

# Eugenics and Assisted Reproduction Technology

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## *The origins of eugenics*

As has often been observed, Darwin's natural selection hypothesis, though based on abundant scientific data, was formulated in a specific historical context, namely the economic liberalism and free competition that characterized the rapid industrial and commercial expansion in nineteenth century England. Following Adam Smith, economic prosperity and social progress were considered to be the fruit of free trade and competition. These were seen to allow economic selection eliminate the ill-adapted enterprises and let only the fittest survive. Although Darwin is said to have been unaware of the social implications of his theory, many were those who saw how that theory suggested a similar selection to have occurred in the history of life and to be at work in nineteenth century English society and economy. In both cases progress could easily be seen to result from the selection of the better adapted and the elimination of those who failed to adapt.

It is also important to notice how, beyond Darwin, these ideas further developed in what was eventually called "Social Darwinism." According to that doctrine, since free competition and selection were considered to be the motor of progress in society as well as in biological evolution, no attempt should be made by society at helping the physically or economically poorly adapted. Helping the economically weak or physically handicapped by public laws would, it was argued, constitute an obstacle to social progress. Such human laws would indeed run against the basic law of Nature.

Similar ideas are also found at the origin of what Francis Galton, Charles Darwin's cousin, called "Eugenics". According to Galton, social and scientific measures should be taken so as to promote the uninhibited working of natural selection by eliminating less well adapted and weaker individuals and favoring the reproduction of the more vigorous and better adapted. "With characteristic Victorian confidence," Kitcher writes, "Galton did not offer a critical discussion of the values underlying his judgments about proper and defective births. Assuming that his readers would agree about the characteristics that should be promoted, he set about the business of promoting them (Kitcher 1996: 191)."

In Germany, Ernst Haeckel, the well known embryologist and champion of evolutionism believed it was the function of morality to favor natural selection. He therefore considered it to be the mission of the state to practice a eugenic policy through the artificial selection of the more vigorous individuals. Haeckel was particularly fond of praising the ancient Greek city of Sparta where only the perfectly healthy and well formed newborns were allowed to survive, the weak or physically handicapped being sacrificed shortly after birth. Thus, always according to Haeckel, the Spartan population enjoyed a continuous health and vigour not seen in other cities, an example that should be followed by Germany. He also suggested that an appropriate commission made up of physicians should identify sickly and handicapped individuals so as to eliminate them through a painless injection or drug. This, he added, would be all benefit to these individuals themselves and to society as a whole.

Needless to say, Haeckel's program was put into practice a few years later in Nazi Germany, with the horrifying results that gave rise, after the war, to the Nuremberg code of medical ethics and to the birth of Bioethics as a new discipline. It is important, however, to recall that similar policies had been proposed, well before Hitler, by biologists and physicians in a number of other countries, such as England and the United States.

As noticed by Arthur L. Caplan, "In the U.S. for much of the first half of this century, the mentally ill, and the retarded, alcoholics, recent immigrants ... became the object of government-sponsored sterilization efforts aimed at preventing the spread of "bad" genes to future generations." (Caplan, 1994, see also Lumerer, 1972). On her part, Margaret Sanger, the well-known American propagandist of birth control "constantly spoke of children who should never have been born, those children who pollute the race and drain the world of its resources." (Murphy, 1994: 8).

Similar ideas, privileging the strong at the expense of the weak, can also be found in other countries, such as can be seen in books published in prewar Japan.

### ***Enforced and utopian eugenics***

Examining the historical, scientific and social context of eugenics in the recent past may help us to better understand how to evaluate the possible longtime social consequences of modern techniques for prenatal genetic diagnosis aimed at selecting the birth of healthy babies. Although it may be claimed that the selective abortion of handicapped or diseased fetuses proceeds from the free choice of individual couples and cannot be compared to the policies enforced by the State, as in Nazi Germany, it should not be difficult to see how prenatal genetic diagnosis, when accompanied with the abortion of fetuses carrying grave hereditary handicaps or diseases, is inspired by ideas similar to those that guided the policies advocated by Ernst Haeckel. This is well perceived by groups of handicapped people and their families who see selective abortions as denying their right to live. Theirs is seen as a so-called *wrongful life* whose birth could have been prevented by a better medical technology. Accordingly, given recent progress in genetic diagnosis, “people that do bring handicapped children into the world will be looked upon as foolish and irresponsible” (Appleyard, 1998: 135). Indeed it is not hard to see how individual choices will progressively alter society’s view of handicaps.

