

What's Wrong with Eugenics?

Eugenics, as traditionally understood, was an effort to improve the human race by applying the wisdom of animal breeders. If people of good quality were to mate with each other and people of bad quality were not to reproduce, the result would be more people of good quality. As Thomas Schelling nicely puts it, traditional eugenics was an effort to select parents. Of course, there were a number of problems with this effort. Illusions about what is inheritable and a failure to calculate how slowly gene frequencies would change by this method are two straightforward problems. Above all, we would like to say, eugenics is morally objectionable since any effective method of selecting parents would involve objectionable intrusions in a private matter if not downright coercion. No one questions the horror of the Nazi eugenic programs so there is no need to labor the point.

Traditional eugenics was an effort to select parents. Modern eugenics is an effort to select children. Or better yet, to design them. Biotechnology opens up the possibility of directly altering the genetic makeup of our descendants. This is not a mere possibility: the technology is expected to be available within a couple of decades. When that time comes a child's genetic makeup will no longer be limited to that of his or her parents and the natural lottery. Parents with Huntington's chorea, beta thalassemia, or sickle cell anemia will be able to stop the inheritance of these diseases and have healthy children. But we needn't stop there. Short people can have tall descendants, black people can have "white" descendants, and bald people can have hirsute descendants. Is there anything wrong with this?

While some of us might think so, articulating that thought is by no means easy. Certainly, the problems with traditional eugenics offer no guidance. No one need be coerced. Indeed, eugenics might appear to be just a part of reproductive and parental autonomy. If we do not object to couples deciding when to have children and how many children to have, should we object to their designing their children?

Two Side Worries

In order to focus the discussion, I would like to mention two worries concerning eugenics only to set them to one side. Eugenics, like any medical therapy, involves some risks. Not only might an actual genetic manipulation fail, causing injury to the patient, sterility, or deformed progeny, unsuspected linkage among genes might have undesired consequences. For example, sup-

pose memory capacity were genetically manipulable, but it was sadly discovered that such manipulation resulted in, say, mentally unstable children. Such worries, by no means unimportant, are worries over cases in which eugenics *fails*. Unless we think that eugenics is impossible, such worries do not guide us in thinking about cases in which eugenics *succeeds*.

A different worry about eugenics concerns its connection with abortion. As things look now, the likely gene therapy techniques would involve detaching a few cells from the embryo within the first week before there is any cell differentiation, analyzing their genetic composition, and then performing the desired therapy on the remaining cells. As a result of the analysis, the detached cells would be destroyed. Because these detached cells are undifferentiated, they could have developed into a complete fetus on their own. Thus, the procedure of human gene therapy could involve techniques that some people would find morally equivalent to abortion, and they would object accordingly. But the worry here is not so much one over eugenics as over a side effect. It is by no means clear that eugenics will have to use such procedures.

The Interests of the Child

How should we think about modern eugenics? If we think about it in one way, eugenics is always in the interests of the child, or, at least, always believed to be so by the parents. This is plain for the case of removing uncontroversial genetic defects, but it also holds for the so-called enhancement therapies. Given studies showing that 6'3" males do better in our society than 5'3" males, it would clearly seem to be in a male child's interest to be the taller height. In general, any property that is a plausible candidate for eugenics is one that prospective parents reasonably believe confers an advantage to the child. Any advocacy of eugenics will start with this thought.

This thought hardly needs to be argued, for it follows from the definition of "eugenics"—which is, having as its object "the production of fine offspring" (OED). Of course, with developing technology this leaves open the possibility of directly altering the genetic makeup of a child for *non-eugenic* reasons. A couple might want a boy for no other reason than that they have a girl and they want to experience something different; or they might just want to ensure that their child has eyes that match the bedroom walls. These are cases where genetic manipulation is being performed to meet the parents' interests or desires, not the child's. In some

cases the manipulation might strike us as innocuous, in others as foolish and irresponsible. But in any case, the reasons behind non-eugenic manipulation will seem weak when compared with the reasons behind eugenic manipulation.

