

My Fair Baby: What's Wrong with Parents Genetically Enhancing Their Children?

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In the shadow of state-sponsored eugenics, much of the debate over the still-distant prospect of human genetic enhancement concerns the role of the government. Some fear that the state will use genetic technology to impose its own conception of the good life or to suppress or neglect minority conceptions; others fear that the state will not adequately regulate the genetic marketplace, allowing parental choices of desired traits to have cumulatively adverse effects, e.g., creating substantial sex imbalances, reinforcing narrow, oppressive ideals of beauty or excellence, and compounding social inequality. Without slighting these concerns, I will focus in this paper on the ethics of individual parental choices. (I will also ignore the important but distinct issue of parental complicity in the adverse social effects of human genetic enhancement.) Although I will argue that many objections to parental enhancement are confused or incomplete, I will suggest that enhancement by parents may raise different moral concerns than enhancement by the state and other third parties. Specifically, I will consider whether there are special moral problems in attempting to shape in advance the talents, preferences, and values of an individual with whom one expects to enter into a special kind of intimate relationship.

Presuming Prenatal Consent

I will begin with a set of objections that apply directly to parents, although they are not limited to them. The general principle underlying these objections is, roughly, that if we do something to a person's body (or to the body that will become the person's) that may significantly affect or potentially harm her, we must either obtain her consent, or, if that is not feasible, be able to reasonably presume her consent.

The requirement of informed or presumed consent, a mainstay of current medical practice, is sometimes invoked to reject genetic alterations to unborn children or future generations. Since they cannot consent, and we know nothing about their willingness to incur risk, we must not impose any change that carries some risk. But this would rule out virtually any genetic intervention, even ones that would impose a very slight risk of avoiding minor harms for a very substantial reduction in the risk of avoiding major ones. It would rule out any life- or health-preserving prenatal or germ-line therapy that was not perfectly safe, which is to say any such therapy. One way of avoiding that result would be to adopt a less risk-averse standard. While it would not be feasible to establish precise criteria, because of the familiar difficulties in quantifying risk, we might develop rough guidelines that reflected societal or cultural norms about risk.

Critics of genetic enhancement argue, however, that while we can rely on such norms to justify therapy for unborn or unconceived children, we cannot rely on them to justify enhancement. The reason they give is much like the standard one offered for the priority of health care as a social good—that health and longevity are goods that people want whatever else they want, and that morbidity and mortality are correspondingly universal evils. Proponents of enhancement counter that strength and intelligence are no different in this respect than health and longevity. The former have the same general utility as the latter, and they likewise expand an individual's opportunity range, whatever his goals and values.

Some critics respond that we can presume consent to risks or harms imposed to avoid harms, but not to confer benefits, however general—a surgeon can break the arm of an unconscious accident victim to save his leg but not to raise his IQ. While we can presume a willingness to trade off lesser against greater harms, we cannot presume a willingness to trade off harms against benefits. The accept-

ability of the latter kind of trade-off depends too much on the individual's own preferences, values, and ends to justify a presumption.

This response, however, merely exposes the problem in applying the notion of presumed consent to unborn and unconceived children. That notion was developed out of, and derives its moral force from, a commitment to deferring, to the greatest extent possible, to the preferences, values, and ends of existing people unable to choose for themselves. The problem is not that we lack sufficient information about the embryo's preferences, values, and ends, as we might in the case of a solitary elderly patient now in a comatose state. The early embryo simply does not have such preferences, values, and ends, and it makes no sense to infer them from biographical evidence or social generalizations, as we might for an elderly comatose patient. If we shift from presumed to hypothetical consent, we avoid the false analogy of the unborn to the unconscious, but we land in a briar patch of controversy on the identity and knowledge of those asked to consent, and the binding effect of their consent—a controversy from which we are unlikely to emerge with clear answers. And if we shift to retroactive consent—the consent of the already enhanced—we face the obvious problem that such consent may result directly or indirectly from the interventions at issue, and thus lack moral authority.

Enhancement as Autonomy-Infringing

A close cousin to the objection based on the presumed consent of the future child is the objection based on its autonomy. It is a weaker objection, since it would not apply to such general enhancements as heightened strength or intelligence, but only to a range of enhancements that would more narrowly shape the child's projects and attachments: the enhancement of specific attributes, such as height or musicality, that differentially promote a narrow set of life plans, plans the parents favor. The question now becomes whether such enhancements can be said to infringe the autonomy of the future child endowed with them.

