

## New Scientist and Greenpeace Science Debates

**Science, technology and our future: the big questions**

**The Search for perfection**

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**John Harris:** Thank you very much Susie and I'm delighted to be here. Thank you all for coming. As you've heard, I'm a philosopher. Philosophers if they have any claim to speak to audiences at all, have that claim because they develop arguments in support of what they want to say but 10 minutes is not time to develop even one argument, let alone a series. But, without the arguments the conclusions are worthless so I'm going to treat you to a number of worthless conclusions. The only justification I have for doing that is that it will give you plenty to disagree with, I hope.

We're here to discuss two main questions: should we search for perfection and should we try to eliminate so-called defects in humans? Now, I don't believe that perfection is a coherent idea when applied to humans. What we're really talking about is the question of whether it's legitimate to try to prevent disease or disability on the one hand and to confer advantages, if we can, on the other.

But there is also the possibility of making choices as to how people will be that do neither of those things. Where our traits are what I call morally neutral, that is where they seek to influence things that it is neither advantageous nor disadvantageous to

have, eye colour perhaps, then the question that must be pressed, I believe, is what justification might there be for preventing parental choice in such matters?

So it comes down really just to one question, what if any constraints or limitations should there be for the use of science or technology to influence future generations? My main point – I'll give you the conclusion now – my main point will be that it's good to do good, better to prevent harm and that doing things that are neither good nor harmful, like determining for example mutual traits like eye colour, hair colour and gender, are, because they're neither bad nor good, obviously neutral and therefore (I would submit there is a missing argument here) therefore permissible.

How far should people be free to choose not only their broad reproductive path but it's finer byways? That is, not only to choose how well and why to reproduce, if they can, (if they're lucky enough to be able to do that) but also have control of other features of reproduction, including phenotypic traits of children – features like hair colour, eye colour, skin colour, general physique, intelligence (if that proves possible), sporting ability, musical ability and the like, any of the things that are or may become susceptible to biological or genetic manipulation.

Now, I'm going to concentrate on reproduction for a moment because, for the foreseeable future, attempts to make improvements or remove defects from humans are likely to be most effective either by choosing between embryos or by manipulating the genome of embryos, and possibly, when we get there, by selecting between gametes prior to conception. That is, by the use of so-called assisted reproductive technologies (ART). They are key. So I'm going to talk for a moment about ART and I want, in connection with using these technologies, to ask and to try to give one answer to the following question: is there, should there be a presumption in favour of liberty, in favour of freedom for reproduction?

In most democracies but not all, there is a general presumption in favour of liberty. Such a presumption means that the burden of justifying their actions falls on those who would deny liberty, not on those who would exercise it. If this is right, the presumption must be in favour of liberty to access assisted reproductive technologies unless good and sufficient reasons can be shown against doing so. So less of the argument will turn on what those good and sufficient reasons, if they exist, might be.

When people express their choices about procreation, they are claiming an ancient, if only fairly recently established example of what may be called a fundamental right.

This right and entitlement is found in all the principal conventions or declarations of human rights. Sometimes it's expressed as the right to marry and to found a family; sometimes it is expressed as the right to privacy and to respect of family life. This right or entitlement is now often discussed in terms of phrases like "reproductive liberty" or "procreative autonomy".

The right or entitlement to reproductive liberty has a number of different sources and I don't have time to go into all of them. Some see it as derived from the right to reproduce per se, others a derivative of other more important rights or freedoms. A famous legal jurisprudence philosopher, Ronald Dworkin, has defined reproductive liberty as "A right to control their own role in procreation" a right for parents to "control their own role in procreation, unless the state has compelling reasons for denying them that control". And he goes on, "The right to procreative autonomy has an important place in Western political culture more generally. The most important feature of that culture is the belief in individual human dignity, that people have the moral right and the moral responsibility to confront the most fundamental questions about the meaning and value of their own lives for themselves, answering to their own consciences and convictions. The principal of procreative autonomy, in a broad sense, is imbedded in any genuinely democratic culture."

So my first challenge to you and to the other speakers, my fellow panellists, is, are you for a genuinely democratic culture?

If we can identify interventions or their consequences, that would be morally problematic of themselves, we might know which state of affairs or traits it would be morally problematic deliberately to produce. The answer seems to be, and this is a challenge for you, the answer seems to me at least to be, only those traits, which would be harmful to the individual or harmful to others. Thus, it would not be morally problematic. It wouldn't be a morally problematic event if a couple had a boy, a woman had a boy rather than a girl. It wouldn't be morally problematic if a child was a particular skin colour when she was born, or hair colour or eye colour, or a range of other useful abilities, sporting prowess, musical talent, intelligence and so on.

It could not be said that children with any of these features would be born in a harmed condition or at any disadvantage whatsoever. Neither would it be plausible to claim that they would be in any way harmful or dangerous to others. No-one has a reason to bemoan the birth of a child with any of those features or characteristics. Nor would a child with such features have any ground for complaint, to find himself a

bonnie, bouncing, blue-eyed, musically talented boy or a handsome, brown-eyed girl who's brilliant at football. If we managed to create children with those abilities, nobody would have any ground for complaint and it wouldn't be anything to moan about. It would be something to celebrate.

On the other hand, we know very well that if you choose to bring a child with disabilities or diseases into being, is morally problematic and a child born permanently lame or deaf or blind or with short life expectancy would surely have grounds for complaint if any of these characteristics had been deliberately chosen by it's parents or deliberately chosen by anyone else. Why then do some people feel that designing children to be healthy or talented or to possess one harmless or beneficial feature rather than another might somehow be wrong? Why is everybody anxious to say, well we permitted this but it isn't designer children. Why should people worry about that?

Let me ask an important question. If it's not wrong for a perspective parent to wish to have, let us say, a bonnie, bouncing brown-eyed baby boy like me or like I once was, if it's not wrong for a parent to wish for that, how does it become wrong if we have the technology to play fairy godmother to ourselves and to grant our wish? If it's not wrong to wish for that, how does it become wrong if we have the technology to play fairy godmother to ourselves and grant the wish to this parent?

As I've said, the phrase "designer children" has clear, negative connotations when used to describe children born as a result of the exercise of reproductive choice. The implication is that parents are more concerned with fashion and with pleasing themselves than with valuing children for the children's own sake. However, normal sexual reproduction and choice of procreation partner has always had a large element of design in it. Cultures, religion and races that have encouraged their members to marry and procreate with other members of the same group are all into designer children. It is a truism that bears repeating but once you have the capacity to choose and the awareness of that capacity, then choice is inevitable. It is not less an exercise of choice because you exercise that choice in a conventional way.

I'll make my last point now. Imagine, when you make children, you're into world making. You're deciding what sort of world will exist. Imagine now two worlds that will exist in 150 years' time. In one world we have eliminated diabetes, heart disease and cancer, congenital blindness, deafness and clef palate and children are healthier and they live longer. In the other one the diseases and genetic conditions are as

they are now. Does it make sense to ask the question, which world would we prefer to try to create? And if the world with less diseases and disabilities seems preferable, seems like something to aim at, then like me, you believe in minimising disease and disability. You believe in maximising health and good fortune. You believe in choice and you accept the responsibility of making that choice. Thank you very much.

