

# The case against perfection



Michael Sandels essay The Case against Perfection (The Atlantic Monthly, April, 2004) is basically a stand that opposes the idea of genetic enhancement primarily via cloning. Sandels places forward his idea of what is wrong with genetic engineering. He admitted its benefits, but he also tried to show how bad it could be allow cloning and genetic engineering. Sandels starts with a thesis that states his stand over the subject matter. His choice of words even in the first sentence alone shows his opposition to the idea of using genetic engineering to enhance the next generation offspring of a couple.

Throughout the text, the readers find Sandels pondering on perspective of the advocates of genetic engineering, talking about the possibilities of the technology and then giving the possible good effects that the development of the technology might bring. He then talks about the how the different popular issues against genetic engineering may be invalid. He defends the stand of genetic engineers, but not to really defend it, but only to show why some reasons some parties are against it are not valid at all. Then, he would present the case which he believes is the more valid reason why genetic engineering should not be used to enhance the future generations.

Sandels attacks the issue by presenting its different facets using analogies and logical reasoning. Even as he ended the essay, he quoted what he must have believed to be the strongest and the most tempting reasons why genetic engineering should be given a chance to be used to enhance future generations - perfect muscles, right height, intelligence, and freedom from diseases. Yet, like in the other paragraphs, Sandels only refuted the idea of

genetic engineering, however, he failed to lay in details his counter against the standpoint of the last author he quoted. In his attempt to show all the sides of the issue to avoid being biased, Sandels showed clearly how the idea of the advocates of genetic engineering works. But most of the time, he is unable to discuss clearly why the idea of the advocates he mention the different parts of the essay are wrong. In some cases, he had problems with reasoning.

Let us start with the first issue he raised in the first paragraph. The last part of the paragraph sounds strong, but there are flaws in his reasoning: “ In liberal societies they reach first for the language of autonomy, fairness, and individual rights. But this part of our moral vocabulary is ill equipped to address the hardest questions posed by genetic engineering.”

This reasoning is like an ad hominem, only, it does not attack the speaker but the words which encompass the basis of the liberal societies in advocating genetic engineering. In ad hominem, the argument attacks the speaker rather than the reason, but here the words “ autonomy”, “ fairness”, and “ individual rights” appear to be the sources of the argument and are the ones being attacked instead of the arguments that are according to Sandels, founded on these words. Instead of focusing on the reasons, he preempted the arguments of the believers of genetic engineering by claiming there is something wrong with how we define the “ autonomy”, “ fairness” and “ equal rights”.

It can further be noted that Sandels himself refuted the oppositions to genetic engineering that are based on autonomy. He did not define clearly

what he meant by autonomy in his essay. Moreover, instead of strengthening the position of the opposing parties that base their arguments on autonomy. What he strengthened rather was the stand of genetic engineers when he made analogies between cloning and using botox and steroids.

When he countered the argument about autonomy, the first reason he gave why the argument was not convincing is: "...it wrongly implies that absent a designing parent, children are free to choose their characteristics for themselves. But none of us chooses his genetic inheritance. The alternative to a cloned or genetically enhanced child is not one whose future is unbound by particular talents but one at the mercy of the genetic lottery." (par. 5)

His point seems rather ambiguous, for what is the sense of the second sentence of the excerpt? How can an enhanced child be at the mercy of the genetic lottery when the parents have already determined the child's genes? Moreover, he mentioned that the argument has a wrong implication – that children whose parents did not choose their genes for them are free to choose their characteristics for themselves.

The argument states that parents disallow the rights of the child to an open future by choosing a genetic structure of the kid in advance. His does not imply that children can choose their genes. It only wants to say that if their genes are not pre-selected by their parents, they can choose their career paths based on what pleases them and not based on the genes that their parents designed for them, and he even explained it this way.

In paragraph 8, he drags the issue to theology, that claiming that it is a matter of moral. He makes it appear that the only way to resolve this issue is

by consulting theological thoughts about the issue. He is pushing the idea that this issue can only be resolved if we look into the moral status of nature and proper stance of the human beings toward the given world.

He may be right that this is a moral issue, but the grounds on which he based his arguments seem not well founded. This part of his paper appears more like a moralistic fallacy. He seems to be setting up the readers for something that would discuss how things should be and let that be the basis of the argument against genetic engineering or be the argument itself.