Emphasizing the distinction between compulsory and freely chosen eugenics may be thought to ignore the fact that individual choices are never made in a social vacuum. Certainly, the immediate motivation in the two kinds of eugenical practice may differ there legally enforced, here freely chosen. But the long term social effects of both practices remain the same. Thus, enforced and utopian eugenics may be closer by their nature and their effects than currently imagined by many. To deny this would be to close one’s eyes to the impact of private choices on society as a whole.

“For me,” writes Appleyard, “it is all too obvious that those who deny the title eugenics to anything other than coercive, socially targeted control of reproduction, are doing so because they wish to avoid the Nazi taint,” and further, “the debate should not, however, be blurred by concealed fears of the word itself. It is not the name given to something that is most important, rather it is the scale of values we apply that matters.”(Appleyard, 1998, 80-81).

### ***Assisted reproduction and eugenics***

More recently, *In Vitro* Fertilization (IVF), a technique developed as a remedy to infertility, proceeds one step further in the same direction as prenatal diagnosis. This is because IVF, as now widely practiced, nearly always involves the production of so-called “supernumerary embryos.” It therefore has led naturally to the analysis of the genetic qualities of the early embryos before implantation in the mother’s womb, the embryos judged to present a genetic “risk” being discarded and only those possessing characteristics highly valued by the parents being selected for implantation.

It therefore becomes evident that some of the procedures closely associated with IVF tend to foster in society a eugenic type of mentality that most people in our society once used to find deeply repugnant. This is a mentality that values people not for their humanity but for the qualities they possess. Moreover, as the practice spreads, there is little doubt that IVF will soon be used not only as a remedy to infertility but also as a means to choose the qualities of one’s child. In such a society, people with handicaps will then increasingly be regarded as the result of technology’s “mistakes” or the parents’ irresponsibility.

### ***Utopian eugenics as a threat to future human society***

When discussing the ethical implications of IVF as a technique of Assisted Reproduction, attention has

often been drawn to the number of sacrificed human lives that accompany each successful birth. Indeed, the discarding of so-called supernumerary embryos appears to take for granted the legitimacy of using abortion for promoting the quality of human lives. For those who believe that human life begins at conception this would seem to be a powerful reason for questioning the morality of IVF and embryo transfer (ET).

However, even for the many who do not share this view of the moment when a human child begins to exist, the *selection process* whereby some embryos are discarded and others allowed to further develop by being returned to the mother's womb is bound to raise disturbing questions. Confronted by the possibility of selecting lives, have not many citizens of the affluent democracies already begun to alter their attitudes toward the value of human lives? If the desire to avoid the birth of severely handicapped children suffices to eliminate the discarding of some human embryos, are not we already being psychologically conditioned to eliminate embryos that, for a number of reasons will probably not enjoy the quality of life their parents expect for their children? Where then shall we draw the line an embryo has to reach in order to be allowed to further develop and be born?

In short, does not the increasingly widely practiced IVF and preimplantation diagnosis lead the individual members of our society to adopt standards and practices quite similar to these advocated as public policies by Haeckel and Galton? This is well perceived by groups of handicapped people and their families as denying their right to live. Theirs will be seen by many as a so-called "wrongful life," that is a life whose birth should have been prevented by a better medical technology. Accordingly, people who bring into the world handicapped children that could have been aborted will probably be looked upon as foolish and irresponsible.

As a matter of fact, similar questions were raised recently in some notes written by Semba Yukari, a graduate student at Waseda University. Therein she points out the need for bioethics to evaluate the possible consequences of assisted reproductive technologies (IVF and ET). Here are her main comments:

1. A technology, once developed, if it happens to answer the needs of some people, tends to expand and influence the ethical judgment of public opinion regarding the ... "morality" of that particular technology. This well appears in the case of IVF and ET. These were first highly suspect to many but, as their practice spread, (they) became progressively accepted, without however any answer having been given to the ethical questions first raised.
2. In a more general way, it may easily happen that the interests of some individuals cause a technique to spread in such a way that it develops in unexpected directions which do not correspond to the true wishes of society as a whole.
3. It is therefore imperative for a new technology not only to be freely chosen by the patient, but to have its possible social consequences carefully examined.

