Genetics and abortion of genetically impaired

Ethics and Genetics: Preventing Genetic Defects
Contrasting views of Purdy and Kass

Leon Kass: one end of “bioethics culture wars”
- Pres. Bush’s appointment to head President’s Council on Bioethics
- A physician, philosophically trained.
- Most recent book is on Genesis. Teaches course on the Bible at University of Chicago.
- Not himself religious, but sympathetic to traditional, conservative thinking
- In this essay, refers to “moral health of the community.”
- Did this concern decide Presidential election?

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

**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: “the desire for children who physically resemble one is understandable but basically narcissistic.”
Genetics and abortion of genetically impaired

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.

Kass
- Thesis: There are no satisfactory reasons for genetic abortion and none that would not also justify the killing of “defective” infants, children, and adults. (p. 345, column 2)
- Goes against fundamental commitment to equal human rights.
- Isn’t that one of our society’s “founding myths”? How different from religious frameworks?

A different kind of “slippery slope” (p. 347, column 2, top)
- 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).
Genetics and abortion of genetically impaired

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.

Arguments for Genetic Abortion
(Kass opposes them)
- Social good: drain on budget with little contribution.
- Family good or family autonomy
- Argument from nature: we should prevent birth of those who cannot live genuinely human lives

Argument from social good
(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?
Genetics and abortion of genetically impaired

**Argument from family good**
- 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].”
- Larger issue: should we limit right of parents (even the right to have children)?
  Issue comes up in surrogate motherhood, cloning, sperm harvesting, frozen egg donation.

**Distinguish two things**
- Who should decide? Answer often “the family” or “the mother” (in abortion cases)
- What is the right decision?

  Answering the first doesn’t answer the second

**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.