Abstract
Recent developments in biotechnology have raised questions that have not been previously addressed, questions about the morality of altering the human genome, the alleged difference between old eugenics and the new, ostensibly laissez faire “techno-eugenics”, and the possible social effects of these developments. These are tough questions, not small questions of procedure. They are difficult to answer satisfactorily, unless “secular moral experts” acknowledge that in assessing the ethical implications of genomics and biotechnology, we should also consider that science, technology, and bioethics do not exist in a vacuum and are not socially, politically and ethically neutral. Socio-cultural ideologies and societal arrangements shape the meaning of notions like ‘therapy’ and ‘enhancement’ and certain technologies have a greater social impact, may require the State to intervene in the private sphere, and may be differentially accessible to users. Also, science and technology can change our relationship with other people and with our environment. Hence the importance of ethnographic, historical, legal, and cross-cultural studies for the analysis of today’s thorniest bioethical controversies. The purpose of this paper is to shed light on
some of the substantive problems in the domain of eugenics and human germline engineering.

Keywords
Changing our nature to fit the world, rather than the other way around, is actually the deepest form of disempowerment. It distracts us from reflecting critically on the world, and deadens the impulse to social and political improvement.

Michael J. Sandel

Whose power is this - and over whom or over what? Obviously, the power of those living today over those coming after them, who will be the defenceless objects of prior choices made by the planners of today. The other side of the power of today is the future bondage of the living to the dead.

Hans Jonas

Introduction

Right at the start, let me clarify what this article is not about. It is not a denunciation of genetic engineering, if it is intended to cure medical conditions. Even though it is often said that the distinction between therapy and enhancement is sometimes contentious, and it is true that the same practices may have strikingly different meanings depending on motives and moral purposes, I still believe that there exist webs of collective, social meanings that are unlikely to succumb to cultural and ethical relativism. Most people would agree on the meaning of “fixing” and “improving”, respectively, in much the same way as, for instance, most people and governments agree on the meaning of the provisions of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Studying the ethical implications of the new biomedical technologies involves much more than simply assuming that totally rational agents, free from social and cultural strictures and contingencies would arrive at the same conclusions, following a single, completely reliable deductive mode of reasoning or, alternatively, starting from some unverifiable articles of faith. A reality made of moral flexibility, discrimination, inequality, differential power relations and access to healthcare
cannot be washed away for the sake of conceptual clarity and simplicity. Yet, many bioethicists understandably prefer to rely on hard logic rather than on the disputable evidence, multiple constraints, relative values, nagging contradictions, and subjective feelings of everyday reality. But that untidy reality is the only one there is, at least for most of us, and this is why there can be no univocal, logically necessary solution to our moral quandaries. Condemning the tendency of ordinary people to cling on to their beliefs as a matter of course seems unwarranted. On various important ethical issues people trust their own judgment because they see that their views are widely shared and because they have strong reasons to believe that such a consensus is not going to vanish into thin air any time soon. Indeed, most of us generally subscribe to those moral precepts that have stood the test of time, because we appreciate the practical insights and moral expertise of those who came before us. This does not have to lead to a neo-luddist posture. In fact, the artificial dichotomy between technophiles and technophobes is a mere caricature that only oversimplifies the actual debate. The same can be said of the equally spurious opposition between procreative autonomy and collectivist state control. Liberal democratic institutions exist in order to protect the interests and liberties of individuals, for children are born to freedom, which is also the freedom to choose between a range of alternatives. If a technology threatens to curtail that freedom, for instance by causing the interests of the child to become inseparable from those of the parents, or by producing irreversible harm, and therefore by preventing them to grow adult and lead the lives they wish, then the precautionary principle should be applied, even if we are not capable to precisely assess the risk. It seems to me that this is just plain common sense. However, this is not the kind of freedom sought by the most ardent advocates of human cloning and human germline engineering. Most of them accept that there may be sensible limits to procreative autonomy, such as the principles of safety,
harm to others, distributive justice, even-handedness, etc. but their assessment of risk is markedly different from that of other people, so that they are led to believe that opponents are biased by emotional prejudices and logical fallacies. Repugnance, also known as the ‘yuk factor’, is one of the biases they decry. For them repugnance and revulsion are both logically and morally invalid. Yet many, perhaps most people, would agree that making twins dress, eat and behave in the same way, calling one’s baby Moxie Crimefighter, Audio Science, Moon Unit, or Daisy Boo, or using homeschooling to impose one’s views upon one’s children, is morally despicable. On the subject of cloning, Jonathan Glover has most reasonably pointed out that “if memories of the previous child are used to cramp the independent development of the cloned child, who is given no recognition as a distinct person, the objection is strong. But, if the parents love the new child as a new person, and welcome and encourage emerging characteristics that differ from those of the previous child, it is hard to see that the Kantian objection has force” (Glover, 2006, p. 66). It would be easy to agree on this premise, and it would be hard put to find robust ethical objections in principle to such a practice, were it not for at least one very practical concern. Is it a realistic expectation that most cloning parents will not be set on replicating a prematurely deceased child, spouse or sibling, even if they should be aware that their quest is pointless? This is precisely what I mean when I say that the ideally rational agents described by many bioethicists are nowhere to be found. Similarly, human germline engineering (HGE), that is, the modification of inheritable genetic traits, for instance via artificial chromosomes, would be so expansive, and there would be so relatively few people who would benefit from it that it is doubtful that it is currently being advocated only to manufacture therapeutic products. Given the availability of pre-implantation screening for couples who are worried that they might transmit to their offspring serious inheritable diseases, it is more reason-
able to assume that HGE would be pursued mostly for eugenic purposes.

