those God has chosen to do great things in the world...score rather low on the potential for leadership scale...or just about for anything else. **[click]** Less directly, scripture refers to all sorts of people in Group 2: those who are a success by the world's standards. Because they possess ability, according to human standards, they have risen to positions of religious leader, judge, king, temple prophet, and most often they have also made a significant amount of money. These are the people against whom the prophets rail, by and large to whom the Psalmist refers as the wicked, and then again in the New Testament, those who have achieved (Pharisees, scribes, Romans) come down on the wrong side of the crucifixion. Having a lot of potential as a human in scripture might get you somewhere in the world, but it certainly doesn't get you very far in the narrative of salvation history.

[click] Group 3 is a composite group, those who do seem to fit traditional definitions of success—men who have worked hard to realize their potential—who God also called or chose for some particular purposes. Job, of course, is your classic overachiever. That man had a ton of potential, which he maximized. In addition to his seven sons and seven daughters, “He had seven thousand sheep, three thousand camels, five hundred yoke of oxen, and five hundred she-asses, and very many servants; so that this man was the greatest of all the people of the east” (Job 1:2). You just know that he had the right alleles. And we see what happens to him... Or Paul: he too was highly successful – “circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law a Pharisee, as to zeal a persecutor of the church, as to righteousness under the law blameless” (Phl. 3:5-6)– and he’s knocked clear blind off his horse and his life is turned upside down. He loses – or rather, voluntarily gives up – everything that prior to his meeting Christ had had value for him, the rewards for maximizing his potential in the eyes of the world. As he says, “For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as refuse” (Phl. 3:8).

[click] Then, of course, you get Jesus. He sort of fits in Group 3. Granted, he’s a bit of a ringer, being God incarnate and all that, so he might skew the data a bit. But the claim central to the Christian tradition is that Jesus is the human person who stands as the pinnacle of humanity. If you want to know what it means to be human, Jesus is the model. And what do we find in this model? We find a child born into a lower socio-economic class to an unwed teenager, Isaiah’s man who “had no form or comeliness that we should look at him, and no beauty that we should desire him. He was despised

and rejected by men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief...one from whom men hide their faces, he was despised and esteemed not" (Is. 53). He waits until he's 30 before he takes on his mission, and by most measures, he's not particularly successful. Yes, he attracts an enormous following, but most folks are following him for the wrong reasons. And in the end, we know what happened to him.

He fits in Group 3 rather than Group 1 because scripture is clear to claim not that he had a lot of potential but that he had completely maximized and realized his potential—he was equal with God (Phil. 2) – but instead of claiming or holding on to that equality, that power, he gave it up. One of the most important facts for the early Christians was that Jesus emptied himself and took the form of a slave (Phil. 2).

Now, of course, in the end, Jesus does prevail, at least in a way – his story ends with resurrection. But this still does not allow us to valorize human potential, since he didn't do that himself. He *was raised*, per the verb construction. The successful ending of his story is not the outcome of his own abilities. God raised him up.

In these two points, Jesus is the key to the whole story. **[click]** The story Scripture tells, populated as it is by a variety of human characters, is not really a story about humanity – though that's what so many readers want to make it. It is not about our own capabilities and achievements. It's rather a story about God, about God's power, about what God accomplishes while journeying with God's people Israel, with the church, with humanity. From Genesis to Abraham and Sarah, through Jacob, Moses, David, the prophet, the disciples, Jesus, and Paul, it is a story about how God creates the conditions in which humanity can flourish, about how God brings about a future that no

one could even imagine or anticipate, or one that seems impossible according to rational human calculation.

[click] And God does this by what appears to be the most irrational, least effective, least productive route. [as an aside, I like to say that when God wants to accomplish something in salvation history, somebody gets pregnant – not the most efficient modus operandi]. God does not select those persons that, by all appearances, are most qualified to change the world. God does not call experts to solve humanity's problems. God selects the last, the youngest, the least, the poorest, the most obscure, those with physical disabilities, the least likely – those who by reasonable human standards of evaluation don't have any innate, latent potential waiting to be maximized. God chooses them and works through them, mostly by simply being with them. God gives them the abilities to do what they need to do as they need to do it.

[click] Those to whom much is given, those who come with innate genetic potential, who have achieved much by the standards of the world, who come in first place, are called to give it up, to empty themselves, to sell all they have and give it to the poor and to follow Jesus—to follow God's model for humanity. Our own abilities, achievements, potential, capabilities, it seems, count for nothing.

Given our penchant to miss the point, Jesus sums this basic dynamic up succinctly and repeats it a number of times: “The first will be last and the last will be first” (Mt. 20:16).

[click] 4. Can We Talk?

Where, then, does this leave the dialogue between genetics and theology on the question of human potential? Are we simply speaking different languages? Let me close with four quick points.

