

The pursuit of perfection philosophy essay



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

George F. Will, American author and Pulitzer Prize winner, asserts, “ A disquieting era of genetic manipulation is coming, one that may revolutionize human capacities, and notions of health. If we treat moral scruples impatiently, as inherently retrograde in a scientifically advancing civilization, we will not be in moral trim when, soon, our very humanity depends on our being in trim.” Dr. Will’s profound thinking leads many to question what experiments scientists are conducting in their laboratories. But nobody knows whether their research is staying within the regulations put in place by the federal government, and whether these regulations align with bioethic principles. With good reason, the human race strives towards perfection. Due to scientific advances, doctors are able to genetically alter the structure of man, but is it ethically correct to make people genetically perfect? Recently, scientists have made great strides towards perfecting the genetic make-up of humans. Complete control of human genetics seems to be beneficial to mankind; however, if improperly used, genetic engineering could take a drastic turn for the worse and undermine simple humanity.

Although genetic engineering is an ever expanding concept, the attempt to “purify” the human race has existed for centuries. Eugenics is the study of hereditary improvement of the human race by controlled selective breeding (Suter 902). The most discussed eugenics movement was the Nazi party’s attempted establishment of the Aryan race. During an economic depression in Germany, Hitler quickly seized control of the government. With his newly established power, he openly published literature in order to spread his dream of a “ perfect” race. To achieve this “ perfect” race Hitler attempted to eliminate those he considered blemishes in German society. Unbeknownst

to many Americans, Hitler derived his idea for a “ perfect” race from the early American eugenics movement (Sandel The Case 63). America developed a eugenics program which began in the 1900’s. In 1910, the eugenics pioneer Charles B. Davenport revealed his plan for America. His mission was to send workers into prisons, hospitals, almshouses, and insane asylums to collect data on the genetic backgrounds of what he called “ defectives.” Theodore Roosevelt, former President of the United States of America, wrote to Davenport, “ Some day, we will realize that the prime duty, the inescapable duty, of the good citizen of the right type, is to leave his or her blood behind him in the world; and that we have no business to permit the perpetuation of citizens of the wrong type” (Sandel The Case 64). It is incredible to believe that a president who is held in such high esteem as Theodore Roosevelt could hold such ideals, but it opens one’s eyes as to how this view can make its way into the minds of the modern public. Roosevelt endorsed the sterilization of “ citizens of the wrong type” and wanted to genetically engineer a better society through selective breeding. America became obsessed with eliminating the “ defectives” and pursuing a “ perfect” race. People wanted to ensure future generations of great intelligence and success. Therefore, those in prisons, hospitals, almshouses, insane asylums and other places where “ defectives” resided were intensely discouraged from reproducing. Eventually, some of these “ defectives” were sterilized by state governments. Twenty-nine states ultimately adopted laws forcing the sterilization of mental patients, prisoners, and other people deemed not suitable for childbearing. In all, more than 60, 000 Americans were sterilized (Sandel The Case 65-66).

Although many in the world now view Hitler as a man of tremendously evil deeds, he developed his idea for the Aryan race from early American eugenics. Hitler even drew praise and admiration from American eugenicists when his original plans were announced. The American eugenics programs and sterilization laws only came to a stop after the tragedies of World War II were revealed. Interest in genetics has persisted, but has mainly remained secreted by the scientific community because of the atrocities Hitler committed. America escaped condemnation by miraculously not being painted in a similar light as that of Nazi Germany. Never in an American History book will you find references to the American eugenics programs that stemmed the rise of Hitler's Aryan race. At the time, eugenics was viewed as a step forward for the human race by almost all in the world, including world leaders. The idea was not intended to slaughter millions of innocent lives and change the course of history forever, but all it took was the action and persuasiveness of a few. Everyone views the Nazis and Hitler as the "scum" of the human race. Then what are we? America gave birth and even practiced Hitler's idea of purifying a race. We were able to sweep our involvement under the rug and salvage our reputation for the time being, but with the discovery and advancement of genetic engineering in the world of today, will we fall into the same trap as before?

In 1990 the Human Genome Project, a thirteen year adventure, was coordinated by the U. S. Department of Energy and the National Institutes of Health. Soon after the start of the project many other sources acknowledged that it was a good idea and helped fund the project. Japan, France, Germany, China and the U. K., became backers for the experiments aimed at decoding

the human Genome. This research was highly praised by outside sources and governments. However, a daunting clause was built into the format of the project. " An important feature of the Human Genome Project was the federal government's long-standing dedication to the transfer of technology to the private sector. By licensing technologies to private companies and awarding grants for innovative research... [the project] fostered the development of new medical applications" (" Human"). All of this information sounds like a great success to the outside world. The question is how these new medical applications come to be discovered. The government has done so much work to put together this detailed information of the human genome and now they are dishing it out to private labs. While it allows for great development and advances in the scientific research field because of all the available information, it also encourages the malpractice of science in backroom labs to come across these new findings.

