

Body and Soul in the Year 2020: Moral and Ethical Considerations in our Biological Future

Remember, thou hast made me more powerful than thyself....
–Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein*

This essay will focus on four questions: 1) what kind of people should there be? 2) how many people should there be? 3) how should people be made? and 4) as to each of the first three questions, who should decide? Other important questions—such as the treatment of animals and the just distribution of biological resources—have been set aside but not prejudged. I take up the four focal questions in turn.

What Kind of People Should There Be?

The obvious answer is, Good people, decent people, happy, virtuous people, the same kind of people we have always prized and tried to cultivate. But the promise of the new biotechnology cannot be dismissed as merely an improved means to an unimprovable end. These means are so radically improved that they force us to reconsider what the good for humans, or human flourishing, consists of. Whether happiness is taken to consist in the exercise of our distinctive faculties or, instead, in our pursuit of self-chosen ends, or simply in our pleasures themselves, the possibilities opened by the new biotechnology demand that we rethink what our distinctive faculties are, which of our ends are worthy of pursuit, and whether limitless pleasure is a plausible end.

If we assume that all of our faculties have a biological basis, and that any faculty having a biological basis is capable of biotechnological enhancement, it follows that all our faculties are subject to biotechnological augmentation. The precise nature of such techniques is on the cusp of present knowledge, but the diligence with which they are being pursued leaves little doubt that huge advances can be anticipated during the next two decades. Mental arithmetic is, for example, a human faculty having its basis in the neurophysiology of the brain. Until our era, the individual's faculty to perform mental arithmetic could be enhanced only by the indirect

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means of education, acculturation, and the provision of economic support. We may soon be able to choose to have included in our biological makeup vastly greater aptitude for doing mental arithmetic—or gymnastics, or performing counterpoint, or what-have-you—than has ever been possible for even the most gifted person.

If we assume that all of our tastes and inclinations likewise have a biological basis, it follows that these too may soon be subject to biotechnological enhancement, suppression, and adjustment. An improved capacity for mental arithmetic would be so much more useful, were it combined with great ambitions to succeed in academics or business. Biotechnology promises us the ability to convert second-order desires into first-order desires: we soon shall be able to want what we want, as well as enhanced abilities to attain what we want. For those who wish to be industrious but find themselves weak of will, help is on the way.

Unleashing people's capacity to achieve and to strive for achievement will not necessarily lead to greater satisfaction. Even if our happiness consists in the pursuit of self-chosen ends, those ends must be such that others might also choose to pursue them—otherwise they are utterly idiosyncratic. Our social nature is such that we crave recognition; but recognition entails distinction. “It is not enough to succeed, others must fail” is not a gratuitous twist but an ironic tautology. Status goods, such as being *the best*, are by their nature scarce. Will an endless upward spiral of competition and frustration at least guarantee an ever-increasing level of human achievement? Unfortunately, not.

Not everyone takes the view that the good, or happiness, ultimately consists in exercising our distinctively human faculties, or in pursuing self-chosen ends. Many people (openly or not) are simply hedonists; happiness, and the good, consist in pleasure and lots of it, the more the better. What is the good of pursuing ends, or exercising faculties, apart from the pleasure of doing so? The new biotechnology, as it converges with cybernetics, promises to be a boon to hedonists without challenging their conception of the good—although it must raise the question, how much pleasure can one stand? Computer gaming is only in its infancy, yet it has already

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demonstrated a remarkable ability to simulate the experience of *cooperatively confronting and pleurably overcoming challenge*. “Cooperative,” because, thanks to the internet, it is possible to engage with like-minded others in a virtual medium, thereby sharing pursuits with others whom one need never physically meet. If pleasure, company, the esteem of others, the exercise of the faculties, and the pursuit of self-chosen goals are all that human flourishing consists of, then *virtual* reality—rather than ordinary reality—may be destined to be the theater of humankind’s coming achievements.

Our real, biological, nature may be a mere chrysalis we are in the process of shedding. To insist that people ought—*morally* ought—to be engaged in real rather than merely virtual pursuits, and to suffer real rather than merely virtual hardships, may soon seem as stuffy as to insist that people ought not to have tattoos or nose-rings. Something makes us think that there is more to the good than mere *experience*—but if the quality of experience can be drastically improved for all humankind by creating *irresistibly appealing virtual spaces*, why not? And if those spaces (rather than, say, *outer* space) are what humans, individually, choose to explore, then why not?

How Many People Should There Be?

