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Go Ahead and Play God? Scientific Hubris on Display

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We live in a day of almost unlimited confidence in scientific progress — or what is advertised as scientific progress. The incredible developments of modern science have reshaped our lives and expectations.

In the fields of modern genetics and reproductive medicine, we have now reached the threshold of attempts to redefine humanity itself. Some scientists urge excitedly that humanity should redefine itself by, in the words of one evolutionist, “taking evolution into our own hands.”

Now, *The Times* [London] is out with a breathtaking essay by Minette Marrin. Consider these selected passages:

Last week British scientists announced a revolutionary screening process for inherited diseases in embryos. It will be quicker and more accurate than the existing method and it will detect thousands more genetic defects than previously possible.

About 200 heritable conditions can be detected by pre-implantation diagnosis in IVF treatment so that only healthy embryos are implanted in the mother or frozen; the new technique — pre-implantation genetic haplotyping — will be able to detect nearly 6,000 diseases and conditions. As one of the British pioneers said, this changes everything. One could almost call it godlike.

What it means is that thousands of parents who are at known risk of passing on terrible disabilities and diseases will now be able to have only healthy babies. This is the best news I have heard for years.

More:

Nature is astonishingly cruel. Science, by contrast, has the power of mercy. One can only be dazzled by the inventiveness and compassion of the scientists involved in this screening breakthrough — “in action”, as Hamlet said, “how like an angel!” Admittedly genetic screening means that embryos carrying disabilities and diseases will be discarded. It is a stretch, however, to use the word destroyed, or even killed, as the test is done on embryos that are only three days old. And what is appealing about this early screening is that it offers the hope that, in the foreseeable future, abortion and late abortion will be less frequently used in dealing with serious defects and disabilities.

It will be easier and better in every way to get rid of a tiny collection of cells. This is indeed playing God, as all the usual campaigners were quick to point out last week. But what on earth is wrong with humans playing God? I am all for it, especially as God doesn't seem to be doing it. Besides, whatever we may think about playing God and defying nature, we are doing it already and even though we don't necessarily recognise it, we approve of it.

Finally:

To say that a disability is undesirable in itself is not to say that a person with that disability is undesirable in herself, or her life worth less than someone else's. The disability is not the person. It is to say that her life would be better without that disability. And saying it assumes that a person with a life and a history here in the world, with family and friends, is not the same as a minuscule collection of defective cells on a petri dish. One is dispensable, the other most certainly is not.

What a piece of work is a man and partly, now, it is the work of godlike humankind.

This vision of a “godlike humankind” is truly frightening. The hubris of this worldview is incredible, but all too real and all too common now.

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