PERFECTION COMPLEX

Genetic Technologies Could Compromise What it Means to Be Human, Warns Political Philosopher Michael Sandel

BY SUSAN LUMENELLO

Should those of us who can afford it take advantage of emerging genetic technologies to perfect our minds, bodies, and children? In his newest book, The Case Against Perfection: Ethics in the Age of Genetic Engineering (Harvard), Michael Sandel argues that sex-selection, human and animal cloning, designer eggs, freemarket eugenics, and other forms of biotechnological enhancement threaten our humanity.

Breakthroughs in genetics “present us with a promise and a predicament,” writes Sandel, the Anne T. and Robert M. Bass professor of government.

The promise is well-documented: The cloning of embryonic stem cells may lead to treatments for multiple sclerosis, diabetes, and other illnesses; gene therapies show hope for treating and even preventing still other diseases; and bioengineering may reduce the bone fragility and memory lapses of aging.

But Sandel also sees a predicament that arises when these technologies become available for nonmedical uses—in a quest for perfection that he finds deeply worrisome. He spoke recently with Colloquy about these concerns and why we need new arguments to engage in a debate about this uncharted medical—and moral—territory.

I understand from the acknowledgments in the book that the provocative title was suggested by your editor at The Atlantic magazine, where the book began as an essay in 2005. But what does the title mean to you? Who would be against perfection?

Michael Sandel: It’s less the goal of perfection that gives rise to moral disquiet than the attitudes and habits, even the hubris, that attend the drive for perfection. That seems to me the heart of it. For example, there’s nothing wrong with parents seeking the best for their children: the best education, the best healthcare, and so on. At the same time, there is a tendency toward hyperparenting.

What do you mean by “hyperparenting”?

MS: Even before we get to questions of genetic engineering, I mean the anxious excess of parental managing and molding and directing of children. The danger of using genetic technologies to get “designer children” is that it will reinforce the tendency of hyperparents to see their children as instruments of their own ambition...

That’s the tendency that I worry about. It’s that aspect of the drive for perfection that worries me... The risk is that we will turn children into objects of manufacture, into commodities...pick[ing] and choo[ing] the genetic traits we want in our children, rather than [viewing them] as independent persons. And there’s the risk, too, of undermining the unconditional love parents have for children if we begin to specify hair color, eye color, height, sex. If we pick and choose the traits of our children, there is the risk of turning parenting into an extension of the consumer society. And that could erode the norms of unconditional love of parents for children.

You’re a parent. Have you ever had to restrain yourself from engaging in hyperparenting?

MS: I think anyone who’s spent any time on the sidelines of youth soccer fields or Little League baseball diamonds has not only witnessed [hyperparenting] but experienced the temptation to hyperparent. Of course it’s always those other parents who display it at its extreme! But honesty requires, I think, noticing those same tendencies in oneself. I think it does take an exercise of restraint on the part of parents, especially these days. When I was in high school, nobody I knew took an SAT prep course. Today, parents look around,
especially in affluent suburban public high schools and also in private schools... and feel that there’s a kind of arms-race mentality. Since everyone else is burnishing their college credentials and taking SAT prep courses, not to do so seems to be depriving one’s own child of a competitive advantage.

The real danger [of hyperparenting] will come when parents feel pressured to resort to genetic engineering for the sake of giving their children a competitive edge, or even keeping up with what other people are doing. We see this already in a limited way with the use of human growth hormone, which can modestly increase the height of children. It was introduced to help children with a hormonal deficiency, but it also works with genetically short but otherwise healthy children. So the question is: Are we going to have a hormonal arms race for height?

In part, you seem worried about these great scientific temptations because you fear that people with the means to pay for them will embrace them. How worried are you, and what exactly worries you?

MS: What worries me are not the genetic technologies by themselves but the availability of new genetic technologies together with social and cultural attitudes in an increasingly competitive society. It’s the combination, not just the technology. I should emphasize that I consider breakthroughs in genetics a great blessing for medicine and for health and for the relief of suffering. My sole concern is with the nonmedical use of genetic technologies, and I want to emphasize that. So I would not in any way want to restrain research and breakthroughs in genetics. To the contrary, they are crucially important for health. My concern is when technologies that were designed for the sake of promoting health are used for nonmedical purposes [and] are turned into instruments of competition in a consumer-driven society.

The moral concerns go back to the history of eugenics. In the first half of the 20th century, eugenics were associated with state control and coercion—forced sterilization and other odious measures) aimed at improving the gene pool. These competing analogies help clarify the moral status of genetic enhancement.

... Defenders of enhancement argue that there is no difference, in principle, between improving children through education and improving them through bioengineering. Critics of enhancement insist there is all the difference in the world. They argue that trying to improve children by manipulating their genetic makeup is reminiscent of eugenics, the discredited movement of the past century to improve the human race through policies (including forced sterilization and other odious measures) aimed at improving the gene pool. These competing analogies help clarify the moral status of genetic enhancement.