Now, scientists use genetic engineering to screen for diseases in early stage embryos and even alter a child's basic genetic make-up. The first glimpses of the possibilities of genetic engineering surfaced with the invention of in vitro fertilization, Latin for " within the glass." In vitro fertilization combines the egg and sperm cells outside of the womb in a glass Petri dish in a laboratory. Then, once an embryo has formed it is implanted back into the womb and the embryo proceeds to grow naturally (Garcia). Having an embryo outside of the womb gave scientists an opportunity to study the creation of life and future possibilities of genetic intervention. They soon developed a practice called pre-implantation genetic diagnosis (PGD). PGD " is a technique whereby a three-day-old embryo, consisting of about six cells, is tested in a

lab to see if it carries a particular genetic disease” (Naik). Information gathered from these tests allows parents to “choose” the healthiest embryo available. Those desired embryos are implanted, but the others are typically discarded as waste, or in some cases used for further experimentation. The procedure ensures the family usually is more likely to produce a healthy baby free from major genetic disorders, such as Down’s Syndrome, muscular dystrophy, and mental retardation. Many people see this as a positive leap for the future of humanity. The ability to avoid certain major genetic disorders seems an inconsequential procedure, but some people would disagree. These extra embryos are capable of becoming children but they are discarded. The other fact is that the embryo’s can provide a lot of genetic material that scientists would love to work on and utilize the stem cells. In opposition to genetic intervention, Michael Sandel, a member of the US President’s Council on Bioethics, argues, “To appreciate our children as gifts is to accept them as they come, not as objects of our design or products of our will or instruments of our ambition” (Steinbock). The ever advancing nature of science strongly disagrees. The more control scientists possess over the embryo before its development and eventual birth translates to the greater chance that child has for a “normal” life.

Today, a clinic in southern California is now offering designer babies. For a steep price parents can construct a child to certain genetic specifications. They are now able to successfully control some genetic characteristics. The Fertility Institute currently offers parents the option to choose gender, hair, and eye color, but many more options loom on the horizon (Celizic). Sex selection is the most prominent non-medical use of genetic engineering.

Families have attempted to control the sex of their child since the beginning of time and today technology replaces folklore and rituals. Early in biotechnology, parents could screen for the gender of a child and abort a fetus of the undesired sex. This practice swelled significantly in cultures where boys are the traditional preference for society, such as China and India (Sandel The Case 108). The genetic alterations of hair and eye color, as well as skin tone are still in the beginning stages of development and have lower accuracy rates. But as scientists continue to research and experiment, these genetic characteristics will provide more “ designer baby” options for parents. As the knowledge on genetic engineering expands, scientists could make it possible to change many more genetic characteristics.

Furthermore, ethical concerns have been raised regarding whether genetic testing should be performed if there is no cure for the disease in question. The controversy remains whether or not the patient should be aware of their pre-ordained dilemma. Some people argue that it is better to know that their life is going to change drastically so that they can plan ahead and make the best of the time they have left. Others argue that this is not a positive use of genetic testing because the patient now spends their whole life waiting for the onset of their condition. It destroys their mindset, ultimately causing the individual excessive amounts of stress as they count down to the end of their “ normal” life (Massey). This seems to be the most logical explanation as to how one would react upon learning about a future life changing condition. Now the patient learns of something that only God should know. Being able to predict the future is not something our minds were intended to be able to

grasp. It would affect the rational decision making of any human being. This kind of knowledge should not be entrusted in anyone's hands.

The ever advancing nature of science could soon allow scientists to completely design babies to the exact specifications of the parents. The idea of designing genetically perfect children was captured in the fictional movie *Gattaca*. The movie takes place in the future, but gives a realistic interpretation of how “ designer babies” and a concentration on perfecting the genetics of humans could change society. The director, Andrew Niccol, focuses on the birth of a genetically enhanced child. The geneticist takes the liberty of making sure the embryo has no major defects. Through genetic intervention, he ensures the child will be intelligent, athletic, and “ extremely successful.” He explains to the parents the purpose behind his work. Without these additional genetic boosts their baby will not be able to succeed in a world that is tailored for and run by genetically enhanced humans. The parents put up a little resistance saying that they just wanted to make sure the child would not have any major diseases and they wanted to leave the rest up to chance. The geneticist responded with, “ You want to give your child the best possible start. Believe me; we have enough imperfection built in already. Your child doesn't need any additional burdens. Keep in mind, this child is still you. Simply the best of you” (*Gattaca*). We cannot leave the word perfect to be defined in the hands of doctors. Perfect is an unattainable goal. If we permit one group of people to decide what this should look like we have destroyed natural birth and simple humanity, and allowed them, in a sense, to become our creators.

