

Impermissibility of Social Harm: Impersonal Harm, Social Values, and Genetic Enhancement

John Le and Amitabha Palmer, PhD

The University of Texas MD Anderson Cancer Center

Abstract

Background:

With the advent of gene editing technology and the usage of embryonic testing, the prospect to proactively prevent certain gene mutation-based disorders has become a real possibility. However, with therapeutic applications for genetic editing, also comes the ability for human beings to enhance their health beyond what was once thought capable, using genetic enhancement. One principle which seems to be critical to discussions of genetic enhancement is the theory of impersonal harm, which is harm done not to any individual, but rather to possible people through a set of decisions. Julian Savulescu and Guy Kahane argue that the principle of procreative beneficence can circumvent impersonal harm, and as such, would be an ideal ethical principle by which to guide genetic enhancement.

Thesis:

I will argue that the theory of impersonal harm has the capacity to fit a social aspect, and that because of this, the principle of procreative beneficence fails to be an ethical guideline. In replacement, I will further contend that the principle for the prevention of harm along with a principle I will stipulate as a principle for respect of social values, based off values espoused by Michael Sandel, are able to account for social impersonal harm, and thus would be a better guideline for the ethical implementation of genetic enhancement.

Impersonal Harm

The theory that it is possible to harm not any individual but instead entire potential worlds, such that a potential choice may create a well-off or worse-off world, even if the individuals in that world were not directly harmed by said choice (Bennett 267-268).

Procreative Beneficence

"If couples (or single reproducers) have decided to have a child, and selection is possible, Then they have a significant moral reason to select a child, of the possible children they could have, whose life can be expected, in light of the relevant available information, to go best or at least not worse than any of the others." (Savulescu et. al 274)

Puts emphasis on most advantaged traits when selecting for genetics

Prevention of Harm

"If reproducers have decided to have a child, and selection is possible, then they have a significant moral reason to select one of the possible children they could have who is expected to experience least suffering or limited opportunity or serious loss of happiness or good compared to the others." (Savulescu et. al 281)

Puts emphasis on least amount of suffering when selecting for genetics



Common Ethical Notions vs. Sandel's Social Values

Certain ethical defenses cannot account for discomfort of genetic enhancement for the following reasons:

Justice: Natural genetics creates natural differences in abilities and talents; no reconciliation for enhancement unease

Autonomy: Due to natural genetic dispositions and environment, one is never truly free to develop

Agency: Enhancement leads to a sort of "hyper-agency" (Sandel), which leads to seeking of perfection; cannot explain unease

Instead, philosopher Michael Sandel claims that what can explain discomfort of genetic enhancement are social values which would be compromised or altered:

Humility: The ability for a society to accept and embrace the unknown

Responsibility: If enhancement were to be widespread, an over-burdening of responsibility would be set on parents, individuals etc.

Unity: Social solidarity has a foundation in the fact that there is an element of fortune in one's life; Some sense of obligation to help those less fortunate or able than us due to talents, abilities, and health being that of natural gifts and not things which can be taken to be created by us

Though Sandel uses these three values as reasons to argue against, or at least be wary of genetic enhancement, I believe that these values can be implemented alongside impersonal harm as a guideline for potential uses of genetic enhancement

Conclusions

I. Impersonal-Social Harm:

Social values such as humility and social unity as posited by Sandel seem to be compatible with a notion of impersonal harm as, when one considers a potential world in which these values are not present, this world might be considered worse-off as lack of acceptance of the unknown can lead to enhancement stemming from a sort of eugenics and a discrimination of those who are without certain traits or features. I stipulate that this social compatibility can be called impersonal-social harm.

II. Preventing Impersonal-Social Harm:

In order to ethically guide enhancement, it seems that a principle would have to be able to effectively prevent impersonal-social harm. Prevention of Harm seems to be a better candidate for preventing social-impersonal harm and thus guiding ethical enhancement as opposed to Procreative Beneficence, as when selecting for least suffering, this enables for diversity in traits which may seem less-advantaged but still contribute to positive wellbeing (securing humility). In contrast, selecting for most advantaged traits seems susceptible to socially imposed discrimination against certain traits or features which may be considered disadvantageous even if they are non-effective towards or contribute to a general wellbeing in society (altering and preventing humility).

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