What was written above about the ethical questions raised by assisted reproduction technologies makes it clear that the points made by Semba Yukari deserve serious consideration on the part of bioethicists. The frequent practice of IVF and ET, accompanied by preimplantation genetic diagnosis, is bound to foster in society a mentality that values human beings not for their humanity but for the qualities they possess. Moreover, as the practice spreads, there is little doubt that IVF will soon be used not only as a remedy to infertility, but also as a means for choosing the characteristics of one's child. In such a society people with handicaps will increasingly be regarded as the result of technology's "mistakes."

If it remains uncontrolled, the practice of IVF and fertilized egg genetic diagnosis will create a capacity for a kind of "homemade eugenics" where individual families decide what kind of children they want to have. At present, the kind they select are those without disabilities or diseases. In the future some couples might have the

opportunity, via the genetic analysis of embryos, to have *improved babies*, children who are judged likely to be more intelligent, or more athletic, or better looking, whatever this may mean! In this sense, the development of Assisted Reproduction Technologies provides a clear example of the points Semba proposes to the reflection of bioethicists. How could this slide into eugenics be avoided, or at least its danger reduced?

### ***Possible counter-measures***

Prenatal diagnosis is probably here to stay and the increasingly more widely used methods of assisted reproduction will almost inevitably also lead to the practice of preimplantation genetic diagnosis. The question here asked is thus: how can both kinds of diagnosis be controlled so as to avoid their fostering a eugenic type of mentality in society as a whole?

1. A radical measure would be to restrict the use of IVF to cases of medically ascertained cases of infertility. Such a restriction, however, is not likely to be readily accepted. (cf, French legislation Documents, p. 219, 227, 230)
2. Public financial support for prenatal or preimplantation genetic screening could be restricted to couples considered to be at risk of giving birth to severely handicapped children (because of previous such births). One could thereby avoid genetic screening to become routinely practiced in all pregnancies, independently of the wishes of the mother.
3. All kinds of genetic diagnosis should be obligatorily accompanied by competent genetic counselling.
4. The target of preimplantation or prenatal diagnosis should be limited to incurable, serious hereditary diseases or disabilities, preventing thereby a slide from negative eugenic practices to positive, quality enhancing eugenics. In this way one may hope to avoid the eugenic selection of embryos on account of their sex or because of preferred qualities (intelligence, good looks, etc.).

However, it will be evident to many that the slide from negative to positive eugenic practices will not be easily prevented by mere legal regulations. The debate should rather be about where good eugenics shades into bad, and we can make that judgment only on the basis of our total view of life.

### ***Conclusion***

From what was written above it will be clear that the basic question raised by the new methods of assisted reproduction and genetic diagnosis is that which much of modern technology confronts us with today. Shall we make use of technology for technology's sake? Or shall we use it only when it helps us, and society, to become more human? In other words, shall we become the servants of technology? or shall technology remain at the service of our human ideals? Beyond individual choices, the new possibilities opened to us by advances in the Life Sciences, once more force us to reexamine what are our basic values, what sort of society we wish to live in and leave to our children (Alonso, 199).

Obviously, a social mentality privileging the stronger and more richly endowed is inimical to the basic values proposed by Christianity. Not only does a Christian view of man regard all men as equal but it also sees in each of them a beloved "child of God." Christ himself, indeed, gave us the example of a preference for the sick, the weak and socially disadvantaged, those that are called "blessed" in the Sermon on the Mount. As is well known, this is why, in the eyes of Nietzsche, Christian ethics were despised as an "Ethics for slaves."

The recent tragedy of Nazism reminds us how, even in a highly cultured Christian country, the way society looks at people -- the commonly accepted value judgments -- can influence the future of society and contribute

to render it either less or more human. The practice of genetic screening, far from being merely a matter for personal choice, must be seen in all its far reaching social and human consequences. As John-Paul II once said when visiting Hiroshima: “To remember the past is to become responsible for the future.” The universally condemned crimes that resulted from the eugenic mentality of the Nazis should constitute a powerful reminder of the possible, not to say the likely, consequences of genetic screening and assisted reproduction technology as now practiced.

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