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# The Brave New World of Sex-Selection Technologies

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Newsweek magazine drew national attention to this technology in its January 26, 2004 cover story, “Girl or Boy?” Writer Claudia Kalb explained the development of the newest and most accurate sex-selection technology, known as “Preimplantation Genetic Diagnosis,” or “PGD.” This new procedure allows for gender selection with a success rate of almost 100-percent. Nevertheless, the technology involves the intentional creation of human embryos that are then selected and implanted in the womb solely on the basis of gender preference.

As Newsweek warns, “While the advances have received kudos from grateful families, they also raise loaded ethical questions about whether science is finally crossing a line that shouldn’t be crossed. Even fertility specialists are divided over whether choosing a male or female embryo is acceptable. If couples can request a baby boy or girl, what’s next on the slippery slope of modern reproductive medicine? Eye color? Height? Intelligence?” The ethics of gender selection for babies is now at the center of the debate about “reproductive freedom” and the “right” of parents to determine the genetic traits they will accept in their offspring.

The Newsweek article traces the issue directly to families demanding such a technology. Sharla and Shane Miller of Gillette, Wyoming wanted a girl after Sharla gave birth to three boys. “I’m best friends with my mother,” Sharla said. “I couldn’t get it out of my mind that I wanted a daughter.” She discovered the web site for the Fertility Institutes in Los Angeles, directed by Dr. Jeffery Steinberg. The rest is history—and a sign of things to come.

The Millers chose to use the PGD technology and invested over eighteen thousand dollars plus travel costs in the procedure. Last year, Sharla’s eggs and Shane’s sperm were combined in the laboratory, producing 14 healthy embryos. According to Newsweek, the embryos were evenly divided between male and female. Dr. Steinburg later transferred three of the female embryos into Sharla’s uterus, where two were successfully implanted. She is expected to give birth to twin baby girls in July. As Sharla stated, “I have three wonderful boys, but since there was a chance I could have a daughter, why not?”

The development of PGD technology, along with other fertility and genetic treatments intended to influence gender selection, raises the moral threat of designer babies and children produced by consumer choice. Parenthood becomes a matter of parental preference, right down to the sex and genetic profile of each child. The new sex-selection procedures are a major step toward the development of “designer babies,” customized through genetic science according to the parents’ desires.

Newsweek provided a helpful summary of recent developments: “The brave new world is definitely here. After 25 years of staggering advances in reproductive medicine—first test-tube babies, then donor eggs and surrogate mothers—technology is changing baby-making in a whole new way. No longer can science simply help couples have babies, it can help them have the kind of babies they want. Choosing gender may obliterate one of the fundamental mysteries of

procreation, but for people who've accustomed to taking 3-D ultrasounds of fetuses, learning a babies sex within weeks of conception and scheduling convenient delivery dates, its simply the next logical step."

As Claudia Kalb remarks, "That gleeful exclamation 'Its a boy!' or 'Its a girl!' may soon just be a quaint reminder of how random births used to be."

Preimplantation Genetic Diagnosis is not the only new technology intended to allow parents to choose the gender of their children. MicroSort, a sperm-sorting technology offered by the Genetics and IVF Institute of Fairfax, Virginia, boasts more than four hundred babies produced by their technology for gender selection. The Institute is conducting an FDA clinical trial and is more than half way toward their trial goal. The MicroSort technology was originally developed by the Department of Agriculture in order to improve livestock sperm, and involves mixing sperm with a DNA-specific dye marker that identifies sperm by gender. Adapting the technology for use in human reproduction involves not only a scientific shift—it is a giant moral leap.

The new euphemism for sex-selection technologies is "gender balancing," especially when a couple already has one child. Is gender now something that must be balanced? Should a couple with two boys or two girls be seen as "unbalanced?" This is moral nonsense.

With these new technological advances, the question now shifts from a question of technological ability to moral acceptability. Without question, the PDG technology can virtually guarantee sex-selection to prospective parents. The morality of the technology is an altogether different question. Should parents be allowed uncontrolled access to these genetic technologies, only for the purpose of selecting the sex of their babies? What about the status of the embryos that are not chosen? What does this say about our culture's view of human dignity? What will it mean when children come to know themselves as products of parental design?

Sex-selection technologies are banned in Great Britain and are considered morally unacceptable in many parts of the world. Of course, the ethical issues involved in this new advanced technology should remind the public of the traditional preference for boys around the world and the discrimination against girls that leads even to infanticide in nations like China. What do feminists think of this?

Leon Kass, chairman of the President's Council on Bioethics, warns that "all of us have a stake in keeping human reproduction human." Turning a child into a commodity is a tragic step backward in moral progress. Treating children as products rather than individuals made in the image of God will have inevitable consequences. Do we really want to make gender selection just another option for parental choice? How do we "keep human reproduction human?"

The PGD technology also raises the specter of human embryos, willing created only to be destroyed. Embryos of the "wrong" gender are simply destroyed—demonstrating a denial of human dignity and terminating human life at its earliest stage of development. The casual mass storage and destruction of human embryos raises the specter of humanity discarded without so much as a notice. And it's not only embryos that are destroyed. The Newsweek article indicates that at least four MicroSort pregnancies have ended in abortion when it was determined that the procedure "failed" to produce a baby of the desired sex.

Some doctors are unwilling to go along with the use of this technology, even though parents demand it. Mark Hughes, an authority on PGD who teaches at Wayne State University School of Medicine in Detroit, rejects the use of genetic screening for embryo selection. "The last time I checked, your gender wasn't a disease . . . There's no illness, no suffering and no reason for a physician to be involved. Besides, we're too busy helping desperate couples with serious disease build healthy families."

Note carefully that Dr. Hughes does not reject all genetic screening. His comment reflects the fact that many physicians now call for genetic screening in order to weed out embryos that would carry significant genetic diseases. What Dr. Hughes seems not to understand is that the demand for a healthy embryo, chosen by genetic screening, sets the stage for parents to demand an embryo of a specific gender. When we start down the path of determining "acceptable" embryos, we are well on our way to sex-selection, genetic engineering, and worse.

The use of these sex-selection technologies is perfectly legal in the United States, and a recent report from Great Britain urged couples there to seek treatment in the U.S.—which, of course, also ranks at the top tier of world statistics on

abortion.

The February 9 edition of Newsweek featured letters in response to the “Girl or Boy?” cover story. An encouraging sign—most of the letters expressed opposition to the use of sex-selection technologies. One woman traced her own difficulty in conceiving a child and retorted: “I’m saddened and not a little outraged that those who have no trouble conceiving a baby and carrying it to term would place such an emphasis on having a child of a particular sex. It strikes me as petty and ungrateful, and I have no sympathy for parents who are unhappy that they didn’t have a son or a daughter. These parents won the lottery when they conceived their other children in the privacy of their own homes.”

Another writer—raised by adoptive parents—attributed the push for sex-selection technologies to “the self-centered, spoiled and juvenile mindset that has permeated our culture.” As he argued, “I can think of nothing more insulting to women who are unable to conceive than women who can, but aren’t satisfied unless their unborn child’s gender is determined in advance.”

In reality, the use of these new technologies is not only insulting to women who cannot conceive—but to human dignity itself. When gender is a consumer preference and babies are designed to order, humanity is redefined as a product—not as a divine gift. We must remember that human beings are begotten, not made. “Things” are made in factories. Human life—filled with promise and possessing full human dignity—emerges as a miracle from the womb. A society that rejects this distinction is moving headlong toward a moral debacle.

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