It seems to me that it is more than a little conceited on the part of neo-eugenicists to argue that they are correct because their arguments are rational whereas the reasons put forward by the public or by their opponents are not. After all, it is values, namely beliefs infused with feelings, that shape our self-understanding and a sense of self-worth. Rationality per se may open the door to emotional disenchantment and the neutralization of ethical considerations and moral scruples and, historically, has time and again given people ‘good’ reasons to do ‘bad’ things. The purpose of this paper is to shed light on some of the substantive problems in the domain of eugenics and human germline engineering.

Communitarian eugenics

The term ‘eugenics’ was coined in 1883 by Sir Francis Galton (1822-1911), after the Greek ευγενηζ, meaning ‘wellborn’. The logo of the Third International Congress of Eugenics, held in New York in 1932, defined eugenics as ‘the self direction of human evolution.’ Negative eugenics was concerned with the elimination of inheritable diseases and malformations and involved prenuptial certificates, birth control, selective abortion, sterilization, castration, immigration restriction and, in Nazi-occupied Europe, involuntary ‘euthanasia.’ Positive eugenics would instead encourage the propagation of desirable characteristics via tax incentives for ‘fit parents’, assortative mating and, in the years to come, cloning and germline engineering.

Galton mistakenly assumed that all traits are passed down unaffected from our ancestors (‘law of ancestral heredity’) and envisioned eugenics as a naturalistic religion antagonistic to Christianity. An extreme version of this theory, called Ahnenerbe (‘ancestral inheritance’), which
described individual life as the epiphenomenon of perpetual bloodlines, was deployed by Heinrich Himmler to justify his plans for a New European Order. Traces of this erroneous understanding of genealogies in terms of genetic continuity, that is, of a combination of Eternal Recurrence – human beings as expressions of the immortal germplasm – and a natural teleology of history – biology as destiny –, were evident in the writings of Nietzsche, Ernst Haeckel, the most influential German popularizer of evolutionary theory, American biologist Charles Davenport, who held that predispositions to social deviance were inherited from “ape-like ancestors,” and British bio-statistician R.A. Fisher, who once (1929) remarked that, if King Solomon’s line was not extinct, he was “in the ancestry of all of us, and in nearly equal proportions, however unequally his wisdom may be distributed.”

Similar convictions informed Cesare Lombroso’s theory of atavism and those of various Social and Racial Darwinists, animal breeders and pedigree researchers. Among them was American psychologist Herbert Goddard, who authored a study of hereditary feeble mindedness, ‘The Kallikak Family’ (1912), based on patently manufactured data, but which nevertheless proved so influential on both sides of the Atlantic that the German translation (1914) was reprinted in 1933. Genealogical studies established the linkage between folk hereditarian beliefs about the transmission of patrimonial and biological inheritance and the religious notion of the inheritability of sins, concurring to foster notions of evolutionary throwbacks and of populations as bundles of lineages, together with the equation of genealogical perpetuation with social distinction.