First, theologically speaking, the question of human potential is at best a non-starter. It's not that a scriptural perspective warns against advancing human potential, as in thou-shalt-not. But it certainly calls into question the normative weight human potential and the advancement thereof is given by our culture. Why does maximizing our own potential and perfection—as well as that of our children—have such a powerful hold on our imaginations and our lives? It's not, let me hasten to add, that Scripture has a negative anthropology – for I don't think it does. The scriptures have a rather realistic assessment of human nature, in all its flaws and glory, its complexity and messiness and beauty. What Scripture does is turn the question of human potential on its head, greatly complicating any narrative that gives it a privileged or valued place. It suggests that the human maximization of human potential is of ambiguous value, and perhaps that the striving to maximize our own power via our abilities as ends in themselves can lead people to think they don't need God, which is the very source of evil in the world. Can a focus on human potential become a functional idolatry?

Second, the qualifier “as ends in themselves” is, of course, crucial. For the question of ends—of goals, of *teloi* raised in our discussion of the notion of potential—is a key question. Like the Enlightenment story of scientific and humanistic progress, the story of scripture is also teleological. It is a hope-filled story, oriented toward the future. In many ways the vision of the future that drives the story of genetic potential is

an offshoot of the larger Christian narrative that so deeply shaped European culture from which the Enlightenment arose. Both stories move toward a future of wholeness, perfection, completion. But in the narrative of genetic potential, the future utopia is achieved by the temporal eradication of human imperfection. In the scriptural vision— instantiated in Eden, the promised land, occasionally in Jerusalem, the kingdom of God, the heavenly banquet, and the new creation—communal human flourishing is achieved not by the perfection of individuals but simply when individuals and communities choose to dwell with God. They might still be fat, not very smart, short, slow runners, or manifest a myriad of other flaws, but when folks in scripture choose to acknowledge God’s power and to live as God’s people, perfection, wholeness, goodness (holiness, righteousness, and justice) come to be.ⁱ The definition of human perfection in scripture is not perfection of mind or body but simply being in relationship with God. In other words, in scripture, perfection, fulfillment, flourishing, comes from outside of us rather than from within us.

Third, in scripture, this perfection and completeness are never simply individual—it’s always communal. In Genesis, humanity (man and woman) are created in the context of all of creation God. God saves, calls, and restores the people of Israel, the city of Jerusalem, always as a people, a people who are to care for the weak, the orphan, the widow among them. All are invited to the heavenly banquet—though only the lame and broken come; those who have achieved their potential, refuse the call. And as the history shows, the early church understood caring for the weak to be one of

its central tasks—because it, as a community, embodied and dwelt with a God who took care of the weak.

Which brings us to our last point. As we noted early, ‘potential’ is about ‘power.’ To speak of ‘human potential’ is to speak of ‘human power’ – a notion foreign to the scriptures. In scripture, God is the one with whom real power, potency, strength and might reside. This is an argument God makes many, many times. As God exercises this power, scripture redefines what power and potency mean. For as Jesus shows and Paul states, God’s power is made perfect (whole, complete, good) in weakness. God models power as self-emptying and holds this up as the paradigm of both divine and human love.

In these ways and more, theology challenges us as a culture and as researchers to understand the assumptions and language that shape how we think about genetics. It may well help us redirect genetic research in ways more consistent with the basic outlines of the Christian story, a radically different framework for thinking about questions like “human potential.” What would it mean for genetics, or geneticists, to base itself on an anthropology of kenosis? What would genetics look like as a practice of the preferential option for the poor? I’m not sure I have an answer, but I will hazard that it won’t look like a test for ACTN3.

ⁱ It’s important to note that the word ‘perfect’ (*teleios*) occurs only twice in the Gospels, and in only 15 more verses in the New Testament. James Keenan comments on the two places in the gospels (both in Matthew) where Jesus enjoins his hearers to be “perfect”

as the heavenly Father is perfect. Some translations render this “holy.” Keenan notes that in the biblical context, this notion of perfection (teleios) does not necessarily mean “maximized” or “excellent” in our sense of the word perfection. Rather it means that something is good, whole, or complete. Thus, when God declares everything “good” in the original creation, he is saying that everything is ‘perfect’ – that it is just exactly as it should be. It’s all kinetic, all actualized, not potential. And God declares humanity – woman and man – to be good. No capacity for growth or achievement is there.

But what is the nature of this achievement? They are in perfect relationship, perfect and complete harmony with God. It is not that they are biologically or intellectually perfect in some idealized anthropological sense. Perfection lies in the unity and harmony of all of creation with the creator. When humanity turns its attention from God to maximizing itself—to become like gods, to increase its knowledge—the perfection of relationship is broken and it all falls apart. Throughout the rest of Scripture, God seeks to reestablish this harmony, this unity, the relationship. He calls Israel not because Israel is particularly worthy, but to demonstrate that “righteousness”, perfection, justification, salvation, holiness, flourishing are not something we have to or even can achieve on our own. The necessary and sufficient condition for all these things is right relationship with God.