Admittedly, specific enhancements would not expand a child's opportunity range as much as general enhancements. But no modification we regarded as an enhancement would be likely to substantially narrow the child's opportunity range. For example, if an early embryo likely to be of average height were endowed with the height potential for NBA play, he would gain opportunities in basketball, lose opportunities in horse racing, but very likely enjoy a net increase in opportuni-

ty in a society that values height. (On the other hand, a child genetically endowed with short stature for a career as a jockey should arguably not be regarded as enhanced, given the myriad disadvantages of being short in our society.) Moreover, our tolerance of a wide variety of opportunity-constricting postnatal interventions, from a strict, insular religious upbringing to a rigorous childhood regimen of musical or athletic training, suggests that we believe that a child's autonomy is not compromised, except in extreme cases, by limited opportunities.

A variant on the claim of opportunity limitation is the claim of manipulation. It might be claimed that a child endowed with specific enhanced abilities will be likely to develop compatible motivations and interests, and that by promoting this outcome, his parents violate his autonomy by manipulating him. Political theorist Matthew Clayton quotes legal philosopher Joseph Raz to support this view: "Manipulation, unlike coercion, does not interfere with a person's options. Instead, it perverts the way a person reaches decisions, forms preferences, or adopts goals. It is an invasion of autonomy whose severity exceeds the importance of the distortion it causes" [citation omitted]. But endowing a person with unusual height appears to do no such thing. An adolescent genetically engineered to reach seven feet could make decisions, form preferences, and adopt goals in a normal manner, trying to match his interests and abilities. The onus is on the critic to explain why the fact that those abilities had been genetically enhanced would pervert his decision-making processes.

It would be difficult to find such perversion even if his parents somehow managed to endow him with psychological attributes predisposing him to athletics. The fact that he would owe not only his physical ability but his psychological predispositions to someone else's plans for him would still leave him free to reach decisions in the same way as an individual who came by his abilities and predispositions in more familiar ways. Again, the onus is on the critic to explain how the parents' role in shaping his preferences prenatally would pervert his decision-making process, especially in light of the fact that parents often, and unobjectionably, attempt to shape their children's preferences after birth.

Selectivity versus Control

The most plausible objection to genetic enhancement may be that to shape the nature of one's own child before it is born or even conceived

is to begin an intimate relationship in an improper manner. This objection does not rest on the psychological claim that one who enters an intimate relationship for bad reasons is unlikely to fulfill its responsibilities. We can recognize the transformative power of some relationships—to deepen the commitments with which they begin, and to make better people out of their participants—and still insist that it is wrong to begin those relationships in certain ways. Some adult relationships, for instance, begin in lust or opportunism and mature into love or friendship, and we can approve the end result while still disapproving the conduct that made it possible.

It might seem, however, that we would not have the same grounds for objecting to the conduct of parental genetic engineers. In contrast to seducers and opportunists, those parents do not do anything wrong to the early embryo; they do not, for example, deceive or exploit it, because it is not at that stage a being that can be deceived or exploited. Yet the way in which they initiate the relationship may still convey a lack of respect for the dignity of the future child or the parent-child relationship. But while we have secular accounts of the wrongs in casual seduction and opportunistic friendship, it is not clear what, if anything, would be correspondingly wrong in parental efforts to shape a child's nature prenatally.

There are two possibilities. One is to assimilate the wrong of genetic enhancement to the wrong of prenatal or preconception screening. Perhaps the objection is to the kind of finickiness or snobbery that can manifest itself in the selection of children as well as in the selection of friends or spouses. And perhaps such finickiness or snobbery is even more offensive in selecting children than in selecting friends or spouses.

It might be argued that parents would display objectionable snobbery in selecting or creating a child with superior attributes even if, with more limited options, they would accept a child with inferior attributes. This claim can be illustrated by taking adoption as an intermediate case between choosing friends and making children. If adoption agencies allowed a prospective parent to select a child on the basis of its known attributes—which they generally don't (except, to some extent, as a dubious incentive in the case of hard-to-adopt children)—parents who would be willing to adopt a child of ordinary intelligence with no other choice might still display objectionable snobbery if they preferred one with extraordinary intelligence, and would choose one with that attribute if they could do so. Similarly, parents who would use preimplantation genetic screening to select an embryo likely to develop

extraordinary intelligence might display objectionable snobbery even if, in the absence of screening, they would accept an embryo lacking that potential. Parents who enhance an early embryo genetically might also display such snobbery, but they need not—they might be committed to the specific embryo they conceived or implanted, and might refuse to substitute one that already had the desired genetic endowment. If parents who genetically enhance their future children act wrongly, it is not only, or primarily, in displaying finickiness or snobbery.

