

## Stuart Low Philosophy Forum: Genetic Enhancement

Genetic enhancement has become a reality in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and opens up a number of moral questions.

First of all: What is genetic enhancement?

- Anything that improves upon the body by directly manipulating the brain or body. Examples are gene insertion in embryos, implantation, some drug use, including steroids in sports
- Enhancement is different from treatment. When treating an illness, you take an unhealthy individual and you bring them back to a range of normal health and functioning. When enhancing, you take a healthy individual and push their boundaries further, beyond normal health or functioning.

### Consequences for the Individual

The first half of the session was devoted to how genetic enhancement impacts the individual. One way enhancement seems to impact the self is by altering what is natural about us.

Therefore, the first discussion question asked: Is there something fundamentally good about the way we naturally are? And, if so, is this threatened when we partake in genetic enhancement?

Some people believed that there was indeed something fundamentally good about our 'natural human condition'. Though it might be hard to pinpoint why, we feel like there is something valuable about the way we are born that we don't want to lose completely through something like genetic enhancement.

But some people thought it was good to improve upon bad aspects of who we are. After all, we engage in improvements of ourselves on a daily basis. A great example is education. A more medical example might be vaccination. In both cases, we take a healthy human being and try to improve upon their functioning or their health. What makes genetic enhancement different from either of these cases, or other forms of enhancement not directly on the body?

One way to make the distinction between genetic enhancement and cases like education is to address what moral questions genetic enhancement brings up about how we acquire our skills, our personality, and, very interestingly, our virtues. How do we determine what is moral about ourselves, when it has been created? For perhaps we can only make moral judgments about our actions when our self – our virtues, our values, and so on – has been earned.

This is well illustrated by an example. If we could take a pill that would make us kinder, more courteous people, why wouldn't we take it? On one hand, if everyone took such a pill, perhaps the world would be a nicer place to live in. But on the

other hand, perhaps we couldn't appreciate this artificial, manufactured form of kindness, the way we do with people who are kind without genetic enhancement. There might, then, be something worrisome about being able to engineer virtues that you haven't earned.

Perhaps we should be concerned about how genetic enhancement impacts the individual because of the consequences it can have on individual morality, especially if we agree that virtues need to be learned 'naturally'. Yes, we do receive social influences in the way we learn virtue (e.g. through parents and society in general, rewarding/punishing us and thus reinforcing certain moral behaviour), but, influence or no, we still must apply our own will to finally acquire these virtues. Not so with genetic enhancement.

## Consequences for Society

The second half of the session was devoted to how genetic enhancement impacts society. One such influence might be seen in the way enhancement changes the way we think about equal opportunity.

Equal opportunity was defined in our session as providing similar prospects for people of similar talents and abilities, for instance in applying for a job. Currently, we secure equal opportunity for all by working on removing structural biases like sexism or racism. But once genetic enhancement comes into play, thus introducing genetic control over our characteristics and capabilities, do we secure equal opportunity simply by correcting 'bad genetic luck' – for instance, by imbuing everyone with the same IQ?

Therefore, the second discussion question asked: Could enhancement 'balance out' inequalities, or would they make them worse?

This is a hard question and doesn't generate a simple answer. One philosophical response might go like this. Suppose that genetic enhancement is widely available and inequality exists. Then perhaps we have a moral reason to use enhancement to respond to the inequality, by intervening with the natural lottery. Philosophers interpreting John Rawls, a political philosopher who emphasised the importance of equal opportunity in social justice, have wondered whether natural bad luck should be fixed if it is possible to do so. Equal opportunity requires elimination of barriers to similar prospects for persons of similar talents and abilities. If taken a step further, why wouldn't it mean using genetic enhancement to eliminate the effects of bad luck in the social or natural lottery?

We might worry, though, about access to genetic enhancement. Does it matter how enhancement is made accessible to the public, most notably to the lower class, for whom genetic enhancement will be less affordable and accessible? Yes, but, again, maybe genetic enhancement is nothing morally new. Why treat it any differently from other forms of enhancement that people have unequal access to? People have unequal access to health care all over the world. Health care is freely available in the UK and not available in the same quality in other countries around the world. So do

we legalise genetic enhancement and couple it with the best means we can, through subsidies and other economic measures, to provide it to all? (Isn't it possible that such a policy would just raise the bottom line – but leave inequalities intact?) Are we comfortable with this scenario?

It is clear that genetic enhancement poses a lot of philosophical questions. In discussing what genetic enhancement might do to the ways we think about individual morality and equal opportunity, we have examined only two of surely many more issues. With the growing importance of genetic enhancement, it is probably only a matter of time before we are required to answer to these ethical considerations.