Claiming that eugenics is nearly always in the child's interest may seem too quick. Who is to say what is in that child's interest? How do we know that it wouldn't be better for that child to be short and weak or even handicapped with a genetic disease? Despite these shortcomings, perhaps because of these shortcomings, he or she may have a happier life. In fact, what we regard as shortcomings may be no more than local prejudices. After all, it wasn't that long ago that being left-handed was regarded as a handicap. How can this generation presume what is good for later generations?

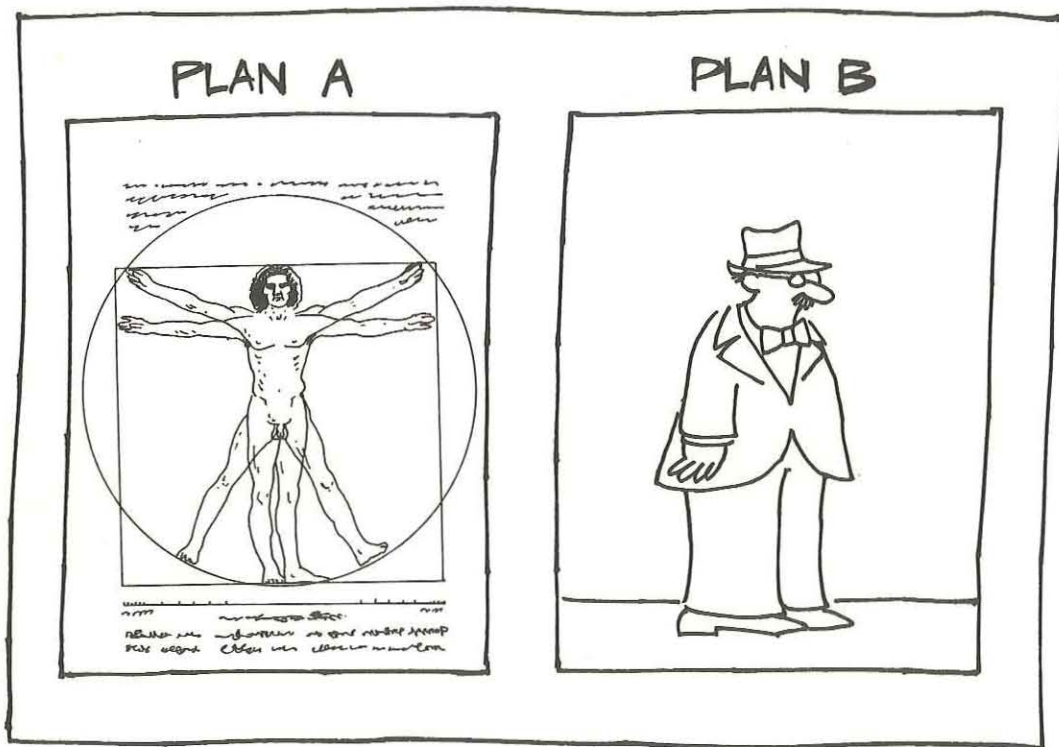
Taken out of context, these questions can easily be overwhelming. But placed in their proper context, they are quite mundane. We typically empower parents with the authority to decide what is in their child's interest. For the most part, this authority rests on the belief that parents are the best judges of their child's interest. As an epistemic judgment, parents are held to know, on the basis of a presumed intimacy and concern, what is in their child's interest. As a regulative judgment, parents are held to have the authority, derived from the institution of the family, to inform if not determine some of their child's interests. Although parental authority is not absolute and has often been challenged, these challenges are usually against the

parents' competency—they have false beliefs about what is in their child's interest—and not against the idea that such authority should exist. Even radical challenges to the family question only the placing of this authority, not its legitimacy. Consequently, individual exceptions aside, a eugenic decision on the part of parents is fully in keeping with how we think a child's interests should be acknowledged.

Nevertheless, although eugenics is always in the child's interest, a number of people have tried in various ways to dismiss or deny its benefits. For example, some have objected that eugenics amounts to "playing God." However, without making some controversial assumptions in theology, this protest does not distinguish eugenics from any other medical intervention. Who would object to modern public health efforts, such as the elimination of small pox, on such grounds? While there have been times when some people did claim that an epidemic was God's judgment and that trying to control the disease, by inoculations or other preventative measures, was wrongly trying to avoid God's punishment, such claims are no longer taken seriously.