In paragraph 9, he made a generalization, “ Everyone would welcome a gene therapy to alleviate muscular dystrophy and to reverse the debilitating muscle loss that comes with old age.” This is perhaps a swift overview or an overgeneralization. How could he be sure that everyone would be open to the idea? He did not even present any survey to support his claim at least inductively. This is a sweeping statement that can be toppled any who would say that he does not welcome a gene therapy to alleviate muscular dystrophy or to reverse the debilitating muscle loss.

In the same paragraph, he made weak analogy. The author claimed “ The widespread use of steroids and other performance-improving drugs in professional sports suggests that many athletes will be eager to avail themselves of genetic enhancement.” Logically speaking, it does not follow that though A and B have similarities, what applies to A will apply to B. Though his claim may be true, he fails to make the necessary connections to establish a strong analogy between genetic engineering and performance enhancers.

Again, as he had done in the earlier paragraphs, in paragraph 11, Sandels presents an argument against genetic engineering and refutes it: “ It might be argued that a genetically enhanced athlete, like a drug-enhanced athlete, would have an unfair advantage over his unenhanced competitors. But the fairness argument against enhancement has a fatal flaw: it has always been the case that some athletes are better endowed genetically than others, and yet we do not consider this to undermine the fairness of competitive sports.”

Here, mentions that the fatal flaw in the argument is that there have always been athletes who are disadvantaged because some athletes are better endowed. That some athletes are better endowed than others is true, but that this fact is a fatal flaw is the flawed idea. This is a case of fallacy of relevance. Being genetically or drug enhanced is very different from being genetically endowed by nature. A person endowed by nature with genes that make him competitive may have an advantage over those who are not endowed, but both have the equal chance to enhance their abilities through practice.

However, it must be considered that an athlete is more likely genetically endowed than not. Hence, the biggest factor is not the natural abilities of the athlete, but perhaps the preparedness of the athlete for a contest. If an athlete is drug enhanced or genetically enhanced, he may not need to practice or train as hard to achieve the results he wants. Therefore, Sandels conclusion that “ if genetic development in sports is ethically offensive, it should be for motives other than fairness” is invalid.

In paragraph 14, Sandels proposes two reasons why we should worry about bioengineering - " Is the scenario troubling because the unenhanced poor would be denied the benefits of bioengineering, or because the enhanced affluent would somehow be dehumanized?" Above this is his belief that " worry about access ignores the moral status of enhancement itself." In his argument, Sandels commits a fallacy of presumption, specifically, a fallacy of dilemmas. He limits the situation to two negative scenario - the poor cannot afford the cost of genetic enhancement and the rich who can afford become dehumanized. The question is, " what evidences point to the situations he is saying?" What he is saying may be plausible, but he is not able to develop it logically to make the premises strong and firm. Limiting his choices to only two scenarios makes it appear that there is nothing more to bioengineering than deprivation of the poor of it and the dehumanization of the rich. This reasoning also makes it appear that only the rich may be able to access genetic enhancement. Furthermore, he limited the term dehumanization to the rich. This poses a sort of bias to those who can afford it, when earlier in the paper he was talking about athletes who might access genetic enhancement the way they do performance enhancement drugs.

Towards the end of paragraph 14, Sandels had a firm claim that " the fundamental question is not how to ensure equal access to enhancement but whether we should aspire to it in the first place." This is a misleading notion of presumption. He makes this assumption and lets the evidences suit it rather than conclude based on empirical data and logical analysis. It seems that only because " the fundamental question is not how to ensure equal access," then the major concern is whether we should desire for it

(bioengineering) in the first place. What he is saying may be true, but the way he develops it makes his reasoning invalid. It weakens his propositions.

He repeats the same fallacy in paragraph 18 when he claimed that the real question about growth hormones is not its availability but whether we want to live in a society where the parents spend for genetic enhancement. In his discussion about the possible solutions to problems of unequal access to bioengineering, he made it sound all too simple for the government to subsidize the demands even of the poor. He did not realize that had the governments of different countries the money or funds, they would rather use that money to make sure nobody gets hungry, and not on expensive genetic enhancement that does not have any promise to save people from hunger based on any study. He created a scenario that seemed too easy to happen just to let his idea stand out. His proposition is perhaps a more important question, but the way he brings it out hurts the validity of his arguments.

