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Science Fantasy’s Clash of Reality

Within the last decade or so, genetic testing has become a norm for eager parents. A step further, in vitro fertilization in recent years has granted the ability to conceive to parents unable to have a child themselves. Each year more breakthroughs are occurring in the field of genetic s while the public attempts to keep up. The average person drowns in information, unable to process the rapidly changing biomedical research. Lack of understanding brings fear, critics, and chaos. Now the question being researched is designer babies: can parents choose through in vitro fertilizations babies who may exclude genetic defects or diseases, maybe even gender, eye color, and other physical or even personality traits? Only a theory currently, the latter may or may not actually happen. But reality is catching up to science fiction such as Gattaca. Parents may in the near future be able to protect their children from Sickle Cell Anemia, Taysaks, and even some cancers. Yet genes can only go so far. They can’t predetermine the destiny of a person with unique environmental factors. Giving parents false hope that may drive them to expect perfection would be immoral. As research progresses, government should regulate choosing genes of genetically designed babies to limit only the elimination of genetic diseases.

Genes code for a myriad of functions, not all understood, which complicates the practice of inserting new genes into established DNA. Only a small percentage of DNA is transcribed to form proteins and other organic molecules. Therefore, each gene affects a large percentage of an organisms ability to function. Not all functions are related either, for example a certain gene added to mice makes them “better at running mazes, but also…hyper-sensitive to pain” (Steinbock). While the accomplishment of the Human Genome Project is a step, enough research to find the cause and effect of every single gene is improbable, at least with the current technology. The side effects, when not outweighed by the costs, have too much potential to be more harmful than it’s worth. If a child has the predisposition to die at an early age, or limited from living a normal, fulfilling life, of course the parent has a right to do whatever it takes to save their child pain and suffering. Conversely, changing a child’s genetic structure merely to enhance their personality and opportunities in life can unnecessarily threaten a life. Bioengineered animals through cloning have shown “various physical problems, including defective kidneys and compromised immune systems” (Masci). The field of “reprogenetics” ,as Princeton biologist Lee Silver has coined, is “a step in the dark” (Jim Cummins). Loving parents could potentially and unwittingly scar their child for life. Research of humans not desperate for a cure would be endangerment of life, a situation the government has a responsibility to prevent.

Those in favor of genetically enhanced children argue its benefits, yet every child having genetic advantages could be detrimental to society as a whole. Arguments compare advantages and costs to the individuals without considering the evolutionary cost. On the one hand, genetic engineering could extend the human lifespan, possibly even 150, 200, or more years. It would “free people from many of the limitations they would have had simply by accident of birth (Bailey). Nonetheless, there is reason to limited life spans. There is reason why people get diseases: that is life. Homeostasis is maintained through the concept of the life cycle. Artificially enhancing anyone with the money to do so could lead to overpopulation. Eventually the earth could reach its maximum occupancy. Without human interference, the idea is folly, an impossible and improbable event. Yet, new technology could bring about a new world issue to panic about. Already gender selection is at risk of becoming a major issue. Although unlikely in the US, some societies that value males more highly the females may become more imbalanced than present. (Lemonick) Researchers forget all of biology is connected; messing with one field could affect others in risky ways.

Altering nature will not affect nurture and may not change a person’s destiny. Just because a child is given a predisposition for a particular talent does not mean they will have predilection for it. Each gene is part of the whole picture’ there is no “genetic determination”. As much as Lee Silver may be in favor of genetically altering human beings, he admits the only result is “an unpredictable son or daughter who won’t listen to his parents”. If after all the trial and tribulation you get a normal child, why bother? Even if the child is slightly smarter, or more talented than someone whose parents couldn’t afford to genetically design them, it’s not a guarantee. Some may fear genetic research will bring back genetics. They compare it to Nazi Germany when millions of undesirables were murdered and Aryans were breed to produce a perfect race. Many believe it would be better just to “appreciate our children as gifts” and “accept them as they come” (Sandel). In fact, in one survey asking people what they would do if they could choose traits for their babies, 33% said they would ensure greater intelligence, 12% would influence height or weight, and only 11% would determine sex. (Lemonick) People don’t want to change what already is. Some people are smart, some have other attributes; it’s okay. Nothing basic is wrong currently with human traits; to enhance what already is fine would be asking for trouble.

Balance within social structure, too, can be harmed in unintentional manners. Some fear the economic class structure would be further strained by the ability to choose one’s child’s genes. The option, at least at first, would only be available to the wealthy, thereby “exacerbating social differences and the gap between rich and poor” (Steinbock). Lee Silver constantly refers to genetic engineering as no different as sending a child to private school. Admittedly, it may not affect social class anymore than “rotten neighbourhoods and lousy schools” (Steinbock) but it must be carefully considered. If movies such as Gattica are to be taken seriously, at least to an extent, a society could, in the distant feature, potentially become divided by a superior and inferior race.

Research to cure medical disease is defiantly a good thing. Genetic testing and in vitro fertilization undoubtedly have prevented thousands of families years of suffering from innumerable genetic diseases. However, the government should keep a careful watch on what gets past just research. Laws shouldn’t limit what can be researched, after all functions of genes are interconnected and one study may lead to an unrelated cure for a disease, yet what comes out of research and theory should be carefully considered and criticized before allowing it just because it’s the latest technology.