Michael Sandel has taught political philosophy at Harvard since 1980. His previous books include Public Philosophy: Essays on Morality in Politics. His writings also appear in publications such as The Atlantic Monthly, New Republic, and New York Times. He is pictured here at Sanders Theatre, teaching the popular undergraduate course “Justice,” in which students wrestle with moral issues such as those engendered by bioengineering advances.
And the dividing line is, of course, who can afford it.

MS: Yes, and that’s a very important point. Now that eugenics is basically a free-market activity, those who will avail themselves of genetically enhanced children will be those who can afford it. The risk is that the gap between rich and poor will be genetically reinforced, will be reflected in the use of these genetic technologies, and that seems to me a very serious concern.

Could you foresee a situation where there was financial aid for people who couldn’t afford genetic enhancement, in order to level the playing field?

MS: It’s a good question. In principle, you could level the playing field and provide public subsidies or financial aid—the equivalent of need-based scholarships—for genetic enhancement technologies. The reason I would not welcome that alternative is that I think the recourse to genetic enhancement is undesirable for rich and poor alike. I don’t think the fundamental problem is inequality of access because I think it’s a spurious good in the first place, in part because it’s at odds with important norms, like the norm of unconditional love of parents for children.

But if we as a society came to believe that genetically increasing, say, IQ was as important as healthcare, then I could see an argument for providing public subsidies for it. I’m not optimistic, by the way, that that would come to pass. We haven’t even managed to achieve universal healthcare, never mind universal access to genetic enhancement. So I would rather that we enact universal healthcare than have a society where the affluent can buy genetic technologies to enhance their children, while other children in our society lack basic healthcare. That seems to me to be, morally speaking, the worst of both worlds.

You served on the President’s Bioethics Council (2002–05). Should a body be created to regulate genetic technologies?

MS: First of all, I think there should be an explicit public debate about the use of new genetic technologies for nonmedical purposes. I also think that there should be some regulations placed on the nonmedical use of genetic engineering. The United States probably has less regulation in this area than any of the other advanced industrial democracies. Unlike the European countries, we have not even been able to enact a ban on human reproductive cloning.

Why is that?

MS: The attempt to do so repeatedly got caught up in the debate over embryonic stem cell research. There are for-profit fertility clinics in the United States that for $18,000 will let you choose in advance the sex of your child...for reasons totally unrelated to any medical need, truly preferential sex selection. These for-profit clinics have virtually no regulation, unlike [in] Britain, Canada, France, Germany, all of which have a very careful regulation of what these days is called reprogenetics, the use of new genetic technologies for reproduction.

What do these European and other countries regulate?

MS: They regulate sex selection. They regulate human reproductive cloning....It’s odd that my barber is subject to more licensing and regulatory requirements than for-profit fertility clinics that are carrying on these experiments with new genetic technologies.

The resistance [to regulation] comes from two ends of the political spectrum. There are some who are pro-choice on abortion who are concerned that any regulation of fertility clinics will be the “first step” toward regulating abortion. And there are those from the right-to-life end of the political spectrum who oppose any regulation of fertility clinics because they oppose in vitro fertilization as such and they’re afraid that regulating fertility clinics would implicitly condone fertility treatments, which they’re against. So, together, from these different ends of the political spectrum, there has been this resistance in the United States which one does not find in European countries [or] Canada.

One other reason that regulation is important: We had a debate in recent years about embryonic stem cell research, and I was among those in the minority on the President’s Council on Bioethics who argued in favor of federal funding for embryonic stem cell research. Having responsible regulation to prevent abuse of these technologies makes it easier to make the case for responsible science, including embryonic stem cell research. For example, one of the arguments [that] opponents of stem cell research raise against therapeutic cloning—the use of cloning techniques for stem cell research—is [that] it could lead to human reproductive cloning.

So, if we had a ban on human reproductive cloning—as all European countries do—it would be easier, not harder, to make the case for responsible science, including embryonic stem cell research....I think it would help the cause of biomedical research to have some regulations to prevent abuse and to assure the highest ethical standards.

Would you favor regulations for some of the other technologies you discuss in your book, such as implants for memory enhancement and other items in the buffet of genetic improvement?

MS: That’s a harder question. I think we need to know more about how exactly memory-enhancing drugs or genetic therapies will develop in order to know whether and under what circumstances they should be permitted. But I do think we should have a public debate about the ethics of these technologies.

If we’re going to have a public debate about genetic technologies and their regulation, the major political parties will have to play a key role. How effective have they been in setting up this debate?

MS: First, I should say I was surprised to have been asked to serve on the President’s Council for Bioethics. They surely knew when they invited me that I’m not a Republican. In the debates we had about embryonic stem cell research, I was critical of the President’s restrictions on federal funding for embryonic stem cell research, so there’s no secret about that.