Most early eugenicists were raised in deeply religious families and, between 1907 and 1940, eugenics laws were only promulgated in those countries where Puritan, Pietistic and Calvinist denominations were strong (Kevles, 1985). In fact, personal religious affiliations and the heterogeneity of Western cultures led to different styles of scientific thought.
The rediscovery of Mendelian laws, August Weismann’s experiments on inheritability, T.H. Morgan’s gene theory and the publication of Wilhelm Johannsen’s seminal scientific review entitled ‘The Genotype conception of heredity’ (1911), established the new orthodoxy of genetic research: ‘germplasm’ (reproductive tissues) and ‘somatoplasm’ (non-reproductive tissues) were distinct and separate. Instead, in Romance and Far Eastern countries, the prevalent interpretation was that the distinction between soma and germplasm did not imply the one between germplasm and environment. Accordingly, medical researchers focussed on external, physio-chemical mutagenic factors rather than on differential genetic predispositions and hereditary transmission, which could have eugenic implications. Given these conflicting allegiances, it was inevitable that the large Italian and French delegations attending the first and second international eugenics congresses (London 1912, New York 1921) would severely criticize those scholars – mostly American and German – who posited the existence of biologically distinct human groups with differential disease susceptibility. The tenor of most of the papers presented at the first International Congress of Social Eugenics, held in Milan in 1924, made it clear that Latin eugenicists favoured hygienism, social medicine and pro-natalism, and urged greater caution before drawing conclusions from a limited sample of data on inheritance transmission. On that occasion, Russian biologist N.K. Kol’tsov juxtaposed the unnecessary timidity of Italian eugenicists with the hasty determination of American eugenicists. This rift, aggravated by analogous contrasts between North American and Latin American eugenicists that had emerged at the 1927 Pan-American Eugenics Conference in Havana led, in 1934, to the creation of the short-lived Latin Federation of Eugenics. Its first and last congress, held in Paris in 1937, restated the strong commitment to ameliorative social reforms, public hygiene, and the Hippocratic/Galenic ethos of compassionate care.
Fragmented and with its credibility increasingly eroded, the international eugenics movement was on the wane in the late twenties. Mainline eugenics had to give way to ‘reform eugenics’, family planning and population control, characterised by a greater emphasis on environmental factors, voluntary sterilizations, birth-control, the rational management of human resources, and the repudiation of an overtly racist language. This tactic made eugenics far more palatable and effective: if the impact of nurture was so important, then children should only be raised in healthy and socially secure home environments. In order to redress nature’s essential randomness and synchronise biological and socio-economic processes, irresponsible citizens unable to meet the challenges of modern society would be forced, blackmailed, or cajoled into accepting sterilisation or castration. Neo-Malthusianism replaced biological determinism, and the Hardy-Weinberg theorem (1908), which demonstrated that sterilising or segregating the ‘mentally unfit’ would not appreciably reduce the incidence of ‘feeble-mindedness’, was deemed irrelevant.

Consequently, by the early 1930s, sterilisation programmes were in full swing. Following the moral panic generated by the Great Depression, few families were prepared to put up with the social protection of what was perceived to be a disproportionate number of dependent people (Paul, 1995). Some argued that, under exceptional circumstances, basic rights could be withheld and that social services should only be provided to those whose social usefulness and biological capability were beyond dispute. The theoretical foundation of constitutional rights were undermined by prominent legal scholars in North America and Northern Europe, who argued that the state was the source of a morality more in line with the demands of modernity, and therefore was not necessarily bound by constitutional principles and norms. Radically realist and functionalist jurists submitted that personal rights were not inalienable,
for they really were culturally and historically relative legal fictions or superstitions, their existence being, to a large extent, contingent on the majority’s willingness to uphold them, that is, on considerations of general welfare and public utility. Enlightened governments, like good shepherds, would foster virtues and restrict personal rights for the sake of communal rights and civic responsibility (Alschuler, 2001; Bouquet & Voilley, 2000).

This led to the paradoxical result that involuntary sterilizations and confinements, mostly single mothers and mothers from ethnic minorities, were almost exclusively carried out in the most advanced and progressive democracies, the only exception being Nazi Germany. The following states or provinces adopted laws permitting the eugenic sterilisations of their citizens: Tasmania (1920), the Swiss canton of Vaud (1928), Alberta (1928 and 1933), Denmark (1929 and 1935), the Mexican state of Veracruz (1932), British Columbia (1933), Sweden (1934 and 1941), Norway (1934), Finland (1935), Estonia (1937), Latvia (1937), Iceland (1938), Japan (1940), and thirty-one American states. In 1936, the ‘Lebensborn e. V.’ (‘Spring of Life, registered association’) was launched by the Nazis, which involved the selective breeding of ‘racially superior’ children and the kidnapping of ‘racially valuable’ children across occupied Europe.

By 1914, in the United States, marriage restriction laws targeting ‘feeble-minded’ citizens had been enacted in more than half the states and, by 1917, 15 states had passed sterilization laws. But ‘only’ a few thousand sterilizations had been actually performed, mainly because nearly half of such laws had been struck down on the ground that they violated due process, freedom from cruel and unusual punishment, and the equal protection clause. A second wave of eugenics laws followed the Immigration Restriction Act (1924) and Virginia’s Act to Preserve Racial Integrity (1924). In 1924, Virginia also passed a law authorizing the
involuntary sterilization of alleged mental defectives. This law was upheld, 8-1 by the Supreme Court, in Buck v. Bell 274 U.S. 200 (1927). As a result of this decision, taken in a country that prided itself on its commitment to individual freedom but favoured scientifically unverifiable notions of social progress over clear constitutional principles, nearly half the U.S. states passed eugenics laws authorizing compulsory and non-voluntary sterilization.

The ostensibly progressive civic religion of eugenics was seen by many as essentially fair and morally unassailable. Children were sacralised and encouraged to develop into ‘ideal citizens’, that is, self-sacrificing patriots. Various representatives of the judicial branch became self-appointed guardians of the public morality and urged state governments to intrude in people’s private lives ‘for their own good’. Wayward citizens, namely those who could not be converted to an acceptable lifestyle, and whose behaviour remained unpredictable, were liable to being sterilized or institutionalized. This kind of society, at once ready to embrace an abstract notion of humankind and reluctant to put up with certain categories of human beings, was so insecure, apprehensive, and self-doubting, that it was willing to carry out self-mutilation in order to become risk-free, while refusing to consider the motives of the offenders and ‘miscreants.’

