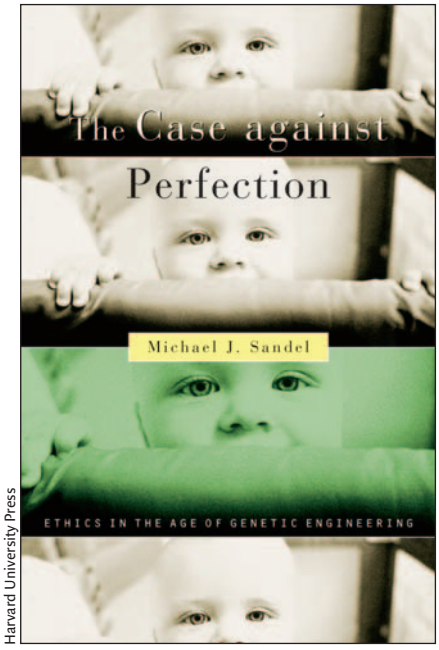
Book review

Slippery slopes in genetics

The case against perfection: ethics in the age of genetic engineering
Michael J. Sandel
Harvard University Press; 2007
176 pp US$18.95 ISBN: 0–67–401927–X

Recent developments in genetic engineering and other technologies are expected to offer future humanity the means to cure many of today's ailments. These same developments have the potential to enhance healthy human beings by, for example, improving academic or physical performance. Because enhancement in the latter case is not based on clinical need, terms like "cosmetic neurology" and "cosmetic endocrinology" are sometimes used to describe the new fields of study that have emerged. Not surprisingly, moral philosophers are not in agreement as to whether it is wrong to re-engineer humans by such means.

In this book, Michael Sandel, a Harvard University professor of government, presents the case that such pursuits toward human perfection should not be attempted, not only for reasons of safety (such as concern about unanticipated side effects) or fairness (such technologies would be generally available only to the rich), but because such activities endanger our humanity. In particular, Sandel argues, they imperil the notion of human life as a gift and erode our appreciation for the natural talents and endowments that human life provides. Thus, for example, according to Sandel, athletes should pursue excellence through the development of their natural gifts, rather than employ technical mastery over nature as a means to athletic prowess. