

Making better babies

Arthur Schafer

A review of *The Case against Perfection: ethics in the age of genetic engineering*, Michael J. Sandel, Belknap: Harvard. 2007, 162 pp.

Suppose that scientists were to make the following interesting discovery. When a woman consumes eleven pounds of broccoli in the first trimester of her pregnancy, sprinkled (the broccoli, not the woman) with lemon juice and wheat germ, her baby will later experience dramatic intellectual gains: thirty additional IQ points and doubled memory capacity. It seems a good bet that many pregnant women, perhaps most, would alter their diet in light of this discovery, and there might be a lot of pushing and shoving in the produce section of Safeway.

Intuitively, there doesn't seem to be anything morally objectionable in the desire of parents to enhance the intellectual capabilities of their children by such dietary interventions, whether during gestation or post-partum.

Indeed, there is virtually an entire wall of books at your nearest book seller dedicated to assisting parents who wish to enhance the intelligence, physique, and personality of their infants. Sceptics may doubt that playing Mozart's *Eine Kleine Nachtmusik* to the foetus *in utero* will have much of an impact. But, if there is some empirical evidence pointing in the direction of efficacy, hey, it's a lean mean competitive world out there and many would insist that it's a parental duty to ensure that one's tyke is not left behind in the competition for success. Pregnant women who are unable or unwilling to overcome their broccoli aversion might find themselves socially censured or even subject to accusations of child neglect.

One of the nice things about my broccoli/lemon juice/wheat germ diet is that it's cheap, safe and could be available to any parents who aspire to enhance the ability and talent of their offspring. That's on the one hand. But, on the other hand, it takes only a moment's reflection to realize that parents who are determined to gain a competitive edge for their babies will quickly find themselves mired in a self-defeating arms race. Being smarter and having a better memory might improve one's enjoyment of life but these enhancements won't confer a competitive advantage when one's competitors have been similarly enhanced. When everyone stands on tiptoe, no one sees better.

The Case against Perfection is concerned, in part, with the willingness of some parents to employ modern medical technology to bioengineer their child's cognitive and/or athletic abilities. Such genetic technologies are likely, at least for the foreseeable future, to be extremely expensive; so, when they become available they will be available only to the wealthiest strata of society. This, however, raises a number of moral concerns. For example, the gene rich might come to think of themselves as an altogether different species from the gene poor. The division between social classes (in North America and

Western Europe), already wide, could easily become an unbridgeable chasm. Social cohesion, already thin, could be dangerously attenuated. The ideal of equality of opportunity, to which liberal societies pay at least lip service, might suffer a fatal blow.

These dangers ought to be of concern to all who care about human equality, human dignity and social solidarity.

Proponents of genetic enhancement technologies argue, *per contra*, that if it's morally permissible to spend a great whack of money buying a superior education for one's child, or special athletic coaching, then it should also be permissible to spend comparable sums of money to purchase better genes. Some opponents accept that buying better genes for one's children is similar to buying a better education for them, but then insist that a just society would permit neither, on the grounds that all children should have comparable life chances regardless of their parent's wealth.

Although genetic enhancement technologies are very expensive they are not (yet) either safe or effective - compelling reasons against permitting their use, especially when the "beneficiaries" would be unconsenting babies or children.

At this point in the discussion, Sandel broadens the framework: "[S]uppose that muscle-enhancement, memory-enhancement, and height-enhancement technologies were perfected to the point where they were safe and available to all. Would they cease to be objectionable?"

The gravamen of the argument Sandel then presents is that, even assuming safety and accessibility to all, bioengineering would be morally objectionable because it would somehow diminish our humanity. The Promethean aspiration to remake human nature may, he fears, destroy the gifted character of human powers and achievements: "To appreciate children as gifts is to accept them as they come, not as objects of our design, or products of our will, or instruments of our ambition."

To accept them as they come? Recall the broccoli recipe. If we, as parents, are permitted or even expected to enhance our children's physical and intellectual powers through diet and education, how can it be objectionable in principle to enhance their powers by means of biotechnology? Sandel tries but (in my view) fails to provide a plausible answer to this question.

Nevertheless, Sandel's discussion offers a range of rather interesting arguments both in favour and against his own position, and does so in a reasonably fair-minded way. Even those who object to the fulcrum of his position – a quasi-religious appeal to "giftedness" – will find the book profitable to read.

Professor Schafer teaches Philosophy at the University of Manitoba and is Director of the Centre for Professional and Applied Ethics. Schafer@cc.umanitoba.ca