In the United States, as in Sweden and Alberta, this Machiavellian interpretation of public law made ethics the handmaid of politics: rights could only be granted by law, and social utility overruled the ‘untenable notion’ of human rights. Virtues, rather than rights, were the defining attribute of citizenship. Instead of protecting the citizens, law legitimized the persecution of certain categories of people, purportedly unable to enjoy freedom and to pursue happiness, by gradually stripping them of their rights and legal protections. Such policies were described as politically necessary and ethically indisputable. In a tragic reversal of roles,
according to the dominant ‘discourse of truth,’ those who violated the physical integrity of other citizens were fulfilling a constitutionally sanctioned civic duty, while the victims of involuntary sterilization and confinement were a social threat and, as such, subject to legally mandated sterilization or confinement ‘for the good of society’ (Colla, 2000; Morone, 2003).

In Sweden eugenicists were more concerned with social utility, efficiency, and productiveness than racial purity. Like the Fabians in Britain (Shaw, 1987), the dehumanizing rhetoric of the Myrdals, in Sweden, described the ‘social residuum’ in statistical terms, as expendable human material unworthy of pursuing their self-fulfilment. Alva Myrdal had no qualm about describing 30,000 Swedish citizens as ‘second-rate’, ‘valueless’, and ‘unfortunate leftovers’, and Swedish workers as ‘human material’ (Myrdal, 1968). In 1941 she argued that ‘optimal productivity’ could only be attained by the ‘casting out of some few who are falling behind the standard demands on efficiency’ (Myrdal, ibid.).

Swedish social engineers were just as opposed as American hard-line puritans to what they believed to be unmistakable indications of moral failure, namely laziness, sloth, waste, poverty, alcoholism, and licentiousness. Individual self-governance (moral suasion) would obviate the need for repressive means of social control. Citizens were seen as calculable variables, ‘human animals’ that can make promises and keep them, and whose behaviour would be fairly predictable. Refractory citizens would instead be liable to being sterilized or imprisoned. In Sweden, the democratic social contract authorized the permanent physical exclusion of those who could not or did not want to sign it. But then again, these arguments resonated with the convictions of many Swedes, who held that in order to be ‘properly suited for living’ (livsriktiga), one had to be useful (att vara till nytta) (Bok, 1991).1
A case in point is the slogan featured in an advertisement circulated by a Swedish dairy company in those years: Ett friskare släkte är malet ... låt oss alla bli A-mäniskor! [The purpose is a healthier race ... let’s all become A-men], as opposed to qualitatively inferior B-men, (undermålig). Family-planning experts and feminists found a huge appeal in an approach that valued rational and far-sighted behaviour over traditional, passé codes of conduct, and medical professionals found themselves on the same side of farmers and the clergy, fighting against biological degeneration and the weakening of traditional mores and values among urban workers. Some citizens were simply deemed so undignified, irresponsible, and biologically unsuitable that they were not expected to behave like good parents and good citizens. Criteria for the selection of the citizens who would be sterilized left much scope for discretion. They included sinneslö (‘mentally impaired’), imprudence, being sexuellt opålitlig (‘sexually undependable’), lösiktig (‘licentious’, ‘sexually exuberant’), anticonformist, hållningslös (‘fickle’), lättledd (‘easily influenced’), or konstig (‘weird’). This politicized version of the Protestant ethic, with its pollution taboos and purity boundaries, saw unconventionality as a social stigma because it threatened to break the symbolic and physical continuum between individual bodies and the body social, which was envisioned as a ‘community of model citizens.’ These very same citizens, sometimes designated as Menschenmaterial in Nazi Germany and människomaterial (human material) in Sweden, could also be labelled avfallsprodukter (cast-offs), when they were not skötsam, that is when their bodies and minds were not sufficiently docile and standardized, and they had not internalised those norms of hygiene and personal care which make for industrious workers and self-governing democratic citizens.

By the same token, eugenicists worldwide were persuaded that what stood in the way of the modernizing process was the result of
ignorance, parochialism, and backwardness. Those who questioned their ostensibly sophisticated and rational arguments were labelled as uncooperative or reactionary. In a burst of self-serving enthusiasm, they regarded themselves as modern, progressive and boldly experimentalist. This made resistance to ethical self-scrutiny particularly strong, because the project of a rationalist utopia was inextricably bound up with social systems that many believed were a model of humanitarian and enlightened administration, the embodiment of intrinsic benevolence and farsightedness, and therefore eminently fair and morally unassailable, like John Winthrop’s ‘City upon a Hill’. In Sweden this sentiment is best described by the aphorism decorating the gate of the University of Uppsala – *Att tänka fritt är stort, att tänka rätt är större* [free thinking is great, correct thinking is even greater].