The number of people in existence is something that human decisions—whether collective or individual—can influence on a larger scale than ever before possible. The birth rate in many European countries, eastern and western, is now well below the replacement level; which means that if trends were to continue these populations would eventually disappear. The birth rate in many of the poorer countries is well above the replacement level; which means that if trends were to continue these populations would enlarge until they exhausted their resources. The birth rate is not the only factor to be considered—public health measures and innovative agricultural methods can expand expected longevity. This means that the decline of shrinking populations may be slowed, and the

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increase of growing populations may be likewise be accelerated. Increased mobility makes populations subject to fluctuation in ways less directly tied to biological factors.

The number of people there are at any one time will affect those then living, but also later generations. Which raises the question, How many people *should* there be? Should there be as many people as there can be, so long as they are not miserable? Or should there be fewer than that, for the reason that a lesser number would be able to enjoy a higher standard of living? How should we trade off population numbers against the standard of living, if a trade-off must be made? These are hard questions, ones that needn't have been taken seriously until we had some means of implementing an answer. But the means are increasingly at hand.

What kind of question is it, *How many people should there be?* Is it a question about what is desirable, like the question "How many sunny days should there be?" Or is it a moral question, even a question of justice? Most people think that the kind of environment we bequeath to later generations poses a question of justice. It would be wrong, we think, to leave later generations a polluted, depleted, and ugly world to live in. But if that is a question of justice, isn't it also a question of justice, How many later generations should there be, and how large? Would it be unjust, at the extreme, for one generation simply to decide, by default, not to reproduce itself? (Unjust to whom?) Would it be unjust for one generation to pursue its own superlongevity (literal immortality being unattainable) at the expense of allowing other generations to succeed it? If these questions make sense—and they are not obviously nonsense—then their answers have implications for what biotechnological means ought to be developed.

Moral philosophy has only recently recognized population ethics as among its concerns. Surprisingly, the standard types of ethical theory either avoid or imply implausible answers to the question, *Ought there to be people at all?* Utilitarianism prescribes the maximum of happiness for people, but does it prescribe that there *be* people to enjoy happiness? If it does not, then it is consistent with letting the human race vanish. If, on the other hand, it *does* require that there be people (so long as their lives are not

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utterly miserable), then it would seem to require that the population be increased until no greater net happiness is possible. The utilitarian principle, so understood, demands the addition of the next barely happy person, and the next, and the next...and so on, and we reach what has been called the “repugnant conclusion” that there ought to be as many people as there can be, even though their lives are only just barely tolerable. To avoid the conclusion, we may deny that the world is a better place merely for having an extra person in it, but that suggests that it would be morally permissible for us to allow there to be no people. Not an attractive conclusion either.

Kantian theories, the main alternative to utilitarianism, fare no better. Reproduction has never been understood to be commanded as a categorical imperative—despite what the “what if everyone did that?” test seems to suggest. Normally no one is *harmed* by anyone’s choosing not to procreate. Religious views (“Be fruitful!”) have the advantage over their Kantian and utilitarian rivals that they deliver the intuitively correct conclusion—“let there be people”—but with the disadvantage that they deliver the conclusion without any accompanying reasons, and never say how fruitful is fruitful enough.

The two questions, “Should there be people?” and “*How many* people should there be?” are separable. Thus, the possibility arises that whatever demand morality makes upon us to assure that humankind be perpetuated might just as well be satisfied by prolonging our own lives as by bringing new people into existence (keeping reproduction in reserve to replace those lost to accident or suicide). If aging is a biological process (and what else could it be?) then it can be altered or reversed, as much as any other. Mastering the process is perhaps more than two decades ahead of us, but in the meantime techniques of organ harvesting (using foetal material until some morally more acceptable work-around is perfected, as eventually it must) are capable in principle of buying an indefinite stay of execution for those able to afford it. Status goods excepted, we may assume that what the wealthy enjoy today, all will enjoy tomorrow. So the question has to be confronted: If the number of people ever to have lived is of no

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special significance, apart from its furthering the perpetuation of the species, what reason is there not to seek to maximize individual human longevity (at a desirable approximation of “youth,” of course)?

One answer that suggests itself is this: superlongevity impedes the development of the species through the time-honored process of evolution. What morality requires is not perpetuation but perpetual *development*. Therefore, morality demands that we not seek to extend individual existence indefinitely, but instead take steps to assure that generations succeed one another. The weakness of this answer is apparent: perpetual development does not depend either upon evolutionary processes or upon a succession of generations. The very biotechnology that can achieve superlongevity can also achieve any variation of the human creature that the processes of evolution might. If, for example, global warming will make Earth’s climate approximate that of Venus, human specimens capable of standing the heat are no less likely—in fact, more likely—to have been bioengineered rather than mutated-and-selected the old-fashioned way.

Achieving individual superlongevity, while continuing the stately succession of generations, must lead to a crowding problem. Not within the next twenty years, of course. But sooner or later.

How Should People Be Made?

Unlike the first two questions, this is a “means” question rather than an “ends” question. It is twofold: 1) how should people be brought into existence? and 2) how should people, once they exist, be made better? Both sub-issues assume as worthy, even obligatory, the *end* that there be people and the *end* that the people there are be the best there can be. Leaving aside possible doubts about these ends, what if anything limits permissible *means* to these ends?

Taking the second question first, intuition stubbornly opposes certain means of human betterment. The violent use of some of us as *mere means* to better others is the clearest case. But there are cases of betterment by exploiting biological mechanisms that are not impermissible uses of

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persons, but which seem nonetheless to be morally objectionable. Using steroids or other “performance enhancing” drugs to boost one’s athletic competitiveness is an example. But the use of expensive coaching and training facilities is unobjectionable. What is the basis of the distinction? And does it matter, outside the special context of competitive games?

Another example: improving one’s intellect by assiduous study is more than acceptable, it is praiseworthy. It gives the student an advantage in the competition for prestige and income, and why not? Have we then a similar objection to improving the intellect by use of performance-enhancing drugs, such as ritalin, or caffeine? No? Then we should be untroubled by the possible use of tissue transplants and cybernetic engineering to improve the intellect, shouldn’t we? So do we say that it doesn’t much matter how one comes by one’s brains, in the game of life, even though it very much matters how one comes by one’s biceps, in the game of Olympic weightlifting?

Character is manipulable by social pressures and sanctions; but we would be appalled by the idea of allowing a person to become, say, a sweeter person by voluntarily undergoing a partial prefrontal lobotomy. We like the end, but we forbid the means. We want to say: if you would be stronger, you must work hard at it; if you would be nicer, you must work hard at that too; but if you would be smarter, you may use whatever means biology affords. Where is the logic in this pattern? Ethical theory is far from being able to support our selective taboos regarding the permissible means of self-improvement.

Now, back to the first sub-issue: How should people be brought into being or, more pointedly, how should babies be made? Artificial insemination, egg transplantation, and *in vitro* fertilization are by now familiar techniques. But why stop here? Cloning is alarming, although no reason appears why cloning should be of any greater concern than the enhanced risk of multiple births that is a side-effect of fertility-enhancing drugs. Cloning *oneself* is a more serious matter—but why should my cloning myself be of greater concern than my doubling my longevity? Having taken the manifold liberties with nature we now routinely take, we can’t simply

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say, “But that’s *unnatural*.”

Perhaps babies by the batch raises no new worry as long as the babies are destined for a decent life. Is *how we were made* part of a decent life? Suppose babies could be decanted, *Brave New World* style. Should it be permitted? Wouldn’t it be less objectionable than surrogate motherhood—or would it be far more objectionable? Again, we can’t simply intone, *That’s unnatural*, unless we have an account of what’s natural and what’s not, and of the moral significance of that difference—something we are nowhere close to having. Why should something’s being natural count in its favor, rather than against it? (Isn’t smallpox *natural*?) A keen observer of the late twentieth century said, “When I look around today, the biggest anachronism I see is pregnancy. I just can’t believe people are still pregnant.” If making baby clothes oneself seems quaint, why not also the making of babies?

Who Decides?

What kind of people should there be, and how many, and how should they be brought into being and shaped—these are chief among the substantive questions that biology raises for ethics. But what about the procedural issue: Who should decide these questions? The answer that seems to command an almost automatic consensus is that these are questions to be answered by individuals and are matters for individual choice. Politics, and the state, should stay out of these decisions. We ought to be left to decide for ourselves what ends to pursue, and how, and whether to procreate, and how to raise our offspring. There is greater agreement here than on the answers to the substantive questions—the variety of substantive answers is in fact viewed as a compelling reason to leave these decisions to individual choice.

Given our indelible memories of the horrifying totalitarian experiments in Europe, the automatic answer is not surprising. That the state should not be allowed to take the lead in shaping a collective destiny seems to us to be the hard-learned lesson of the twentieth century—especially

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where such intimate matters as procreation and the basic design of one's life are concerned. But our thinking is actually more complicated than this. Leaving matters entirely to individual choice is to leave them to the market to sort out. We like the idea of being able to buy things, but we feel revulsion at the idea of people selling their organs or their babies. We like to be free to choose, but there are certain choices we call upon the state to discourage, even to forbid. There is no easy way to draw a line between what is on the table for democratic politics to decide, and what is hands-off, private, beyond the proper bounds of collective decision making. The debate of the next twenty years may be as much about the procedural question, how much of biology is up for political decision, as it is about the three substantive ones.

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