This suggests that there may be distinct concerns about creating desired traits in children and selecting for them in friends, or even in children. The more apt objection to genetic enhancement may concern excessive control rather than excessive selectivity. The challenge is to explain how control can be a vice when it is exercised in shaping a fetus, rather than in overbearing the will of a conscious, autonomous person. What is wrong with profoundly shaping a person with whom one intends or expects to have an intimate relationship? After all, parents and teachers do it all the time.

Fearful Asymmetry

The moral difference may lie in the fact that genetic enhancement, unlike rearing and education, would be unilateral rather than collaborative. But much child rearing is done when the child is not even self-conscious, let alone capable of meaningful collaboration. And no genetic enhancement would be likely to bear fruit unless at some stage, the parents were able to enlist their child's collaboration through rearing and education.

The philosopher Jürgen Habermas makes some suggestive remarks on this point. He claims that genetic "programming" would make the normal asymmetry of the parent-child relationship irreversible in a way that rearing and education do not. This difference would not be apparent if the child were inclined to adopt the plans his parents have made for him; it would only emerge if he were inclined to question or reject those plans:

Of course, the adolescent may assimilate the "alien" intention which caring parents before his birth associated with the disposition to certain skills much in the same way as might be the case, for instance, for certain vocational traditions running in the family. For the adolescent confronted with the expectation of ambitious parents to

make something out of, for instance, his mathematical or musical talents, it makes no fundamental difference whether this confrontation takes place in reflection on the dense tissue of domestic socialization or in dealing with a genetic program, provided he appropriates those expectations as aspirations of his own. . . .

In cases where the parents and child have "dissonant intentions," however, the moral difference between genetic enhancement and socialization becomes clear:

Due to the interactive structure of the formation processes . . . , expectations underlying the parents' efforts at character building are "essentially contestable." . . . [T]he adolescents in principle still have the opportunity to respond to and retroactively break away from [parental rearing]. . . . But in the case of a genetic fixation carried out according to the parents' preferences, there is no such opportunity. . . . Being *at odds* with the genetically fixed intention of a third person is hopeless. The genetic program is a mute and, in a sense, unanswerable fact. . . .

Eugenic programming establishes a permanent dependence between persons who know that one of them is principally barred from changing *social* places with the other. But this kind of social dependence, which is irreversible because it was established by ascription, is alien to the reciprocal and symmetrical relations of mutual recognition proper to a moral and legal community of free and equal persons.

These are certainly evocative passages, suggesting that parents who genetically endow their children with characteristics they deem valuable unfairly handicap them in their struggle to achieve independence by planting a "fifth column" in their genome, which they cannot challenge, let alone overcome. But the appeal of this claim rests on a highly exaggerated contrast between genetic and social influence. Why should Habermas believe that it is any more hopeless to be at odds with the "genetically fixed" than the "environmentally fixed" intentions of a third person? To the extent that parents shape the character and abilities of their already-born children, they do so largely at a time when those children are too young to contest their influence in any coherent or effectual way, and they do so by "fixing" their intentions towards those children through such powerful mechanisms as habit-formation and internalization. These mechanisms may alter the child's psyche, and brain, as permanently as any genetic intervention.

A rearing parent always encounters an older child with the advantage of having had a profound influence on him at a time when the

child could not effectively resist, whether shortly after conception or shortly after birth. A clever or recalcitrant child can reverse this advantage by blaming the parent, challenging her right to complain about features for which she bears responsibility, or absolving himself of responsibility for those features.

Moreover, as I noted earlier, very little genetic enhancement would be likely to bear fruit without the child's collaboration, or at least acquiescence. As skeptics about genetic technology are fond of pointing out, no conceivable genetic intervention, even the genetic replication of an actual person, could ensure that the resulting child would exploit his genetic endowment in the way his parents desired. Those parents would have to make the same intensive efforts as parents who did not avail themselves of genetic enhancement.

