Critical and Creative Thinking

Now more than ever we control our evolution. Whereas before, natural phenomena such as drought, disease, and famine would destroy large segments of the population, today we decide who gets to live. For example, we choose to search for cures to cancer, more than we search for the cure to Malaria.

Biotechnology allows us to take this picking and choosing to a more dynamic realm. We can either stop technology that deals with changing our biology now, in the Luddite fashion, or we can use our technology to help us accomplish what we as a society can to being beneficial in a reasonable as opposed to emotional manner. There are limitations to human enhancement through non-technical means such as education. There are many criticisms on the use of current Assisted Reproductive Technologies and opponents state that there is something inherently wrong with eugenics, especially in that it creates prejudices. However, I advocate for a frame of thought that incorporates a comparison between the possible negatives of these technologies against the potential benefits. A defense of eugenics has to focus on the rights of society at a level that allows for fluidity of morals, not simply denying a technology because of it’s imperfections; otherwise we wouldn’t ever be able to take advantage of our technological improvements.

The old definition of eugenics implies a crazed demagogue trying to force characteristics into breeding, which may or may not have been scientifically cogent. With a better understanding of causation, a definition for neo-eugenics should be one that separates positive and negative eugenics. Modern day eugenics should be non-coercive, and focus on individual rights of the parents to have the best possible child, instead of trying to ‘improve’ society as a whole. However, while policy is aimed at individual rights I think it is important for policy-makers to consider the ‘tragedy of the commons’ and the public domain in which children are born into. While modern Assisted Reproductive Technologies do not exhibit a form of traditional eugenics, advances in genetic manipulation do. They should be allowed to exist with proper regulation; for the worries brought from history can be counteracted, either through science or through legislature.

Eugenics has been historically been deemed morally unworthy for five reasons according to Dan Winkler in *From Chance to Choice*. The first is that it was a form of replacement, not therapy. It is seen as morally reprehensible to “prevent lives” since you are making a judgment upon which life should be allowed to live. The second thesis states a form of “value pluralism.” In which certain traits are arbitrarily valued over other, and that we cannot decide for others which ones we do and do not want to pass along. The state of what is deemed ‘normal’ may change, and parents may be pressured to screen children. The third thesis introduces the problem of the violation of reproductive freedoms. However this does not seem to warrant a problem in the US any longer. For that reason I will not consider it while evaluating technologies. The same issue is true of the fourth thesis of statism. As Wikler states, “statism is not a source of wrongs inherent in the core of the eugenic program.” The last issue is one of justice. What is public health, and at whose expense?

The assisted reproductive technology I am considering are those of in vitro fertilization, which has advanced recently, and sought its beginnings with Amniocentesis in the early 1990's. It is possible that people seek out certain genetic characteristics which can be deemed a version of eugenics. In this case the intent, principle and cause are eugenics. The intent in all these technologies is to bring into the world someone with ‘better’ traits than the ones that the parents possess. The principle is a pre-conceived notion of what better is which can vary. It may mean, specifically removing oneself from the gene pool to prevent the negative aspects of some disease, such as Huntington’s. However, it may also mean seeking out someone who is better at math. As far as we know, genetic causation cannot determine a person by their mathematical ability. One cannot attribute their ability in analytic thought to their gene; more so, there is no proof that the ability will be passed on. Therefore a principle which involves, gaining anything more than the few determined dominant genes that we know of is scientifically incorrect. The consequence, due to this popular fallacy, is the passing down of a random set of genes, guaranteeing only
the avoidance of some traits, such as Huntington's disease, and including some such as skin color. To evaluate whether this type of eugenics is considered morally or politically wrong, I will evaluate it against Winkler's five theses.

