Genetics introduction, genetic screening, and abortion of genetically impaired

**Genetic Control**

Holy Grail or Brave New World?

**Genetic Technology**

- Perfect "test case" in our attitude toward ethics of new medical technology
- Enormous potential of Human Genome Project (HGP)
- Should we be optimistic/hopeful or fearful? Munson-Davis essay (NEXT SECTION) is one extreme.
- Technological advances increase the control we can exercise, with benefits and risks.
- Genetic advances promise/threaten to alter the very "we" that does the controlling

**Optimistic**

"Evolution need no longer be a destiny imposed from without; it may conceivably be controlled by man with his wisdom and values."

Theodore Dobzhansky
Is it somehow “not human”?

“Laboratory reproduction is more human... Man is a maker and a designer, and the more rationally contrived anything is, them ore human it is. So “coital reproduction is less human than laboratory reproduction”

Herman Muller or Joseph Fletcher

Kass: a cautious view

- Beware of a Brave New World
- Human impulse to control nature can be dangerous

Larger implications

- Role of the medical profession
  - To perfect the human species?
  - To help people have “perfect babies”
  - Use stem cells to cure disease?
- Concept of “disease”
  - Not always obvious whether x is “disease”
  - Line drawing: what IQ or height is “disease”?
  - Does having a treatment make something a disease?
  - Is being a carrier (e.g., “sickle cell trait”) a disease?
Older Issues Become More Intense

- Confidentiality and autonomy
  - Insurance companies and employers could have access to our genomic information
  - Employers may require screening before allowing exposure to certain chemicals
  - Personal level: is one morally obligated to tell a prospective spouse about genetic risks (e.g., Huntington’s)?
  - When genetic profile is available (through HGP), do you have a moral obligation to share it with a prospective spouse?
  - Do parents have a right to have genetically related children?
  - Do parents have a right to have genetically impaired children?
  - Purify: Focus on situation where parent is carrier of serious genetic disease: child will have (or 50% chance to have) disease.

Classic utilitarian/formalist split

- Is it (e.g., eugenic measures) immoral because “we’ll mess it up”—appeal to unknown longterm consequences
  - Or
- Is it for some reason inherently immoral.
  - Why?

Genetic Counseling, Screening, and Choice

- Should screening be made mandatory?
  - Parallel to contagious disease programs promoting larger social welfare?
  - Require people unable to afford child with genetic defect not to have child?
- Should people be allowed to be tested with intent to abort if sex?
- Should we use genetic screening to aim for a world free of crippling genetic diseases?
- Should we consent to request for genetic screening for breast cancer gene or “gay gene”? 
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Non-Standard Appeals
• "Playing god" (easily dismissed?)
• “Symbolic significance”
• “Yuk factor”
• “Wisdom of repugnance” (Kass)
• Sacredness
• Unnaturalness

Larger Social Issue
• Given the costs to society and the benefits of eliminating genetic illnesses, what should we do?
• A "modest proposal": see this item for discussion http://www-personal.umich.edu/~elias/Courses/42108/genesics2010.doc

Kass: Against “genetic abortion”
• Starting premise: all human beings possess equal right to life independent of merit.
• Genetic abortion will have negative effect toward existing people who are abnormal.
  • Parents may resent child
  • Others may think child should not have been born
• We will start thinking not of eliminating genetic defects but eliminating genetically defective people.
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A different kind of “slippery slope”  (p. 329-2 middle)

- Not consequentialist, predicting the future: not that doing this will actually lead to horrible results.
- Rather, the principle behind genetic abortion logically implies justifying other practices (which should not be accepted).

Arguments for Genetic Abortion  (Kass opposes them)

- Social good: drain on budget with little contribution.
- Kass: can’t easily quantify this. Maybe a Harvard graduate costs society more?
- Does Kass’s argument refute all CBA or argue for a broadened conception of it?

More Arguments for Genetic Abortion

- Parental or family good: sorrow, resources diverted from siblings, etc.
- Kass: some families may be harmed, some strengthened (“might help healthy siblings…cope with adversity”)
- Kass: “the whole idea of parental rights with respect to children…problematic. (…) Our children are not our children [as property].” (p.622)
- Larger issue: should we limit right of parents to have children
  
  Issue comes up in surrogate motherhood, cloning, sperm harvesting, frozen egg donation.
The Argument from Nature

- Argument: Persons afflicted with severe genetic disease won’t be able to live the full life of a human being, not “truly human.” (e.g., Tay Sachs)
- Kass: Unclear where one would draw the line. Retarded? How retarded? What is “severe”? Is this a good argument against Purdy who used Huntington’s just as an example to stand for “severe” genetic disease?

Problems with the idea of “nature”

- Kass often sympathetic to it (wrote book Toward a More Natural Science) but understands complexities.
- Kass: whole notion of “disease” based on idea of “normal” or “natural” health.
- EB: problem of “natural”: disease is natural, medical intervention is unnatural.

McMahan on Screening for Disability

Arguments by those who oppose screening
- Discriminatory: aim to rid the world of certain kind of people
- Harms particular disabled people
- We all lose by loss of diversity—respect for difference, courage in overcoming obstacles, etc.
- Sends negative message to disabled people: “you should not exist”
McMahan rejects these arguments
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**Reduction to absurdity**
- Imagine woman takes a drug to increase sexual pleasure.
- Drug increases fertility but replaces normal egg with one leading to disability
- Would it be wrong for woman to take the drug?
- McMahon: yes, because it causes a disabled rather than a normal child to exist
- But McMahon: if the earlier arguments show that screening/selection are wrong, then they also show that woman taking this drug is okay

**Principle used**

If it would be morally wrong to try to prevent an outcome (and okay to stop people legally from preventing the outcome), then it would be permissible to cause the outcome.

**Principle applied**
- If it’s wrong to try to prevent birth of a defective child (and okay to make genetic abortion illegal), then it’s permissible to cause the birth of a defective child.
- If it would be okay to prevent women from taking the drug and to say so publicly, we’d be doing the same thing opponents of genetic screening condemn: demeaning the disabled
Purdy: Having a Child Can Be Immoral

- Thesis: It is morally wrong to reproduce when there is a high risk of transmitting a serious disease or defect.
- Independent of abortion issue
  - If against abortion, may have an obligation not to conceive
  - If not opposed to abortion, may have an obligation to test and abort if child defective

Purdy's Argument

- A parent has a moral obligation to try to provide child with a “minimally satisfying life.”
- Objection: if the life is not worse than death, still better to have been born
- Response: possible children do not have a right to be brought into existence, so they are not harmed if they are not

Further discussion of this

- Makes sense to say that a “possible person” (fetus, for some) has no right to be born but does have right not to suffer if born.
- Imagine if you conceive today, child will be blind. If you wait until tomorrow, child will have normal vision. Should you wait?
- Purdy: a possible person is not harmed by not coming into existence
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**No Parental Right to Genetically Related Child**
- If possible child that is not born is not harmed, is anyone? Only parent.
- But no parent has a right to a genetically related child.
- Purdy (p. 351-1 top): “the desire for children who physically resemble one is understandable but basically narcissistic.”

**Adoption vs child “of one’s own”**
- How strong a claim (right?) do parents have to reproduce?
- Might harm to possible child and to society outweigh this claim
- Many children waiting for adoption.
- Do parents have a right to a child “like themselves, “ e.g., deaf or dwarfs. See Decision Scenario 4 (p. 361).