Explicit coercion was often unnecessary. Thousands of people genuinely believed, or were led to believe, that eugenics measures were desirable, and they had themselves or their family-members sterilized or confined. Correspondingly, the Swedish governmental Directions and advice for the 1941 sterilisation law stated that ‘the knowledge that a decision has been taken by the Governmental Medical Board (*Medicinalstyrelsen*) often seems to bring about in the formerly unwilling person a compliance to submit to the operation.’ (Ekerwald: 2001).²

Most North American and Scandinavian laws were only repealed in the late 1960s and 1970s, even though the Supreme Court ruling in *Skinner v. Oklahoma* 316 U.S. 535 (1942) defined procreation ‘one of the basic civil rights of man’ and sterilization an invasion of fundamental interests which, according to Justice William O. Douglas, ‘in evil or reckless hands,’ could have genocidal consequences. As late as the 1980s, 44 percent of the American public was still in favour of compulsory sterilization for ‘habitual criminals and the hopelessly insane’ (Singer et al. 1998). By contrast, in those same years, law-makers in
Holland, Britain, in Latin American and Latin Rim countries\textsuperscript{3} objected to selective breeding, involuntary sterilization, the assault on the notion of free will, the spurious conflation of modernization and liberation, and the linear extension of natural laws into the social sphere.\textsuperscript{4} Eugenics, genetic fatalism, and the marriage between bureaucratic rationality and scientism did not evidently resonate with every Western repertoire of values and symbols (Baud, 2001). This finding is of signal importance for the analysis of current trends in bioethics, social policy and biotech regulation.

After World War II, the trans-national eugenics movement was forced underground by the popularity of the human rights discourse, and pro-eugenics journals and organizations adopted new names. But eugenics never died out. While some eugenicists espoused the aims of Planned Parenthood, and addressed questions of population quantity, celebrated scientists at the 1962 CIBA-sponsored London conference and 1998 UCLA ‘Engineering the human germline’ symposium advocated programmes of involuntary sterilization, human cloning, and genetic enhancement.

The problem with the current revival of eugenic utopianism is that it continues to operate on the demonstrably false premise that the key to all contemporary plights lies in our genetic enhancement. Emblematic in this sense is the dystopian vision entertained by Gregory Stock, director of the Program on Medicine, Technology and Society at UCLA’s School of Medicine, who describes a future ‘ideal’ society in which repro-genetics would create genetically in-built professional specialisations, more dependable ‘gender specificities’, and the reinforcement of a society’s most cherished values, such as “calmness, obedience, and curiosity” (Stock 2002: p. 194). Julian Savulescu, Uehiro Professor of Practical Ethics at the University of Oxford similarly speaks of “productive, cooperative social existences” and of the need to achieve “impulse
control” (Savulescu, 2006) – which begs the question of what a reasonable amount of impulse control is. A reformed eugenicist like Frederick Osborn (Osborn, 1937: p. 393) likewise called for eugenics techniques that would develop a “balanced personality and normal attitudes toward family life.” Calmness, obedience, docility are recurring terms in scientific utopias which, due to the utopians’ craving for purity, consistency, stark contrasts, coherence and unity, are unfailingly set on imposing order on the inherent (and fecund) messiness of human life. A concept that subtly and surreptitiously pervades the new eugenic discourse is ‘harmony’. “I don’t want harmony, for love of mankind I don’t want it,” says Ivan Karamazov to protest against the total subordination of the interest of the individual to the wellbeing of the ‘collective’. These attitudes are grounded in what anthropologist Laura Nader (Nader 1996) calls ‘harmony ideology’, which comprises controlling strategies emphasising conciliation, meekness, passivity, and reluctance to take issues with the authority. Thus, paradoxically, but in accordance with Albert Camus’ warning that absolute freedom mocks at justice, and absolute justice denies freedom, the libertarian pursuit of absolute reproductive freedom is likely to end in absolute subjugation and in greater levels of inequality.

Nowadays, affluent societies are on the verge of a ‘eugenics renaissance’ in the form of reprogenetics, human germline engineering, and cloning. This is a trend which is being indirectly and often inadvertently reinforced by the courts’ recognition of wrongful birth and wrongful life claims, by the commodification of healthcare, by the diffusion of testing for genetic predispositions, and by the rhetoric of genetic responsibility, involving new forms of discrimination and exclusion. The possibility that, as hinted by Shigalev in ‘The Possessed’, starting from unlimited freedom, we might arrive at unlimited despotism, is the subject of the next section.
Eugenics as a consumer choice

Today, medical, cosmetic, and enhancing technologies are being pursued to meet our needs, such as the self-imposed obligation to be fit, active, self-sufficient and responsible citizens, and an almost universal desire to control our own lives and possibly improve them. What measure of genetic and personality enhancement are we going to tolerate? In this section I explore continuities and discontinuities between past and future eugenics.