In the first thesis which states that eugenics is wrong because it seeks replacement, not therapy, this is not eugenic. Even a form of "gene therapy," to remove and introduce different traits, would not mean that the couple will opt to have their own child. It may mean that the couple will go without a child. In the case that they choose to go with their 'original' child, as opposed to one that has been brought through in vitro fertilization, proper education of what is and is not possible can prepare the parents for the consequences. Assuming the randomness of the procedure, it seems that parents are simply trying to avoid traits they do not want. This avoidance happens even with mate selection, and is therefore not a eugenic aim. To favor the 'natural child' over the 'artificial child' is pointless. People are much happier taking care of a child that they want. This is the same line of thought that encourages us as a society to come to the needs of neglected children. In vitro fertilization is assuring the same parental fulfillment. There isn't a prevention of traits happening. Actually, more children are coming into the world, now that there are parents to take care of them. The second thesis states a problem with value pluralism. Once again this does not apply to the current in vitro fertilization technologies. If one day, we do decide to have all our babies in test tubes, only using the genes of a select few, then I can see this being a problem. The only value non-pluralism going on with in vitro fertilization is the removal of certain traits one does not want to have passed on to their children.

As Phillip Kitcher states, "Preventing disease has nothing to do with imposing social values, for whether or not something is a disease is a matter of objective fact."[\#_edn6[vi]] This should make it simple to evaluate what we do and do not want to enforce as eugenics. This however, isn't an arbitrary value that a 'eugenicist' decides. It is coming from the parent that has the trait. For them to not want their child to have it is not the decision of anyone else to make. Currently there is not a problem, if the parent does not want to expose their child to smallpox, or art, or even a second language. It can be argued that the child can attain the environmental trait later on in life, whereas they cannot attain the biological trait. The authors of *From Chance to Choice* argue that this same type of experience can be seen when a genetic traits phenotype is changed through the environment in how it is expressed[\#_edn7[vii]]. However, I don't deem that eugenics, rather simply a means of taking care of their child. Certain values, such mandatory vaccinations, have been encouraged in the past, but for good reason. The consequence of mass in vitro fertilization cannot lead to eugenic value pluralism if controlled. Any form of value it would advocate is one such as the reduction of polio. This is the analysis at the individual level. "Each individual has an important and morally legitimate interest in having access to a cooperative scheme that is the most productive and rewarding form of interaction in which he or she can participate effectively."[\#_edn8[viii]] Therefore individual rights, though considered important in their own right, should not be seen as separate from society. At the level of society irreversible technologies would be detrimental. It is important to keep in mind that genetic engineering is reversible. We can bring back traits, even if they are completely removed. Allowing genetic engineering to exist allows for the test of time. However, it is important not to influence future generations. This would be the worry of the people who cite the slippery slope argument. According to them it may be fine to enact negative eugenics now, but to make sure that we do not enact positive eugenics later. Just as we are able to have a dialectical debate now on the ethics behind genetic engineering, so will future generations. In the case of the fifth thesis against eugenics, in vitro fertilization does not lead to a form of public health. There is nothing public about the process. It is the parent's private decision. If this criticism is applied to in vitro fertilization, then it must also be applied to mating habits. We do seek out better mates by nature. Once again the only thing being expended is the 'natural child' over the 'artificial child.'
There seem to be two different schools of thought on allowing genetic research for the purposes of eugenics. The first is a form of laissez-faire eugenics, allowing “what will be to be.”[#_edn9[ix]] However, as Kitcher points out, this leads to problems of justice, equality, and social pressure. The greatest advantage to laissez-faire genetics is the individual reproductive rights that we enjoy now. He seems to advocate what he calls “utopian genetics.” This means that there should be reproductive freedom to all those in society not simply the ones with the financial means to use the technology to one’s advantage. Reproductive freedom can be adopted into my reasoning for why eugenics is beneficial.

Society has many ways of regulating eugenic transitions, the question becomes how which method is the best, since none can ever satisfy everyone. These methods include laws, patents, counseling, and education. However, if society is to have certain advancements in mind one must be careful on who the benefit is going to. If the society is going to consciously remove a debilitating disease everyone can benefit. The job of any policy-making facility is to guide genetics so that there is a positive outcome for everyone in society. In China's family planning policy the intent was this, but the consequence was not. In an attempt to lower the population rate, cultural ramifications lead to a reduced number of women[#_edn10[x]]. There were many problems with this. Right now there are not enough females for the men to marry, creating cultural issues. Furthermore, the lack of women, and resistance to female babies lead to gender discrimination. Some theorists even believe that China is going to become a war-like state to an overabundance of males. A society needs to be concerned about these types of ramifications even when it is trying to do what will be better for the population as whole. Policies in place would not promote such individual advantages such as height. Having a taller society is not benefiting anyone but the individual.