"God Children," babies born naturally, are confined to the most demeaning tasks in society and given no hope of succeeding. In the movie, the couple's first child was of natural birth and had a genetic disposition to heart failure. He struggled through life in a world where he was among the minority of people who were not altered. His career opportunities were limited to janitorial duties. Even though he was capable of a lot more, he was not given a chance to succeed. Eventually, he takes the identity of an engineered individual. This cover allows him entrance into job opportunities that were denied to him under his natural born status as a "God child" (Gattaca). Throughout his life, he had to scrape and struggle for all he received, solely because he was competing against altered beings whom were thought to be more capable than he. This is why the family wanted to give their second child the best possible start. Genetic racism is heavily portrayed throughout the movie. Looking at the advances in today's technological realm, this issue may very well be in our days to come. As futuristic as it seems, today's world is not far from the world in Gattaca.

A boy is born to a family of four. This is no normal baby boy. He is afflicted with a genetic disease that causes dwarfism and other complications. Rushed away from his family at birth in order to preserve his life, he experiences many trials and troubles through his young years (Weststeyn). Geneticists would argue that there is no reason why this young child should have to experience these pains. If he would have been tested as a fetus, his genetic disposition to dwarfism could have been diagnosed and the fetus could have been aborted or modified at that time. Not taking such action, the geneticist would allege, is a crime against the child. If the child's best

interests are taken into heart, then he would not be allowed to be born into this world with such defects. Religious or not, the argument for a better life of a child is a persuasive one. It is easy for people to get caught up in the physical limitations of one's body and exclusively make that the judge for the quality of life for that individual. On the other hand, these defective individuals have experienced their entire life in their state. Who is to say that their quality of life is dependent on their physical capabilities? They are not limited by their defects. They embrace them as a part of life and enjoy what they have, often times better than those of us who are considered normal. For example, people with enormous sums of money often time consider themselves unhappy. However, those who live on minimum wage and barely make it through are sometimes seen as the happiest people. They enjoy and love everything they have even though it is not much. The same concept can be applied to those who struggle with genetic defects. Whether it is Downs Syndrome, Muscular Dystrophy, or dwarfism, these people enjoy what they have. Of course they strive for bigger and better things, but they take pride in what they can accomplish. We all ought to learn from the way handicapped individuals conduct themselves and apply it to our own lives.

Even though the possibilities of genetic engineering seem idealistic, doctors consistently working with small pieces of genetic material are bound to make mistakes. A scientific mishap might not just mean a dead embryo or undesired characteristic, it " could mean the creation of a whole new genetic illness" (" Books"). These hypothesized illnesses could be unstoppable in nature, and eventually lead to the complete deterioration and destruction of humankind. Many may argue that this scenario is only hypothetical, and a

false representation of a slippery slope argument that would never prove accurate, but what if it happened? We must consider if the risks are worth the rewards. Because genetic intervention is relatively new, scientists possess little knowledge on the drawbacks of genetic alterations. However, when with scientist's experimentation problems could arise beyond the scope of original intention. Someone is always pushing the limits and bending laws and regulations, and not always for the benefit of humanity.

Michael Sandel writes, " Genetic enhancements undermine our humanity by threatening our capacity to act freely, to succeed by our own efforts, and to consider ourselves responsible-worthy of praise or blame-for the things we do and for the way we are" (Sandel " The Case"). Although the possibilities of genetic intervention seem to significantly benefit society, should ethics and simple humanity bring about any pause? One day, genetic engineering could design people to exact specifications from head to toe, but is this morally correct? Completely genetically altered people could bring about the end to simple humanity. rather allowing life to persist naturally, or simple humanity, genetic engineering could bring an end to the natural lives we live and bring about an age of people altered to parents exact specifications. Hitting a towering home run in baseball, throwing down a thunderous dunk in basketball, discovering a new species of animals, or even just making it through the day are all examples of human effort and training. People admire great achievements and those who perform them. But soon genetic enhancements could take the place of simple humanity. Everyone will possess superior intelligence, athleticism, and other " perfect" genetic characteristics. Science has the aspiration to reform human genetics to serve

our own purposes and satisfy our own desires. Humanity will drift toward a society of mechanism and mastery. Genetic mastery will rid the world of its appreciation for human power achievement and individuality. Simple humanity, allowing life to proceed naturally, could be completely destroyed. As Michael Sandal writes, " To acknowledge the giftedness of life is to recognize [and realize] our talents and powers are not wholly our own doing, despite the effort we expend to develop and to exercise them. It is also to recognize that not everything in the world is open to whatever use we may desire or devise" (Sandel " The Case").