The secular or naturalistic counterpart of the "playing God" objection is that eugenics amounts to tampering with the wisdom of evolution. The result of millions of years of natural selection is a delicate balance of fragile structures and processes, which direct gene manipulation would upset. The reply to this objection is the same. On this Panglossian reading of evolution

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any attempt to eliminate a disease or affect morbidity rates would be objectionable. Medicine must be viewed as an unnatural and destructive interference. It is difficult to believe that this accurately articulates what worries people about eugenics.

The Interests of Society

Up till now I have tried to present the case for eugenics—eugenics is typically in the interest of the child. Consequently, if we wish to find a way to identify the sort of considerations that oppose eugenics, we need to look beyond the child's interest. A frequent thought has been to point to the consequences of everyone, or at least most people, designing their children. To fix ideas, let us consider the case of choosing the sex of children. If people were allowed to determine the sex of their children, so the worry goes, the result would be a catastrophic sex-ratio imbalance, favoring males.

The reasoning in this worry is weak. The claim that more male children would be born if a choice were available is based on surveys reporting that people prefer their first child to be male. Of course, it does not follow that if someone prefers A over B, then that person would actively bring about A if he or she could. But, for the sake of argument, let us swallow this assumption. Since surveys report that couples prefer having an equal number of boys and girls, the source of sex-ratio imbalance would be from couples who have an odd number of children, with single-child couples having the greatest impact on the imbalance. To get some sense of the numbers involved, suppose that *all* single-child couples use sex-selection techniques and all decide on male children. The resulting sex-ratio imbalance would then be approximately 60 percent males to 40 percent females. What is the harm in that?

One reply might be that, making the obvious assumptions, the number of families would decrease by 10 percent, with the population decreasing accord-

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ingly by 10 percent. This is not clearly a bad consequence. Indeed, people who worry about overpopulation would have to regard this result as a good thing.

A different reply might be that having an equal number of men and women is simply an important value for us. But I doubt that this is true. Even a casual look at population statistics shows that we tolerate all sorts of sex-ratio imbalances. Consider all of the people over the age of 65. Here there is a sex-ratio imbalance of 60 percent to 40 percent, but of women over men.

In fact, if we are looking for striking sex-ratio imbalances, we need only consider the group of single people over the age of 45, for there the sex-ratio imbalance is not 60 percent to 40 percent but rather 80 percent to 20 percent: a four-to-one ratio of women to men! Nevertheless, no one, I think, would suggest that these imbalances should be corrected by direct compensatory actions such as having preferred health care, better Medicare coverage, or even major research specifically in the health problems of elderly males.

We can thus see the problem of eugenics as a conflict between two values. On the one hand, we have the value of benefiting the child's interests by altering certain of his or her characteristics; on the other hand, we have the value of the original, untreated condition.

I don't wish to suggest that there is nothing wrong with choosing the sex of one's children. However, I don't think that what is wrong with it lies in some harmful consequence of the sex-ratio imbalance itself. Rather, what is *prima facie* wrong with determining that the sex of a child be male is that it insults the dignity of women; it demeans the value of being female. The designer by his or her actions is saying, in effect, that whatever the value of being female is (or whatever the value of the child's original sex is), that value is second-rate.

This objection does not turn on any hypotheses regarding the popularity of eugenics. The other two objections do not identify anything wrong in a single case of sex selection; their worries turn on the consequences of how it could be used and an assumption that its use would likely be widespread. This invites the defender of eugenics to reply that these worries show only that eugenics efforts can be abused, but this hardly distinguishes eugenics from any other technology. Consequently, the most these worries can recommend is that eugenics efforts should be regulated to prevent any harm that might occur from their aggregate use. But if sex selection for male children denigrates the value of being female, then it does so even in a single case.

