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The Age of the Designer Baby Arrives

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The logic of the genetics revolution leads inevitably to the concept of the designer baby. New technologies bring new possibilities and hard choices, and the new genetic technologies bring genuinely frightening new possibilities. Now, even designer babies loom as a very real scenario.

Until very recently, genetic technologies related to the screening of embryos were entirely negative. In other words, these tests screened for the genetic markers for certain diseases. Now, at least some fertility clinics promise to offer testing that will allow parents to choose positive, non-medical traits for their children.

Science fiction is about to become fact, and the nightmare scenarios of writers such as Aldous Huxley may soon be realized.

The Wall Street Journal recently reported on this issue, and the paper's report indicates just how close at hand this prospect now may be. The report directs attention to pre-implantation genetic diagnosis or PGD.

Now, as the paper reported, "the growth of PGD, unfettered by any state or federal regulations in the U.S., has accelerated genetic knowledge swiftly enough that pre-selecting cosmetic traits in a baby is no longer the stuff of science fiction."

The use of PGD is becoming more common in fertility clinics, and the technology is morally problematic, to say the very least. Used since the 1990s, the technology allows what amounts to a search and destroy mission directed at human embryos considered to be unworthy of life. The technology is now paired with a moral outlook that assumes that parents should have the choice, if not the duty, to avoid having a child with a propensity toward certain diseases. The extension of this logic to other traits is inevitable.

Americans are addicted to the culture of consumer choice. Advances in the PGD technology may soon allow parents to choose traits ranging from gender to eye color and beyond. Will clinics offer this service? Here representatives of the industry disagree.

As the paper reports:

"It's technically feasible and it can be done," says Mark Hughes, a pioneer of the PGD process and director of Genesis Genetics Institute, a large fertility laboratory in Detroit. However, he adds that "no legitimate lab would get into it and, if they did, they'd be ostracized."

But Fertility Institutes disagrees. "This is cosmetic medicine," says Jeff Steinberg, director of the clinic that is advertising gender and physical trait selection on its Web site. "Others are frightened by the criticism but we have no problems with it."

Sadly, some clinics are sure to offer what would-be parents are willing to fund. Morality gives way to the demands of



the market.

What about public opinion? The paper explains:

In a recent U.S. survey of 999 people who sought genetic counseling, a majority said they supported prenatal genetic tests for the elimination of certain serious diseases. The survey found that 56% supported using them to counter blindness and 75% for mental retardation.

More provocatively, about 10% of respondents said they would want genetic testing for athletic ability, while another 10% voted for improved height. Nearly 13% backed the approach to select for superior intelligence, according to the survey conducted by researchers at the New York University School of Medicine.

These numbers are sure to rise. Parents offered the opportunity to choose to have more intelligent, more athletic, more conventionally beautiful children are likely to want that choice — even if they feel guilty about its implications. Before long, the factor of choice becomes a social mandate.

As reporter Gautam Naik of *The Wall Street Journal* explains, these technologies are still in development. No current technology allows parents to order a baby like customers order an automobile — at least not yet. The shape of the future is fast coming into view, however.

Not all those cited in the article are thrilled with the prospect. Marcy Darnovsky of the Center for Genetics and Society in Oakland, California commented, “If we’re going to produce children who are claimed to be superior because of their particular genes, we risk introducing new sources of discrimination.”

One of the figures leading the development of these technologies also voiced his concern. “I’m not going to do designer babies,” says Dr. William Kearns of the Shady Grove Center for Preimplantation Genetics in Rockville, Maryland. “I won’t sell my soul for a dollar.”

Others are only too willing to offer these technologies as soon as they are available. As Dr. Steinberg of the Fertility Institutes said above, “Others are frightened by the criticism but we have no problems with it.”

Those who honor the sanctity of life will have big problems with these technologies. Genetic screening brings the brave new world of designer babies, dividing embryonic humans into those considered fit for life, and those considered unfit. The “unfit” embryos are destined for destruction.

We have seen this logic before, but we appear to have missed the moral lesson. We can only imagine what the scientists of the Nazi regime would have done with this technology.

The brave new world of designer babies is about to be upon us. We will soon learn what, in moral terms, we really believe about human dignity and the value of human life.

We discussed this issue on Monday’s edition of *The Albert Mohler Program*. Listen [here](#). Marcy Darnovsky of the Center for Genetics and Society was my guest.

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