Another issue on his discussion of genetic enhancement is the ability of the parents to choose the sex of their child. In the previous paragraphs he would always state the case of something that is already prevalent and then compare it with genetic engineering. Here, he only mentioned that where folk remedies failed, genetic enhancement or bioengineering can be of help.

Through bioengineering, a couple can choose the sex of the offspring. He pointed out in his discussion about this matter that choosing the sex of the offspring somehow removes the giftedness when the child comes. The child not longer comes as a gift, but more like a planned object. He did not criticize how folk remedies also tend create the same effect whether they are



effective or not. It is clear here how he leans toward a bias in attacking genetic engineering.

Sandels also had reasons that are too far flung from reality. Consider his argument in paragraph 30. While it is true that effort is not everything, it would not have been possible that a basketball player who trains harder than Michael Jordan would be a mediocre player. It would take a lot to be more than like Jordan and to earn more than he did, but one who trains harder he (Jordan) did would not remain mediocre. He is using an impossible scenario to create his point. And that does not make much sense at all.

In paragraph 40, Sandels said that “ Genetic manipulation seems somehow worse — more intrusive, more sinister — than other ways of enhancing performance and seeking success.” There is a grave error here suggesting that all efforts of parents in seeking to enhance the performance of their children so they may become successful are bad, intrusive, or sinister. What of parents who personally train their children? What of parents who lets their children attend to trainings that they want to attend, because they (the children) want to be successful in that endeavor? Would that be sinister? Maybe that is not what he means, but that is the message his paper seems to be putting across. It could have been better if he specified which ways of enhancing the child’s performance are sinister.

In paragraph 53, Sandels wants to point out that genetic engineering does not only violate religious morals, but also secular morals: “ The moral stakes can also be described in secular terms. If bioengineering made the myth of the “ self-made man” come true, it would be difficult to view our talents as gifts for

which we are indebted, rather than as achievements for which we are responsible. This would transform three key features of our moral landscape: humility, responsibility, and solidarity.” He denies religion in this part, but he talks about gifts for which we are indebted. The question now, is, “ to whom are we indebted?” Taking our talents as gifts inevitably leads us to a proposition that involves religion, for where will the gift come from? If the gifts were merely from nature, to whom do we owe humility, responsibility, and solidarity?

He further argues that genetic engineering takes away these three. He forgets to consider that the characteristics of a person are but secondary. What a person, whether genetically endowed or not, savors most is life itself. With or without genetic enhancement, a person has reasonability to his fellowmen. In the same way, whether genetically enhanced or not, a person may be boastful or humble depending on how the parents reared him. Solidarity has nothing to do with genetic enhancement or endowment. People unite for a common cause, for love and for peace. His argument is presuming that genetically enhanced individuals are incapable of humility, responsibility, and solidarity, but he did not develop the issue logically. If his statements in paragraph 53 were factual, why did he have to mention, “ The more we become masters of our genetic endowments, the greater the burden we bear for the talents we have and the way we perform”?

Immediately following this, he mentioned about the future scenario in which a basketball player may be blamed now for missing rebound, but in the future for being short. Here is another reasoning error, for who would hire a small basketball player if not for his exceptional skill? Basketball payers are

usually tall, hired for height and skill, so what is saying is another far flung argument.

The last argument in favor of genetic engineering he mentioned pondered on the possibilities of enhancing IQ and physical abilities of children. All he said about this is, " But that promise of mastery is flawed. It threatens to banish our appreciation of life as a gift, and to leave us with nothing to affirm or behold outside our own will." If it were indeed flawed, then how is it flawed? How can it banish our appreciation of life as a gift? How can he say that it leaves us with nothing to behold and affirm with our free will when he himself talked about being endowed by nature? He may be right to think that cloning and other forms of genetic engineering have setbacks, but his essay provided arguments that are pro genetic engineering that he failed to counter effectively.

## References

1. Sandel, M. J. (April 2004). The Case Against Perfection. Retrieved 9 April 2008, from [http://www.catholiceducation.org/articles/medical\\_ethics/me0056.html](http://www.catholiceducation.org/articles/medical_ethics/me0056.html))