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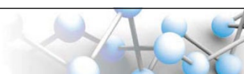
BOOK REVIEW



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CREATING FUTURE PEOPLE: THE ETHICS OF GENETIC ENHANCEMENT

Jonathan Anomaly

Routledge: London, 2020. 110 pp. ISBN 9780367203108. £120 (Hardcover)

Beginning a conclusion with the words 'As I write this sentence…' is always risky. The author's next words concern general public awareness of the future prospects for genetic enhancement technology. Clearly in the forefront of his mind are the advances in the use of CRISPR and the furore surrounding Dr He's announcement of his highly controversial experiments in applying the new technology. Yet as I write these words of my review, what is in the forefront of everyone's mind is the global epidemic of COVID-19. This makes Jonathan Anomaly's chapter on the prospects for, and ethics of, 'immuno-enhancement' much more relevant than the discussions of moral enhancement. Moreover, the author's 'cautious optimism' about the future of humanity is well argued but will look, to some, in need of reappraisal, as many commentators begin to assess how we might reconstruct a better and sustainable world for our species.

These opening remarks—events can always ambush writers on contemporary issues—should not detract too much from the proper estimation of this book as an excellent contribution to the ongoing debate about the ethics of genetic enhancement. The book's brevity—under 100 pages of main text—is a real virtue, since the author covers an extraordinary amount of ground with clear, concise and robust argumentation. It is beautifully written and combines in exemplary fashion philosophical rigour with scientific literacy. The author demonstrates an easy familiarity with the main arguments for and against enhancement, as well as the scientific evidence for the possibility of such enhancement and for its likely outcomes. The narrative device of initially framing various forms of enhancement—aesthetic, moral, physical—by reference to the Greek gods is unforced and a stylish reminder that humans have always imagined what the superhuman is like and how it relates to the human. Above all, the book manages, even in its brevity, to construct a genuinely original and highly interesting set of arguments against various forms of enhancement. These have in common an appeal to the collectively sub-optimal nature of developments that might initially appear to be prudent as choices by individuals. These go beyond those problems that have already been noted by other writers, such as those that arise in respect of positional goods and those that have to do with compounding inequality. The first is that some relative advantages conferred by enhancement (greater strength, for instance) are simply not secured if everyone is enhanced to the same degree. The second is that inasmuch as genetic enhancement of offspring is only available to those who are already advantaged—well-off parents—there will be a further intensification of the initial social inequality.

Anomaly does not, incidentally, appear overly worried by inequality. He is right to claim that inequality as such (rather than those forms of inequality that expose some to distinct harms such as poverty) may not be wrong; and right to say that some unequal distributions of benefits may nevertheless work out to the advantage of all (the less well-off are still better off than they would be in a more equal arrangement). Yet he does not make clear what kinds of inequality he would find objectionable. Moreover, in his very last pages he declares himself sympathetic to the idea that a future division of humanity into enhanced and unenhanced persons would mean both a division of humanity (superhumans and the remainder) and groups of unequal moral standing. His only response is that inequality as such is not bad and that it would be impossible to police such a development. I will return in due course to his teasing suggestion of a division of communities.

The book proceeds by setting out the arguments for and against enhancement in respect of cognitive, moral, aesthetic, and immunity. His evaluation of these arguments is throughout judicious and measured. He then, as noted, offers problems of collectively sub-optimal outcomes. For instance, moral enhancement is problematic if some choose not to so enhance their children who will be able to exploit or free ride on the altruism of the morally enhanced. Or general immuno-enhancement of humanity in respect of some virus may lead it to be exposed to as yet unknown threats. (This has particular salience in the current context.)

The overall claim is that there is, on balance, good reason to enhance human beings in different ways. And to that end we should consider the best ways to encourage parents to make the right kinds of choices. This is eugenics but Anomaly is not frightened of embracing this title. His is a version of what Nicholas Agar calls liberal eugenics. This is to be contrasted with that form of eugenics which gets it its bad reputation: officially enforced discrimination against those deemed inferior (and at its most murderous extreme a genocidal cull) on the basis of a single prescriptive model of what makes for a better human. Anomaly, like Agar, thinks eugenics is best left in the hands of parents.

However, they differ in that Anomaly would not, I think, endorse a view that there can be a reasonable plurality of views as to what makes a human better. He would also see grounds to limit parental choice. Herein lie some of my major difficulties with the

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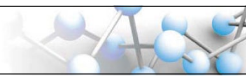

book. If enhancement does have potential collective problems, especially those of successful co-ordination, then there need to be collective solutions. It is not clear exactly what Anomaly envisages.

In the first chapter Anomaly concedes that government not being well placed to enact the socially optimal distribution of cognitive traits, 'we have pretty strong reasons to leave parents free to make these choices on their own, even if their choices will be structured by social norms, and enabled by government policy' (p. 11). Subsidies of enhancement for those parents unable to afford it for their children seems an instance of enabling. But subsidies are either monetary payments which may be used for other purposes or discounting vouchers which need not be taken up.

Elsewhere throughout the book Anomaly appeals to an initial 'least restrictive' framework of uncoerced individual exercises of reproductive freedom subject to social norms that encourage the right kind of parental choices. This of course assumes we can have agreed norms. Is there not a prospect of reasonable moral disagreement as to the benefits—both in general and of particular instances—of enhancement? Even if we can find some degree of consensus, can we assume that individuals will be suitably moved by such norms? Indeed, Anomaly concedes the ineffectiveness of social norms to influence essentially private choices but argues that we might harness professionals and others to exert the appropriate social pressure. Shame is invoked as one lever in this context (p. 48). He later appeals to the possibility of using 'nudge' techniques but also acknowledges the problems with them even whilst stating that they remain preferable to coercive measures (p. 67).

This seems rather undercooked. He is left then with using force to ensure that parents do enhance in the right way. Talk of parents who fail to use genetic enhancement as 'negligent' (p. 52) suggests the need for criminal sanctions. Anomaly cites J. S. Mill as one who 'seems to think we might coercively prevent parents from reproducing, or making reproductive choices that would be detrimental to their children' (p. 16). I suspect the 'seems' is crucial as nothing in *On Liberty* supports the idea that Mill envisaged criminalising poor procreative choices.

Even if Anomaly can enlist Mill in his support, the idea of coercion in this context is beset with difficulties and these multiply when Anomaly entertains in the final chapter the idea of enforcing an obligation on all of us to have children. What in reality would this mean? There are really only the options of *ex ante* compulsion of the requisite procreative acts or *ex post* sanctions for failures to act sufficiently serious to ensure future compliance. These possibilities only illustrate what Anomaly himself agrees are the evident 'problems with the political feasibility of enforcing mandatory genetic enhancement' (p. 26).

Amomaly floats one other possibility in two places (pp. 16–17 and 86): the voluntary creation of small self-governing communities that would be defined by the adoption of the desirable procreative norms. As he says, this 'would require rethinking the moral foundations of the large nation states in which many of us now live' (p. 86). It certainly would!

It is unfair to ask someone in a brief book to cover all the bases. Yet the lack of a reasonably well sketched account of how genetic enhancement would be secured in the right way and in sufficient numbers is disappointing. However, once more it should be said that such failings should not overly detract from the excellence of this short but beautifully formed defence of enhancement.

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