
Babies by Design: The ethics of genetic choice by Ronald M. Green

LEAVING NOTHING TO CHANCE

- 1 EVERY year children die by the millions from preventable diseases like pneumonia, diarrhoea, malaria, HIV and malnutrition. Poverty and the lack of clean water, hygiene and prenatal care all contribute to the toll of premature death.
- 2 In the face of this holocaust, why would Ronald M. Green, a professor of ethics at Dartmouth College in New Hampshire, spend 279 pages of well-crafted prose defending the claim that it is ethical for parents to create “designer” children? How much effort is it ethical to devote to improving the lot of the yet-to-come when balanced against the needs of those in the here and now?
- 3 Unfortunately, *Babies by Design* never directly addresses this question – the hardest ethical question facing proponents of the genetic engineering of embryos. Green is so distracted by the pace of science in genomics, stem cell research, gene therapy, and pre-implantation genetic diagnosis that the staggering plight of so many existing children never edges into his analytical field of vision.
- 4 Be that as it may, and as Green makes clear in this engaging book, it is high time we debated the use of genetic technology to enhance children. In fact, the debate is unavoidable: in clinics and labs all over the world we can already see the beginnings of the



gene-based technology that will permit parents – or at least those parents who are economically advantaged – to prevent defects and disability in their offspring, and even endow them with enhanced traits and capacities. The disparities between rich and poor will not slow the demand of the rich for more control over the genetic destiny of their children.

- 5 The key objections to tweaking or selecting a child’s genes are that it is too risky to try, that children ought not to be treated as objects of manufacture, and that children should get the chance to be who they want to be without having to carry the burden of their parents’ genetically mediated expectations. Furthermore, the arguments go, designing kids will lead to such an unfair advantage for the designees created in labs versus those made in bedrooms or the back seats of cars that it is simply unjust.
- 6 These arguments have been dismantled in other books, notably Jonathan Glover’s *Choosing Children* (Oxford University Press, 2006) and John Harris’s *Enhancing Evolution* (Princeton University Press, 2007). Green’s book does not add much in the way of new argument, but his prose is

crisp and his engagement with the issues sincere.

7 Of course, risk is an issue, but when we have a technique that is not especially risky that worry evaporates. 15, Green says, concerns about the risk in engineering children amount to the prudent counsel to go slowly rather than not to go at all.

8 What of the claim that children ought not to be “manufactured”? The worry that children become of less value the more they are designed is, in my view, a distant cousin of the argument about how free will is possible in a deterministic¹⁾ world.

9 Green does not say enough about the fact that wherever dignity resides, it does not emerge from the means of our creation. When assessing a child’s worth or moral standing, does anyone ask whether the youngster was born using forceps, spent time in a neonatal intensive care unit or was conceived in a Petri dish? Dignity and worth reside in the person that emerges from the gene/environment cocktail and in the social and emotional relationships that form between parents and their children.

10 Green is less persuasive than he should be in responding to the claim that designer children will bear the burden of their parents’ expectations. He insists that parents will love their kid even if they paid a lot of money for a musical prodigy only to find that the little darling still can’t play the piano. Some might like to believe that love will conquer all, but cynics will need more convincing.

11 The feared injustice that could result from the rich making designer

babies and the poor making babies the old-fashioned way may be real. Green rightly and forcefully argues that social inequity is not an objection to genetically engineering children.

Rather, it is a concern about unequal access to the goods of society. Those who bring the objection forward don’t seem to realise that the way to avoid a two-class system emerging from the genomic revolution in reproduction is not to stop it but to ensure access to genetic engineering to all who want to utilise it.

12 What’s missing from *Babies by Design* is any recognition that someone other than a parent might play a role in deciding what traits or capacities ought to be enhanced. Shouldn’t we worry that governments might try to impose standards of design on parents? What about private companies that could spend fortunes trying to guilt or beguile us into making kids that have the traits they happen to sell?

13 Green’s book is worth reading, whatever your view on the ethics of designing our descendents. Even if he fails to persuade you that it is moral to do so, he will definitely get you thinking. •

Arthur Caplan in *New Scientist*, 2008

Arthur Caplan is chair of the Department of Medical Ethics and director of the Center for Bioethics at the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia

noot 1 Determinism is the belief that all action and events result from other actions, events or situations, so people cannot in fact choose what to do.

Tekst 5 Leaving nothing to chance

- 1p 12 Welk dilemma wordt in de alinea's 1 tot en met 3 aan de orde gesteld?
- 1p 13 Which of the following agrees with what is stated in paragraph 4?
A Gene-based medical technologies should no longer be a social taboo.
B Genetic engineering will contribute to equality between the rich and the poor.
C It will not be long before it is possible to design children according to personal preference.
D The demand for genetic engineering from the rich may make it inaccessible for the poor.
- 1p 14 Hoeveel "key objections" noemt Arthur Caplan in alinea 5?
- 1p 15 Which of the following fits the gap in paragraph 7?
A At most
B Instead
C Nevertheless
D To be fair
- 1p 16 What is the point made in paragraph 9?
A A child's chances of success are not dependent on the circumstances of its birth.
B From a moral point of view children created in different ways are equal.
C Natural conception is still the more reliable way of producing sound offspring.
D Parents opting for a designer child are interfering with their child's free will.
- 1p 17 "cynics will need more convincing" (laatste zin alinea 10)
Citeer de mening van de cynici.

- 1p 18 Which of the following is/are made clear about Green in paragraph 11?
- 1 He claims that the issue of social equality should not stand in the way of the genetic engineering of children.
 - 2 He thinks that genetic engineering might open the way toward social equality.
 - 3 He points to the need for making genetic engineering available to all.
- A Only 1.
B Only 1 and 2.
C Only 1 and 3.
D Only 2 and 3.
E 1, 2 and 3.
- 1p 19 What is “missing from *Babies by Design*” (paragraph 12), according to the reviewer?
Green fails to
- A acknowledge that genetic engineering may produce socially unacceptable traits in children.
 - B recognise that a third party may well want to be involved in deciding which genes should be manipulated.
 - C take into account in what way governments or private companies will profit from genetic engineering.

Bronvermelding

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