This objection can be easily generalized to cover cases of genetically altering the racial or ethnic features of one's progeny, and, so generalized, it identifies what we would find troublesome about such cases. This suggests that we might generalize even further: eugenics involves saying that whatever the value of the child's original condition, that value is second-rate.

We can thus see the problem of eugenics as a conflict between two values. On the one hand, we have the value of benefiting the child's interests by altering certain of his or her characteristics; on the other hand,

we have the value of the original, untreated condition. How the matter will resolve depends upon the particulars. Suppose the original condition were a generally recognized disease, such as Huntington's chorea. Since there is presumably little if any value to be attached to such conditions, the interests of the child would be decisive. However, in cases where we hold that it is important not to treat the value of the original condition as second-rate, such as in the case of sex or racial selection, the interests of the child, unfortunately real though they may be in our society, may not be decisive. We do not want to treat those conditions as being of little value, as if they were diseases. The coherence of our values might not tolerate it.

Old Eugenics vs. New Eugenics

Despite the differences, the new eugenics involves the same kind of conflict that underlay the old eugenics, but with the positions reversed. The old eugenics pitted an alleged state interest in the quality of the genetic composition of the community (the gene pool) against individual rights and liberties over reproduction, i.e., the value of improving the gene pool versus the value of individual reproductive autonomy. The case for the old eugenics foundered on false empirical assumptions. Wild claims were made regarding what sort of conditions are inheritable, among which were "nomadism," "shiftlessness," and "thalassophilia" (love of the sea). In addition, false claims were made regarding how much gene frequencies are affected by selective breeding. A standard calculation from population genetics shows that reducing the frequency of a

recessive gene from 5 percent to 2.5 percent, even with a vigorous eugenics program, would take over 200 generations! I wish I could say that the violation of individual rights was decisive in the downfall of the old eugenics, but neither history nor the courts support that view. When the public health is at stake, individual rights are seen as luxuries. Exposing the false empirical assumptions contributed to the view that the quality of the gene pool is not a public health problem, and so contributed to the repudiation of the old eugenics.

In contrast, the new eugenics pits the alleged interests of an individual against the value the state would find in not having certain human conditions manipulated—against a concern for the stability and harmony of the community. Admittedly, the ways in which a particular case of eugenics could constitute a threat to that concern will not always be entirely clear. Indeed, when the genetic condition to be altered is unquestionably defective, the state's interest will coincide with the child's interest since reducing the frequency of such genes is in the interest of public health. There is a danger here, however. If genetic diseases are once again held to constitute a public health problem, modern eugenics could very well share the moral collapse of the old eugenics.

—Robert Wachbroit

This article is adapted and condensed from "Designing the Goods," a talk prepared for a workshop on Teaching Philosophy and Public Policy, sponsored by the Center for Philosophy and Public Policy, held at The Catholic University of America, June 24–26, 1987.

Racist and Sexist Jokes: How Bad Are They (Really)?

In 1976 Earl Butz, President Ford's popular secretary of agriculture, fell from grace with almost unprecedented abruptness. On a flight to California after the Republican National Convention, he committed an offense so unforgivable that the public outcry drove him from office less than seventy-two hours after the story broke. The offense: telling a racist joke. Two administrations later, James Watt, the embattled secretary of the interior whom critics had unsuccessfully tried to unseat over a host of environmental issues, finally made his fatal misstep: he remarked jocularly that his coal advisory commission boasted the impeccably balanced mixture of "a black, a woman, two Jews, and a cripple." The joke precipitated Watt's forced resignation.

What did Butz and Watt do that was so terrible? How

can two prominent officials lose their jobs over *jokes*? Doesn't that seem a kind of joke itself, laying bare our national oversensitivity and humorlessness? Millions of us tell racist, sexist, heterosexist, or ethnic jokes; millions of us are offended by their telling—especially if the joke hits too close to home. And when members of the target group take offense, the question comes: What's the matter? Can't you take a joke? Where's your sense of humor?

"It's Only a Joke"

Few presumably would defend racist, ethnic, and (hetero)sexist jokes as cultural treasures, but many of the jokes are cleverly constructed, such as the infinite variations on "How many so-and-so's does it take to