Habermas suggests no reason why a child should be less capable of reappraising values, habits, or skills promoted by genetic enhancement than those inculcated by early rearing. Almost all of his values, habits, or skills will reflect the interaction of the child's genome, engineered or not, with his rearing environment, and it is hard to see how an engineered child would be rendered incapable of reappraisal and resistance. To assume that genetic intervention cannot be resisted because it is too powerful is to embrace genetic determinism; to assume that it cannot be resisted because it is too integral to the child's identity is to embrace genetic essentialism.

Where Habermas appears to go astray is in emphasizing the indelibility of genetic interventions rather than their unilateral character. Parents who genetically enhance their future child would initially face only the vagaries of genetic manipulation, not the reflex resistance of an infant or toddler or the more self-conscious opposition of an older child or adolescent. The question is why this difference in the nature of the initial intervention should alter the moral landscape of the parent-child relationship.

Because of the unilateral role his parents initially play in shaping his attributes, a genetically engineered child may appear to be too much the creature of his parents. But more familiar ways of shaping one's children are also prone to excess, and the misgivings such excesses provoke may differ only in degree, not kind, from the misgivings we feel about genetic enhancement. Parents are often accused of treating their children as mere extensions of themselves, of failing to acknowledge and respect their status as separate persons, of disregarding or suppressing their distinctive natures by forcing them into a pre-set mold. Parents who genet-

ically enhanced their future children would do something similar to overbearing parents, in failing to recognize, or show appropriate deference to, what a continental philosopher might call the "radical otherness" of the being with whom they are forming an intimate relationship. Their interventions are not consistent with the kind of restraint we require in relationships between moral equals, with the equality we expect parents to strive for long before it can be fully achieved.

The philosopher William Ruddick has suggested that parents have two distinct, and potentially incompatible roles: as gardeners, who cultivate desirable attributes, but also as guardians, who nurture the attributes their charges already possess. A successful parent balances the two roles, difficult as that is, cautiously shaping the nature of his children while carefully preserving the nature they already have. Genetic enhancement, like many more familiar rearing practices, might be seen as tipping the balance too far towards the gardening role, subordinating the child's nature, present or future, to the parents' own projects and ideals.

Control, Restraint, and Respect

The moral imbalance in unilaterally shaping a human being to one's own ideals may be illustrated by the original Pygmalion myth, though it concerns marriage rather than parenthood. Unlike his latter-day counterpart in Bernard Shaw's play, Pygmalion did not attempt to shape a living woman as a means to professional success or personal satisfaction. Resigned to a solitary existence, he had no intention of creating or remaking a human being:

Yet fearing idleness, the nurse of ill,
In sculpture exercised his happy skill;
And carved in iv'ry such a maid, so fair,
As Nature could not with his art compare. . . .

Yet he (like his latter-day counterpart) fell in love with what he created:

Pleas'd with his idol, he commends, admires,
Adores, and last the thing adored, desires.

He prayed to the Goddess of Love, Venus, and she made the statute come alive in his arms. Galatea, as he named her, reciprocated his love; they married, had a son, Paphos, and, apparently, lived happily ever after.

The original Pygmalion, then, was rewarded for his attempt to improve on nature with a passionate romance and a happy life. To us, however (or at least to me), there is something deeply troubling in his course of action—not in sculpting his ideal woman but in seeking to have her animated as his mate, after spurning all existing women. Were the Ancients simply more tolerant of such aspirations than we are? Or did Pygmalion really act unobjectionably, neither imposing his will and sensibilities on another human being, nor attempting to gratify himself by making another human being to his liking? After all, when he sculpted “Galatea” he was merely expressing what he thought was an impossible ideal, and by the time he prayed to have ivory become flesh, he was hopelessly in love. The qualities he sculpted into Galatea were not intended for his own benefit, save in the minimal sense of expressing his ideals. Once he saw those qualities embodied in ivory, it is not clear that he did anything wrong in seeking to have that matter brought to life.

But if so, what would be wrong in genetically “sculpting” a child to conform to one’s ideals? Of course, unlike Pygmalion, the parents who employ genetic enhancement *would* expect their creation to come to life, and expect to enter into a long and intimate relationship with that creature. Moreover, the love of parents for a child is supposed to be even less conditional than the love of one spouse for another. But where is the fault, if parents attempt to shape their children to express their ideals as best they can, as opposed to catering to their vanity or material comfort, so long as they recognize, and accept, that those children will inevitably fall short of their ideals?