Proposing regulation that encouraged this type of traits is not a type of “value pluralism.”[#_edn11[xi]] This is the argument from Troy Duster in *Backdoor to Eugenics* which seems like an argument against such as 'the tyranny of the majority' or certain genes being in fashion. This is a problem for policy, and one that can be avoided through legal and economic measures.

It is the job of the government to assure that these types of practices are not happening, and to keep the people regulated[#_edn12[xi]]. The market can only compensate for the short-term so governments need to interfere even at the risk of not being perfectly capitalist. After all, simple economic rules aren’t the only things guiding humanity. Money, spent on targeting these types of improvements is money thrown away. However, if one were to remove debilitating diseases without targeting a population, we are simply speeding up evolution. This means that evolution would have gotten rid of the disease anyway. People who cannot live to reproductive age cannot have kids. Other debilitating genetic diseases prevent reproduction simply due to their social consequences. This can be called a form a natural eugenics. If we become healthier as a society, we are personally better off, and others are not worst off.

What can be targeted? Well, first it would have to brought down to only those diseases that we can target specifically through genetics. Then it would have to be something that is debilitating to everyone. Social productiveness is often questioned. What counts as advantageous to a society without infringing on the rights of the individual in some utilitarian crusade. For example, if we are remove the unproductive members of society, do we remove the artists that haven’t created anything magnificent? I wouldn’t say so. There are certain diseases that can be targeted as to preventing a healthier population. Phillip Kitcher brings about the problem of disability activists[#_edn13[xiii]]. That in itself seems like an oxymoron. A disability is a medical problem that we learn to compensate. This is viewed as a form of discrimination—because it is. It is very important to have diversity in the world. But disabled humans are not diverse in their thoughts or cultures, they are diverse in their ability to be completely human.

The disability activists are arguing for a right to life. However, I can argue in turn for the right to life of those who are healthier. In vitro fertilization isn't killing life. It is avoiding certain lives. We treat these members of society by removing them from the social realm for the safety of the individual and others as
it is. This has been criticized as playing God. However, there is no God in matters of the state. Our minds are the God, so they should be given respect when our human knowledge can transcend these barriers. As a healthier society, we are less likely to spread disease through reproduction. Further, we are taking less of the states public health funds. In an attempt to allow the possibilities to have weight in this ethical argument, increased public health funds have more than monetary value. That value is due to a society that can devote more time on education, prevention of disease, and overall well-being. It is a matter of preventing harm by advocating negative eugenic goals.

Another issue with genetic enhancements is the issue of equality. As it is, people with more money can provide their children with a better environment, schooling, opportunities etc. Using genetic engineering will add to the advantages that these children will have. In a society where the rich were able to afford better genes, the poor would become inferior, when in actuality they are simply the norm of today. I think it is possible to counteract these inequalities through social policies, instead of limiting the technology. This has been done many times throughout history. For example, one can subsidize and widen the access to the technology. If this is something that benefits everyone, than it is in the government's best interest to do so. Or, if this is being done through the private sector, that economics will lower the price anyway, such as in flying, or the current trend with space technology. Genetic enhancement technology betters the daily lives of people, not simply an aspect of their environment. If the government is going to limit the technology to prevent equality, it may at the same time subsidize to allow the technology to spread to everyone. Once again, this would be a case of negative eugenics not positive eugenics. To compensate for the few people in society who would not want this would be irresponsible. There is always a percentage of the population that would advocate stalling improvements. To go with the majority of society is to follow a "Goldilocks Principle" that weighs the middle range between all the possible extremes. In the case of technology it is the government's responsibility to aid the people as a whole. By requiring genetic enhancements to an entire society, would prevent the inequality gap, and also have the whole of society benefit. This is similar to the laws on insurance, in that it questions 'why', but acts upon the reasoning of 'why not'.

References

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[[#_ednref8][viii]] From Chance to Choice: pg 188
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