

New Scientist and Greenpeace Science Debates

Science, technology and our future: the big questions

The Search for perfection

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Well I have a gap through my front teeth and I get emailed about penis enlargement regularly. I don't know where they come from.

I used to be a competitive runner. A few years ago I was running well one day. I was well out in front, about 200 yards ahead of the field, the first lap of a road relay. About half an hour before I glanced back. That's something you should never do in running. Who should I see catching me up but David Bedford. He won the Southern Counties Cross Country Championships for the senior race then ran immediately in the junior race and won that too – nine miles and six miles. One of the outstanding talents of a generation, he was catching me up. Every time I looked back he was closer. The last yard he went past me. He ran the fastest time of the day and me the second fastest. So I can't say to my children I beat the man who went on to break the world 10,000m record.

Well I don't know if he was better than me or not but he trained like a maniac – 80-100 miles a week even at the age of 17 or thereabouts. I wasn't prepared to do that. I had my university place and my studies. I didn't want to be an athletic pervert. There were more things in life. I didn't just want perfection in running. So I never found out whether I actually would have been that good. I doubt it. But suppose I

had taken drugs to enhance my performance. Suppose I could find something that would short circuit the daily agony of training and it would have given me that edge and that record might have been mine.

Well today Jennifer Trueland in the Scotsman has an interesting article "Winning At All Costs" and there is Ben Johnson about exactly this issue. Because today there's been a British Medical Journal Conference on how medical professionals deal with, not just athletes taking drugs, but also people at their local gym taking anabolic steroids because it's become the in thing in that particular gym to do that and there's all manner of problems that it creates including small penises.

So these ideas of how wonderful these things will be, I think I agree with Tom, all sorts of problems now.

But the point really is suppose you could do it and did do it of course, what would you gain because you would know that medal wasn't actually yours. Because you haven't played the game by the rules. Because you undercut the whole purpose of having the game. Well nobody assumes you can do that genetically. There's too many genes, too many other factors like training and metacarpals and bugs. It's more likely that it is a more mundane example to take the sex selection area because that is real at the moment.

Just over a year ago we had the Nash family in the States using IVF to choose embryo of the same sex and as a close match as possible to a child suffering from serious bone marrow disease. The same week a family in Scotland were turned down I think by the HFEA asking for IVF to select a girl to replace the only daughter they had lost in a tragic bonfire accident – four sons and one daughter and they had lost the girl. They claimed it was there right to re-establish the gender balance of their family and they were taking this case to the European court because they said under the European Human Rights Convention then they should have a right to do that.

I am actually part of the European Church Working Group on bio-ethics who are observers to the Council Bio-ethics Committee and we have to know that under their convention on human rights and exactly that case is prescribed. They said that the only case for using sex selection is in the case of serious gender related genetic disease.

I don't think that's a right judgement. For all the anguish of that individual, the tragedy which that family has had to cope with, ones heart goes out to them. But it's not just an individual thing. They are part of a wider society.

Society, if you put down a marker, and once you've said yes in that area, in a non-medical situation, I would argue you've no real reason to say no to any other thing that's just personal preference. Then we argue that there really is a difference between the medical and the non-medical situation. Yes, undoubtedly there are blurred areas in the middle but I don't think it's just continuing from one to the other. The sorts of ethical discussion I think you would have in this area are actually quite different.

I would also say well why not just have another child in the normal way? See what you get and love the one you got whatever sex. In a sense not put your own personal preference as a factor in the desirability of that child because I think we are beginning to become somewhat close to commodifying childbearing. Not the children, but the concept of childbearing for our own sakes and we're losing the sense of children as a gift in a Christian sense or in any other sense life giving children for their own sake. A miracle. Something that we didn't design to be that way but just came. We were given it. I gather we actually haven't shot ourselves because once the child is born I think the illusion rapidly goes.

I chose sex selection because it is there rather than genetic enhancement, which generally speaking isn't. But just suppose you could not enhance some characteristic. Change the rules of the game. The question is there are now winners and losers under the new rules. What if you were born on the wrong side of the tracks, culturally, politically, economically? You're not going to have genetic enhancement on the NHS. So what you've got is the rich who can afford it or can find someone to pay for it for them being allowed to try and hard wire their economic and social advantages by genetics. That reminds me of Gattaca and Brave New World and so forth. Okay this is a thought experiment. I think it is highly unlikely we'd ever get to that point but just suppose there are things you might. I would say social and economic advantage is one thing and always people have always, John Rackley said, "tried to, in a sense, design their children".

I'm rather different from this rather precise attempt to design and the problem is what have you actually got and what is perfection? I mean what is the perfect shape for a woman? I mean "does my bum look big in this" addressed to the author of the

Arabian Nights would say "Yes, Great!" because in that culture to have a large bottom was seen to be very desirable. So who is to say what is the appropriate shape for men or women or anybody else? Children perhaps.

Isn't it missing the point? Just suppose you could perfect looks or intellect or artistic skills or aesthetic [pride] whatever you want to think about. Haven't you missed the point? Because I would argue that the dream of perfection is an illusion. I'm a Christian and Jesus said it's what's in our hearts that messes us up, not the externalities. He told the story of a rich man who had made in agriculture in a big way, settled down to look after his, well his enormous farm to live an independent lifestyle and God says to him "you fool. You fool. This very moment your soul is your quality. Where are all those riches?" The Internet, music, the vulnerability whatever because you've missed the point about what life really is about. In that story he could see no God. It isn't the material, the beautiful, successful that really is what being a human being is about. It's about who we are inside. What the relationships we have. Those are the real things and of course sadly it's about our moral things.

You can have all the genetic enhancements you can imagine, but feel miserably failed in the really key issues. I mean is genetic engineering going to solve the Israel Palestine problem? I don't think so. Something much deeper involved.

I took part in a programme for the Science Fiction Channel a few months ago. I went to this studio in Soho and got dressed up in a white bathrobe. I thought it was eternal life. Suppose you could live forever, literally forever. I mean not just a long time, but never stopping and all of us involved with this programme thought what on earth would you do with all that length of time? For Christians living forever without God is, of course, hell.

But one of the questions my wife comes, her mother is Finnish and the soul is a style of Finnish life in my wife's upbringing. This is the perfectly normal thing to do and you've seen those programmes about nature on the TV over the last couple of weeks. All sorts of bodies of all sorts of shapes and sizes, but underneath that's what we really are. The externality is removed and the principal with heads of state we visited and somehow it is a reducing thing because it shows you really as you are outside the trappings. I think there is a profound lesson there.

Now I want to ask by asking well who is the perfect person? Presumably there has been one. Just one. Jesus who came as God in human form. Well okay so that's

an unfair advantage. But what sort of man? 700 years before Isaiah prophesied the becoming of Messiah and said who has believed what we've heard? He wasn't someone we looked at and thought fantastic. He was a man of sorrows well acquainted with grief. One of the Biblical writers reflects on Jesus' life and said "it is fitting that God should make the author of salvation perfect through suffering". That seems to me to turn the whole question of perfection upside down.

At best repair is only temporary. You still have to face that eventually it won't work. You have to come to terms with immortality. You can't have a technical fix for that.

So the whole success motive that seems to underlie this whole argument I think has missed the point. Perfection is something quite different.

I'm going to leave you with three questions. I was asked by the organisers to pose some questions to you.

- Is there a real distinction between medical and non-medical enhancements?
- Who decides what enhancements should be? Is this a personal thing or a societal thing?
- What is the place of suffering in all these questions?