One response is theological. If children are a gift from God, they should be accepted as they are given. Ms. Manners has doubtless counseled many times that the recipient of a gift should try to avoid specifying what she wants, even if what she wants is noble—a contribution to Oxfam rather than a Lexus. But gifts come in many forms, which confer on the recipient widely varying degrees of control over what that recipient ultimately acquires. Why can’t God confer a “gift certificate” good for a range of choices, rather than insist on making all the choices Himself? Clearly, such constraints on the kind of gift God can give have their source in a highly specific, far from universal, conception of the very modest role that human beings are assigned as God’s co-creators.

Perhaps the theological recourse would be easier to resist if we had a richer secular conception of parenting and families; of what it means, or should mean, to help bring new people into existence and forge a singular kind of association to nurture them. As bioethicist Thomas

Murray has pointed out, our thinking about reproduction and families has been dominated by powerful but limited notions of negative liberty—liberty from government coercion and social pressure—at the expense of more positive notions of what it means to flourish as a parent, and in a family. Informed by “thicker” conceptions of the good of parenting and of families, we might be better able to articulate the wrongs or excesses of parental genetic enhancement. It may be that the kind of control sought by even the most conscientious genetic engineer is simply incompatible with the posture of openness and acceptance that parenthood and family require.

Many of us undoubtedly share the stubborn conviction that parents should accept the biological endowment their children receive by random genetic recombination. This conviction may draw its strength from the distinct one that we should accept our children “as they are.” But that conviction has much more force when the alternative is rejection, not improvement. We certainly don’t expect parents to accept what nature has dealt out to their *existing* children; we hardly discourage aggressive treatment for genetic diseases or accidental injuries, or many concerted efforts to improve a child’s genetically constrained abilities. How can we object to attempts to improve on human nature prenatally without falling prey to genetic essentialism; without regarding any genetic improvement as if it were tantamount to rejection and replacement?

One promising approach, as I suggested earlier, is to place less emphasis on the genetic character of prenatal enhancement, and more on its unilateral character. On this approach, the importance of genes does not lie in their causal or constitutive role so much as in their independence from the will of their “donors.” A child’s existence as a distinct being begins with the randomness of genetic recombination. Such randomness may not be intrinsically valuable, but it serves the important function of limiting the control of parents and other agents. Genetic enhancement compromises that randomness and defies the limits it places on parental control.

On this approach, restraint in modifying genes is akin to restraint in modifying nature. To intervene without restraint is to fail to respect the independence or otherness of the beings and processes one encounters. While the analogy to nature obviously needs to be refined, it suggests that we can see in parental genetic enhancement the same kind of irreverence we see in uncontrolled development; and that we can condemn such irreverence in both domains without recourse to theology.

The analogy to nature also suggests, again, that an objection based on excessive control cannot be a categorical one; that we should regard the difference between prenatal enhancement and child rearing (and between enhancement and therapy) as a matter of degree rather than kind. We believe that parents should strive for a mean between control and acquiescence, and we can see genetic enhancement as falling toward the first extreme. But this leaves open the possibility that modest genetic enhancement will sometimes be less objectionable than ambitious rearing. Clearly, much work remains to be done to develop plausible secular objections to, and plausible moral constraints on, parental genetic enhancement.

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Sources

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The Ethics of Making the Body Beautiful: What Cosmetic Genetics Can Learn from Cosmetic Surgery

Sara Goering

Work to map the human genome is nearly complete, intensifying the debate about the appropriate uses of the information contained within this "book of life." We want to understand what these gene sequences make possible, and how they might be manipulated for good or for ill. We want to glean whether this knowledge will lead to new avenues for discrimination, or bridge such divides by highlighting the similarities in our biology. We ask ourselves whether we can avoid using our knowledge of the human genome for unethical ends.

Genetic manipulation for aesthetic reasons—cosmetic genetics—will be one of the important ethical challenges citizens must face in the future. The number of surgeries performed for cosmetic reasons has grown dramatically during this past decade, and it is plausible to believe that consumer demand will increase pressure to develop genetic techniques used for aesthetic enhancement. But we can recognize and debate those ethical challenges now, before techniques are developed which allow cosmetic genetics to become a part of an inevitable future reality.

Concerns about the ethics of cosmetic surgery offer important insights for cosmetic genetics. After briefly discussing what is meant by "plastic surgery," "cosmetic surgery," and "cosmetic genetics," this article explores one kind of argument commonly used in bioethics—the argument from precedent—to show that it cannot adequately discern