

*In this article Johann Hari writes about **LIBERAL EUGENICS***

- 1 A decade after the creation of Dolly the sheep, we are living in a glorious age of liberation biology. New technologies are unveiled by doctors almost every week that make it possible to reduce the sum of human suffering in ways that would have seemed like Star Trek science-fiction when Dolly first came into our world. Pre-implantation Genetic Diagnosis makes it possible for couples with terrible hereditary diseases to have children without condemning them to a life of suffering. Stem cell research makes it possible for people with ruined spines to have some hope that they may walk again. Genetic screening has ensured hundreds of children are alive today because 'saviour siblings' were created as a match. Some time soon, infertile couples may be able to produce clones to pass on their genes. Human life is being extended and enhanced in ways that spread joy and harm nobody. 5 10
  
- 2 Leon Kass, the chairman of George Bush's Council of Bioethics, recently summarised some of the greatest biological advances of our time: "The Pill. In-vitro fertilisation. Bottled embryos. Surrogate wombs. Cloning. Genetic screening. Genetic manipulation. Organ harvesting. Mechanical spare parts. Brain implants. Ritalin<sup>1</sup> for the young, Viagra for the old, Prozac for everyone. And, to leave this vale of tears, a little extra Morphine accompanied by Muzak<sup>2</sup>". But Kass was not offering this as a joyous hymn of praise. No—he was offering it as a condemnation. He is not alone. There is a large constituency of people scattered across the world who treat the doctors pioneering these treatments as moral criminals. Amazing though it might seem, they want to stop all human beings from using technologies that will make our children healthier, cleverer and less likely to be disabled. This movement of bio-Luddites stretches from the White House to radical disability activists to the Vatican, and if the decent pro-science majority do not fight back, the bio-Luddites will win. 15 20
  
- 3 To understand what this will mean, we need to look at what would have happened if the bio-conservatives had prevailed a generation ago. The very same people described doctors who performed the first organ transplants as 'body snatchers' and 'grave robbers'. They predicted that the sickly would swiftly be bumped off in their hospital beds to harvest their hearts and livers and lungs. If they had won, tens of thousands of the people reading this article would be dead. When in-vitro fertilisation went mainstream, people like Kass said it was 'playing God' to conceive a child in a test tube, and that the relationship between children and parents would be 'irreparably damaged'. Kass still says we should heed the 'urgh!' factor, and trust 'the wisdom of our own repugnance'. But pre-rational repugnance quickly fades once we see the life-enhancing benefits of new technologies. So are there any more sensible objections to these life-extending therapies, and how can they be answered? 25 30 35
  
- 4 Some of these criticisms are simply based on misconceptions. Some people believe human clones will be carbon-copies of their originals, or 'robots' and 'automatons'. Scaremongers like Francis Fukuyama have even conjured hilarious visions of 'armies of cloned Hitlers'. But clones, once they can be safely created, some years from now, will not be replicas, with the same personality and memories as their originals. There are, after all, already hundreds of thousands of human clones in Britain. They are called identical twins, and we have no difficulty understanding that although they share a genetic profile, they are very different people. Does anybody believe they are robots? A clone of Hitler would look a 40

<sup>1</sup> Ritalin: a drug used to treat attention deficit disorders.

<sup>2</sup> Muzak: a term for any type of bland, monotonous background music.

bit like him, but would have none of his views, experiences or beliefs. Genes do not exclusively maketh the man. A string of dystopian fictions, like Kazuo Ishiguro's 'Never Let Me Go' or the Ewan MacGregor movie 'The Island', have imagined clones to have horrendous lives. But they are based on a flawed premise, that we would treat clones as lesser beings, not deserving of the basic rights of the rest of us. Why should that happen? We do not treat in-vitro fertilisation babies as sub-human, the way some people predicted we would. Once we grant clones full human rights, these nightmares melt away.

- 5 The criticism that deserves more careful consideration comes from disability rights activists like Adrienne Asch. They argue that this attempt to eradicate disability is an assault on disabled people. By trying to eradicate disabilities, we are saying disabled people are worth less, 'errors in the gene pool', and clearing the way for them to be treated even more badly. But is this true? By making sure that no more mothers take thalidomide during pregnancy, are we implicitly saying that thalidomide people have worthless lives and should be killed? Of course not. We are simply saying that people are more likely to be able to live the kind of life they want to with fully formed arms and legs. By ensuring that the number of able-bodied babies is maximised, we are simply acknowledging that, however harsh it might seem to say it, lacking an ability to hear or see or walk is not simply a difference. It is a disability nobody would voluntarily choose, and that you are better off without. Nor does the evidence suggest greater screening and treatment will lead to the remaining disabled people being treated worse. Since amniocentesis<sup>3</sup> was introduced, people with Down syndrome are, if anything, treated better.
- 6 The only criticism that really lingers in the mind comes from egalitarian critics. They warn that human biotechnology may create a world divided between the rich, with their 'Genetically Modified Babies', and the poor, who are lumbered with the random flaws of nature. The idea of human equality will, they say, melt in the biotech labs. But there is an answer to this. There are already inequalities thrown up by nature. I am nowhere near as clever as Amartya Sen, nor as good-looking as, say, Tom Cruise. Does that mean human equality is nonsense? No—my belief in it is strong enough to cope with smarter, better looking people. The solution to unequal access to biotech cannot be the Stalin-style levelling down proposed by the biotech-banners. We did not react to the invention of medicine, which similarly benefited only the rich at first, by banning it. In England, we reacted by creating the National Health Service so everyone could access it.
- 7 These worries do not outweigh the obvious, incalculable benefits of biotechnology. And we should be honest enough to call this attempt to improve the genetic lot of humanity by its name, liberal eugenics. It has nothing to do with the evil of Nazi eugenics, which was imposed by the state and concerned not with producing healthier babies but with deranged race-theories. No, this new brand is voluntarily entered into by parents, and it is motivated by love, not hate. The risk of not following this path, and failing to uncover cures for a thousand curses on humanity, is far greater than the risk of acting. Those who want to stop these natural, beautiful acts of love should be shunned and shamed.

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<sup>3</sup> Amniocentesis: a procedure in which fluid is removed from the womb of a pregnant woman to check the unborn baby for defects.