But stepping back in the way that your question suggests, I think that neither party has done a very good job at framing public debate on the broader issues. So far, the public debate has been restricted to the question of embryonic stem cell research, which too often has tended to track the abortion debate. A much broader range of moral questions is at stake in the question of genetic engineering or enhancement. I don’t think either party has come to terms with this yet, in part because both parties tend to approach the question with old reflexes.
Old reflexes?

MS: Reflexes that were shaped by the abortion debate. So, many liberals think first about questions of autonomy and individual choice, whereas many conservatives focus on the moral status of the embryo. But neither of those frameworks is adequate to the fuller debate we need to have about the use of genetic technologies for enhancement. Both liberals and conservatives need to begin to develop a way of thinking about bioethics—and what some are beginning to call bio-politics—that reaches beyond the abortion debate, pro-choice versus pro-life.

You write, “The connection between solidarity and giftedness...saves a meritocratic society from sliding into the smug assumption that success is the crown of virtue.” Can you talk about that connection?

MS: The idea of giftedness goes along with a willingness to be open to the unpredictability of life. To appreciate children as gifts, for example, is to accept them as they come, not as we might “design” them. This idea of giftedness looms large in the argument that I try to make because it emphasizes the importance of what theologian William May calls “an openness to the unbidden,” [that is,] the unchosen—and that openness, which involves a certain humility and restraint, seems to me to be very important morally but also to have civic consequences.

Which brings us to solidarity. If we put aside genetic engineering for the moment and just think, why do we, I think, give the fortunate even anything to the less fortunate in society? One answer to that question depends heavily on the idea of giftedness. Some people are fortunate or blessed or gifted through no doing of their own, and if many of our advantages can’t be said to be our own doing, then that gives a powerful moral impetus to solidarity with those less fortunate than ourselves.

So, my concern is that the moral and civic basis of solidarity would be diminished, would be eroded, if we really did come to think of ourselves as self-made ...[if] biotechnology enabled us really to become... as the one to speak, the self-made men and women of Promethean aspiration... Whereas if I think of myself as the beneficiary of gifts or luck or grace or fortune, then I think there’s a greater tendency be able to look at someone else and say, “There but for the grace of God—or the luck of the genetic lottery—go I.” ... Some of the advantages I enjoy are not my own doing; they’re gifts, things for which I’m indebted, not things that I control wholly. That way of thinking lends itself to solidarity. Whereas if I think, “Everything I have I did, I made, my own doing, I’m not indebted to anyone or anything for it,” that way of thinking makes the case for solidarity much more difficult.

In the book, you use health insurance as a good example of solidarity. People buy into this pool because one never knows what will happen with one’s health. With more self-determination, though, one will know more things and perhaps be less empathetic about other’s medical woes.

MS: Yes! Even if we are able to map our own genomes—now, it’s millions of dollars to map a person’s genome, but they say eventually the cost will go way down—what will it be like when we know all about genetic propensities to various diseases? Well, we still won’t know how likely we are to be the victim of accidents. But the sharing, the pooling of risk, that is involved in health insurance...will become much more difficult.

Humility and restraint don’t really characterize our age.

MS: (Smiles.) They don’t.

How will you reinforce your argument in the public arena, or are you just hopeful?

MS: That’s a good question too. I think you’re right: There are precious few resources for humility and restraint in our society, and I’m trying to lean against the current, which is very much in the direction of increasing our mastery, dominion, and control over nature, including human nature. There’s always been a powerful drive—especially in America—toward thinking of ourselves as being self-made. But now biotechnology comes along and empowers that drive even more deeply.

So, I think it’s all the more important to notice those features of our moral and civic landscape that depend on a certain measure of humility and restraint, and to try and shore them up. Now, some people will say, “But all of medical advances, all of scientific advances, depend on rejecting restraint—for example, surgery and using tools to cut open the body.” And I accept that. I’m all for mastery when it comes to restoring health and curing disease, but what I’m trying to point out is that there is still an important place for humility and restraint, and that certain important social and civic practices depend on those virtues.

How to deal with the fact that society is headed in the other direction? The only way is to try to encourage a public debate that recognizes these important domains of life that depend on moral resources at odds with the drive to mastery and control, at odds with the Promethean ambition.

Do you think Barry Bonds should have an asterisk next to his name in the baseball record book?

MS: Yes. In fact, I would prefer [that] he not break the record, but that won’t come to pass. By the time [this interview] appears, he will long since have surpassed Hank Aaron. My interest in baseball by far predates my interest in biotechnology. I grew up near Minneapolis, Minn., in the days when Harmon Killebrew was the great homerun hero—without the help of any performance-enhancing drugs—and then Willie Mays. So I do think [Bonds’s is] a lesser achievement and, sadly, a sign of the times.