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Should we cure stupidity?

As advancements in genetic research have presented us with evidence to suggest the existence of genetic links to intelligence levels, issues concerning the idea of 'curing' stupidity are being examined. Various scientists claim to have already discovered genes that are linked to cognitive abilities and geneticists such as James Watson believe that eventually we will be able to genetically enhance lower intelligence levels, and effectively treat low intelligence in the same manner as a genetic disease. However, even if we do manage to develop a method that enhances low levels of intelligence, there is debate as to whether we have the right to interfere with characteristics such as intelligence which most people view as part of normal human variation. The main question within this issue is whether it is justifiable to use these scientific advances to our advantage?

It seems as though the advice from James Watson is to treat low intelligence levels as any other disease. Watson seems to believe that enhancing the intelligence of individuals will benefit our society. Watson's credibility as a source in this argument is increased by the fact that he is a renowned scientist and therefore has obtained a high level of expertise on genetic issues, particularly as he was partially responsible for the discovery of the structure and function of DNA. This also means that his reputation as a scientist also increases the credibility of his argument. However, as a scientist he could be seen to have a vested interest because he would naturally argue that any form of scientific advancement deserves to be put into practice, if this is taken into account, his credibility as a source is decreased. Watson's views are consequently prone to be bias because he would be more inclined to support developments that expand the frontiers of genetic research. From the perspective of a scientist, the ability to enhance intelligence through genetics is a breakthrough rather than a potential problematic. However there is reason to believe that Watson is not purely approaching this from a scientific perspective. According to an article from the Times, Watson's son suffered from a disorder similar to autism that caused various learning difficulties. Watson claims that his son's disorder has influenced his views on the idea of enhancing intelligence. This factor increases his reliability as a source because he has first hand experienced of the effect of cognitive disabilities on an individual's life and isn't therefore simply viewing this issue from a clinical perspective as many people have assumed. Given that the scientists have yet to test the theory of genetically enhancing intelligence, we cannot criticise Watson based on observation.

An alternative perspective on this issue is that it is morally wrong to enhance cognitive abilities. This ethical argument deals with the Christian principle of the sanctity of life[1] that is to say that each individual's life is made sacred by God and therefore should not be altered. Christian Organisations such as the Catholic Medical Association and the Christian medical fellowship believe that genetic screening[2] should only be used to diagnose a severe genetic disorder. Although the views of these societies must be taken into account when addressing this issue, the credibility of their evidence is questionable. Naturally these organisations are prone to appearing bias given their religious beliefs, compromising their reliability as a source. The level of expertise concerning genetics within these organisations is unknown therefore; though members of this society are medically trained it cannot be assumed that they are able to make a steadfast judgment on this issue. A large proportion of their reasoning is based on opinion and principle which will compromise their credibility as they have little evidentiary support to sustain their arguments.

Another perspective on this issue is that the idea of 'curing' stupidity is in fact farcical; nullifying Watson's argument. In 2003, Oliver James, a clinical psychologist claimed in the Times that the idea of enhancing cognitive abilities is, "so far away as to be science fiction"[3]. He accused Watson of 'ropey thinking' given his assertions that there is undoubtedly a link between genetics and intelligence when there is little evidence to support this claim. James,

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[1] Defined as the ultimate importance and inviolability of human life by the online Oxford English Dictionary
[2] A process in which an individual's genes can be examined to expose genetic defects either before or after birth
[3] Quote taken from http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/uk/article1114058.ece

who has on more than one occasion criticized the idea of genetically enhancing abilities, can be viewed as a credible source given his expertise in clinical psychology, a specialty that would present evidence that abilities lie more within nurture than nature.

One reason as to why Watson believes that lower levels of intelligence should be genetically enhanced is that it will improve the quality of life of those who are less intelligent. However, this reason is based on the assumption that more intelligent people have a better quality of life. In modern society intelligence is not necessarily beneficial given that as a population we do not base quality of life on intelligence but on an individual's ability to enjoy normal life activities[4]. It does not take great intelligence to enjoy social activities or job satisfaction so the degree to which quality of life will be improved is questionable. Watson also formulates an analogy between genetically modifying intelligence and beauty. Although the same problems emerge when addressing both these issues such as whether or not it will genuinely improve quality of life, this analogy is weak because intelligence and beauty are distinctly different particularly as it is known that outward appearance is inherited whereas we are still unsure if intelligence has a genetic basis. Watson believes that low intelligence can be classed as a disease that can be eradicated, however many believe that different levels of aptitude merely bring about natural variation within the species, an idea which scientists, by observing evolution in other species, assert will benefit humans. Although Watson counters this in stating that increased intelligence would benefit society, this reasoning would be flawed given that it is not based on solid evidence, rather on an idea that may or may not materialise. Many critics have been guilty of attacking Watson's views claiming that he is entering a dangerous area of medical ethics, however it could be true that his beliefs have been over exaggerated. When referring to less intelligent people, Watson means the 'lower 10 per cent' that genuinely struggle with basic cognitive skills such as reactions to simple environmental changes. Though Watson's ideals have been overly criticised, his entire argument is flawed on the basis that intelligence is an extremely subjective trait.

Organisations such as the Catholic Medical Association base their argument against genetic alteration on the religious principle that scientists should not attempt to 'play God' given that the, 'life of every individual is created in the image and likeness of God and is therefore sacred and inviolable from conception to natural death'[5]. However it could be argued that as humans, we have a duty to care for our neighbour and improve the quality of life of others. If this means increasing intelligence then technically genetically enhancing this trait is justifiable. Religious arguments are generally fallacious given their reliance on moral principles rather than factual evidence.

Although scientists such as Oliver James present valid arguments against genetically enhancing intelligence as links between intelligence and genetics are weak, much of their argument is based on ad hominem attacks on Watson rather than his reasoning. Many scientists dismiss his ideas and some even fall down a slippery slope in stating that Watson is advocating eugenics[6], a practice carried out by Nazis during the Second World War. This is unwarranted as Watson is only referring to this 'bottom 10 per cent'. This is also a straw-man fallacy, because rather than critiquing Watson's actual argument, his critics have over-exaggerated and therefore distorted his argument. Some fear that gaining the ability to enhance intelligence may lead to the creation of super-intelligent humans. This would stunt the progress of a society as there would be no one willing to accept menial jobs. Our society survives on this variation of cognitive abilities. However, to state that these practices will lead to the creation of 'super-humans' in an attempt to scaremonger people into rejecting genetic enhancement, is excessive since Watson's argument is based on a theory that has yet to be put into practice.

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[4] Definition taken from http://www.medterms.com/script/main/art.asp?articlekey=11815

[5] From the Bioethical principles of Medical Practice at http://www.cathmed.org/publications/bioethical.htm

[6] The science of controlling breeding to produce a healthier, more intelligent race- definition taken from the online Oxford English dictionary

From a personal perspective, issues surrounding genetic modification are complex; however I believe that to state that this area of science should have no limits is reckless. Although in theory the idea of a society containing only intellectually gifted humans seems to be profitable, there are serious flaws in this ideology. I believe that it is wrong to make the assumption that by increasing intelligence levels of various individuals', society as a whole will benefit because this insinuates that higher levels of intelligence, a trait that is arguably very subjective, will improve quality of life. Although the use of genetic modification in humans may help to eradicate various genetic disorders that cause learning difficulties such as Fragile X syndrome I believe that this is the point at which genetic modification in humans should reach its limits.