

Title: The Genetic Genie

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"The Moral Meaning of Genetic Technology" by Leon R. Kass, in *Commentary* (Sept. 1999), 165 E. 56th St., New York, N.Y. 10022.

Are popular fears about genetic technology the product of ignorance? Many scientists say so -- but not Kass, a physician-philosopher at the University of Chicago. "The public is right to be ambivalent" about genetic technology, he argues.

Genetic technology differs from conventional medicine. When the technology is fully developed, genetic engineers will deliberately make changes that will be passed on to succeeding generations, and may even be able to alter particular future individuals. Genetic enhancement may allow creation of new human capacities. "The genetic genie, first unbottled to treat disease, will go its own way, whether we like it or not," Kass believes.

Genetic engineering aside, gaining advance knowledge of an individual's likely or possible medical future by "reading" his genes may not always be a good thing, Kass observes. "Should we welcome knowledge that we carry a predisposition to Alzheimer's disease [or] schizophrenia?" Such knowledge could prove inhibiting, even crippling. Without "blind hopes," human aspiration and achievement may be diminished.

Most genetic technologists imagine themselves to be enhancing people's freedom in making decisions about their health or reproductive choices. But in reality, Kass contends, genetic power may well curb the freedom of most people, subjecting them even further to "the benevolent tyranny of expertise." Already, in many cases today, he says, "practitioners of prenatal diagnosis refuse to do fetal genetic screening in the absence of a prior commitment from the pregnant woman to abort any afflicted fetus." In other situations, pregnant women are pressured to undergo genetic testing. Eventually, Kass believes, strong economic forces are likely to develop that will work to compel genetic abortion or intervention. "All this will be done, of course, in the name of the wellbeing of children."

At the root of popular anxiety about genetic technology, Kass says, is the challenge it poses to human dignity. It puts scientists in the role of God, standing "in judgment of each being's worthiness to live or die." And the road from in vitro fertilization "leads all the way to the world of designer babies." Producing genetically sound babies will mean "the transfer of procreation from the home to the laboratory," turning it into "manufacture." This new arrangement, he says, "will be profoundly dehumanizing."

As genetic engineering progresses, Kass contends, the standard of health by which it is guided will become increasingly vague. "Are you healthy if, although you show no symptoms, you carry genes that will definitely produce Huntington's disease?" And with the inevitable arrival of "genetic enhancement," he continues, the standard will vanish along with "our previously unalterable human

nature.... Because memory is good, can we say how much more memory would be better? If sexual desire is good, how much more would be better? Life is good; but how much extension of life would be good for us?"

Is the Brave New World inevitable? Everything depends, Kass says, on whether the technological approach to life "can be restricted and brought under intellectual, spiritual, moral, and political rule." About that, he is not optimistic.

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