Opponents of genetic engineering of the human germline and human cloning point out that a society in which parents can avail themselves of preimplantation genetic diagnosis (PGD) tests has no use for them. If embryos are affected by serious genetic disorders, they can be discarded and only the healthy ones will be implanted in the womb. Therefore, critics argue, the advocates of germline engineering and cloning do not have therapy in mind, or the noble goal of redressing genetic injustice, but species enhancement. Promoters of human genetic enhancement counter that it would be more sensible and economical to try and eradicate genetic conditions instead of treating them each generation. Their detractors respond that ‘simple’, single-gene disorders are very rare, and that most severe genetic conditions are complex, involving a combination of genetic and non-genetic factors. The risk of unanticipated inheritable negative effects that the reconfiguration of human biology would entail is simply unacceptable, even if germline manipulation could be made reversible, because the more complex the trait that is changed, the less simple it will be to undo the change.

I will not object to these procedures on philosophical or religious grounds, nor will I dwell on the inevitable widening of the ontological and social gap between the rich and the poor that they are likely to cause, including the prospect of a future caste of uninsurable and unemploy-
able. These arguments have already been addressed ‘ad nauseam.’ A different case against designer babies and the medicalization of childhood can be made, which draws on the life of Francis Galton himself, the father of modern eugenics and on the ressentiment felt by Alva and Gunnar Myrdal’s children against their parents.

Galton (1822-1911), half-cousin of Charles Darwin, was destined to a life of fame and academic prestige, to fulfil his father’s ambitions (Swee-ney, 2001). Persuaded that heredity was destiny, and given the outstanding pedigree of the Galton-Darwin-Wedgwood family stock, his parents decided that he would be taught how to realize his full potential and become the genius he was meant to be. As a result, in the family diaries Francis is only mentioned for his educational achievements and intellectual exploits. Such were the forces at work in the shaping of the character of the proponent of the theory of hereditary genius: destiny was implanted like a programme into Francis, who would grow into a man “suffering considerable angst as a result of seldom achieving the heights of intellectual acclaim to which his parents had encouraged him to aspire and for which he had worked assiduously hard” (Fancher, 1983). At the age of four, he was already saving pennies for his university honours and four years later he was encouraged to study French, Latin and Greek. But when he confronted the highly selective environment of Cambridge, he crumbled under the pressure of harsh competition and constant mental strain: dozens of exceptionally-gifted students made it exceedingly hard for him to excel and a sudden and severe nervous breakdown ensued (Sweeney, 2001). Little by little, Galton drifted away from his family and devoted himself to those fields of knowledge in which he felt he could stand out. He tried his hand at poetry, soon to realise that he had no literary talent; then he turned his attention to mechanics and devised a number of contrivances that were never patented or manufactured. Even his statistical calculation of the relative
efficiency of sailing came to naught when the steam engine was invented (Forrest, ibid.). This series of failures brought him to a second and more severe mental breakdown in 1866. Only eugenics, which Galton envisioned as a secularized religion, gave him a sense of calm, peace, strength, inner conviction and confidence. It is easy to see where his unhappiness and frustration came from: not from state coercion, but from parental despotism (Forrest, 1974).

Judging from the harsh tones used by Jan Myrdal, Kaj Fölster and Sissela Bok in their autobiographical appraisals of their parents’ rearing practices, it is likely that they had comparable experiences. Of the three, Sissela Bok’s book (Bok, 1991) is arguably the least acerbic and yet she admits that her parents had an indiscriminate contempt for weakness, would not allow themselves to be wrong, and were not prepared to see their children as persons in their own right, because they were persuaded that only rational beings are persons and that “children are not fully rational until thirteen.” This might explain their condescension towards ‘unruly’ citizens, namely those whose behaviour did not accord with their impossibly high standards of rationality, commitment and accountability: “if one stands for such self-evident ideals as those of justice, equality and peace, persons who express other points of view can easily seem irrational or blinded by prejudice or even in league with the powers of evil” (Bok, ibid. p. 189). Bok acutely observes that “there can be peril in growing up with parents as forceful as Alva and Gunnar who invoke such ideals so boldly and unquestioningly overwhelming them, at times disabling them, all in the name of reason and social utility” (Bok, ibid.). Alva’s Nobel acceptance speech, in which she stated that she “always looked at the world’s development as a battle between the forces of good and those of evil,” is very telling of the parental potential for ‘inadvertent tyranny’. Demanding parents who are used to making their children bend to their will, like human clay, do not realise that in
their self-righteousness they seldom put their children before their selfish desires and systematically avoid self-questioning. This is why John Stuart Mill (1806-1873), who had plenty of firsthand experience of parental tyranny, declared that the family could be a school of despotism, and this is especially true these days, as childhood is being turned into an invaluable commodity that needs protection.

How else to explain the aberrant behaviour of tyrannical, exploitative, and sometimes violent Kronos-like fathers such as Richard Williams and Earl Woods, Stefano Capriati, Jim Pierce, or Marinko Lukic? More and more young athletes suffer from severe physical injuries, anorexia nervosa, menstrual dysfunction, osteoporosis, sleep deprivation, mental burnout, and other medical conditions leading to lifelong damages, because they are pushed beyond their physical and emotional limits – to become a winner is, after all, in their ‘best interest’, even though that means taking away the pleasure of being a child. How many children have been programmed to become piano or violin virtuoso? If they could go back, would they rather have a ‘normal’ life? And if we all agree that extreme competitiveness is a critical risk factor for suicide, then we should concur with Israel W. Charny (Charny, 2006, p. 127) when he points out that “students from a culture that requires excellence not only in its own right but in obligation to generations of ancestors are at very high risk for breakdowns, including taking their own lives if they do poorly in their studies. Such a cultural injunction, including approval of suicide as an honourable self-punishment for failure, will be found in any number of Asian cultures, but the same solution also can be played out in other cultures ... For example, no few instances of suicide in the vaunted Israeli army are suicides by outstanding young men whose preservice records were excellent. They begin their army careers with high expectations for continuing their excellence, but some failure or problem prevents them from being outstanding – sometimes it is not
more than an orthopaedic injury that prevent the youth from being able to complete his basic soldiering – and they are then so unable to bear their failure that there seems no way other than to take their lives.”

In this respect, Michael J. Sandel is absolutely right when he denounces the danger of ‘hyperparenting’ and ‘hyperagency’, “a Promethean aspiration to remake nature, including human nature, to serve our purposes and satisfy our desires” (Sandel, 2007: p. 27). What would such consumer-parents, who feel entitled to beget the most brilliant and athletic children, perhaps to live their frustrated athletic ambitions through their children, most likely do, should they be permitted to engineer them? The inescapable conclusion seems to be that there will be far more compulsion and control than the advocates of ‘liberal eugenics’ would like us to believe. We also need to make clear that this ideological posture has nothing to do with genuine liberalism. A more correct definition is ‘libertarian eugenics’. As Samuel Freeman has forcefully and eloquently demonstrated, “correctly understood, libertarianism resembles a view that liberalism historically defined itself against, the doctrine of private political power that underlies feudalism. Like feudalism, libertarianism conceives of justified political power as based in a network of private contracts. It rejects the idea, essential to liberalism, that political power is a public power, to be impartially exercised for the common good” (Freeman, 2002). The essence of libertarian eugenics thus lies in its pursuit of an enhanced State of Nature typified by free market selfishness, that is, by unaccountable private tyranny. Its stress on ‘procreative autonomy’ necessarily conflates the meaning of autonomy with that of consumer demand.

When John Harris (Harris, 2007) or Julian Savulescu maintain that we all have a moral obligation to enhance ourselves and our children, it becomes patently obvious that the total freedom they want for themselves is paired with the right to deny freedom of choice to those who
would not go along with their ‘rational’ choices. Much like the Myrdals, the new eugenicists believe that everyone is free to act as they please, so long as they do as they are told (for their own good). After all, why should the self-made and self-sufficient successful feel that they owe anything to those who, allegedly, cannot make rational decisions and thereby cause their own misery? States must, to some extent, be coercive because their function is to establish and secure civil liberties by overriding individual and group coercion.

Authorizing the creation of designer babies may have dire consequences, because embryo selection carried out for the sake of ‘quality control’ in reproduction is far more restrictive of a child’s freedom and places much more pressure on the offspring. Intuitively, one would expect that it would be more difficult for these children to develop into autonomous beings and to be free to choose not to fulfil the wishes and aspirations of their parents, irreversibly inscribed into their DNA, at least at a symbolical level. Even assuming that most of us would justifiably reject the fallacy of ‘Genes ‘r’ Us’ determinism, ‘made-to-order’ children would be hard put to do the same. As American sociologist W. I. Thomas once said, ‘if men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences.’ What would the consequences be, in terms of their development as nominally independent and responsible moral agents, if the alterations were of a non-medical nature? Would they take pride in their achievements in the same way as ordinary people do, even if their talents are inherited? Why, in a nominally meritocratic society, should they feel they owe anything to the less fortunate? How would they respond to personal failure? Would they assume that they are entitled to the best of everything? Finally, and more importantly, those parents so preoccupied with the uncertainties of life that they would rather have their children genetically engineered, how are they going to deal with the unavoidable challenges of parenting and the realization that control can
never be complete? Are we going to rear children who cannot face life’s challenges without the help of chemical and genetic enhancers of mood, memory, cognition, sex life and athletic performances? If the goal posts are constantly being pushed forward, how are we going to avoid that what was once regarded as unnecessary should become imperative?

Victoria University ethicist Nicholas Agar (Agar, 1998) has argued that if a 6-year-old Mozart had mixed with children of his own age instead of performing in the courts of Europe, today we would not be enjoying *The Marriage of Figaro* or *Don Giovanni*. But we could counter that perhaps Wolfi might have preferred to play with his peers and live a longer and less tormented life instead of complying with the requests of his authoritarian and manipulative father. Even a strictly utilitarian perspective should not contemplate a scenario in which kids are sacrificed for the greater good and in the parents’ pursuit of reflected fame and status, to the point of transforming them into biological artifacts designed by others. Habermas’s objections to libertarian eugenics, on the ground that a human being that is ‘made’ and not ‘grown’ is more easily consigned to instrumental thinking and that genetically altered persons “might suffer from the consciousness of sharing authorship of her own life and her own destiny with someone else” (Habermas, 2003) cannot be dismissed as ‘fuzzy logic’ or ‘quasi-religious arguments’, as the champions of neo-eugenics are so eager to do. In vitro fertilization is not just an alternative to natural procreation, it is always the last resort for infertile couples and, for that matter, a terribly expensive and emotionally draining one. Moreover, neo-eugenicists are seriously mistaken when they argue that they cannot see a profound moral difference between technological and conventional means of enhancing human beings (diet, education, and so forth). It seems fairly obvious that socialization processes, which are interactive, negotiable, and reversible, thus limiting parental authority over their children, and germline enhancement, which
is entirely arbitrary, paternalistic and allows for no revision and critical reappraisal, cannot be assimilated (Santosuosso, 2002). In all likelihood, parents who are prepared to disburse large sums of money for the engineering of their offspring will see their children as a long-term investment – to an even greater extent than already is the case – and will impose a specific goal upon their child. Savulescu does not seem to be particularly troubled by this prospect when he submits that because parents invest a large amount of energy, time and money in raising their children, then they should have a legitimate stake in the nature of the child that they give birth to (Savulescu 2002).

Even though past government-sponsored coercive eugenics programs have been discredited, the mere defence of reproductive freedom is not sufficient in itself to protect citizens from abuses and harm. Unfortunately, as I mentioned earlier, the history of libertarianism is replete with examples of citizens claiming liberties for themselves while demanding restrictions for other ‘less deserving’ citizens. Also, there is no such thing as a government stubbornly refusing to cater to the demands of powerful lobbies. Apart from the fact that, under more strained socio-economic circumstances, democratic states may at some point be forced to recommend compulsory screening for certain genetic conditions, we might also want to consider the historical evidence pointing to a growing presence of the State in the family sphere in Western democracies, motivated by the imperative to better protect the children’s rights (Cavina, 2007). In 1909, Swedish feminist eugenicist Ellen Kay (1849-1926), proclaimed that the twentieth century was to be ‘the century of the child’ but, as in the past century, it is to be doubted that children, rather than their ‘guardians’ (parents, society, the State, etc.), are the primary beneficiaries of this purportedly child-centred approach. Take for instance the recent proposal to the effect that the state of Texas should embark on mass pre-symptomatic diagnosis of Attention Deficit Hyperactivity
Disorder in schoolchildren, followed by widespread prescription of psychoactive drugs (Rose, 2005). This should be a sufficient warning that the so-called consumerist eugenics will not be a democratic panacea: treating shyness and liveliness as bio-chemical imbalance, and medicalizing our children to make them well-behaved and cooperative, as though they were faulty devices – regardless of the unforeseeable long-term side effects of taking drugs at such an early age – is, for all intents and purposes, an experiment in social engineering on an unprecedented scale, and one which can only disempower parents and children and suppress human diversity.

In sum, the language of autonomy, empowerment, choice, and rights ought not to obscure the fact that: (a) it is also a rather apposite way for medical professionals and the State to be released from their responsibilities vis-à-vis patients and citizens; and (b) the randomness of sexual fertilization is, alas, the closest thing to freedom in societies where choices are constrained by legal restrictions, social and gender-related expectations, obligations and imperatives, as well as by prejudices, ignorance, practical impediments, and huge economic and social disparities, which translate into a dramatic differential distribution of power and authority.

A society where individuals are expected to responsibly monitor their health and lifestyle and to act on the available knowledge – ‘free choice under pressure’ is a fitting definition of life in advanced democracies – will look on those who do not fulfil that obligation as reckless and uncaring. This is also what we gather from Nancy Smithers, 36, an American lawyer, and from her firsthand experience of how the line between care and desire is becoming blurred and how the range of human variability that is deemed socially acceptable is being inexorably narrowed:
I was hoping I’d never have to make this choice, to become responsible for choosing the kind of baby I’d get, the kind of baby we’d accept. But everyone – my doctor, my parents, my friends everyone urged me to come for genetic counselling and have amniocentesis. Now, I guess I’m having a modern baby. And they all told me I’d feel more in control. But in some ways, I feel less in control. Oh, it’s still my baby, but only if it’s good enough to be our baby, if you see what I mean. (Rapp, 1988: p. 152).

NOTES

1. Cf. the Nazi designation Lebensunwertes Leben, ‘Life unworthy of life’, for racially unfit and uneducable citizens, which denies that life per se is its own justification.
2. This should remind us that infor-med consent is not just a signature on a form but a two-way process involving information exchange, education and counselling.
3. Spain, Portugal, Italy, and France.
4. In those countries, most scientists and social analysts correctly understood that Charles Darwin had historicized nature without closing the gap between nature, human history and society. Elsewhere, Social Darwinists, who held that the Darwinian revolution had paved the way to the naturalization of history, found a more receptive audience.
5. ‘eugenics must be introduced into the national consciousness as a new religion’ he once wrote

REFERENCES

Stefano Fait • From Institutional Paternalism to Parental Despotism


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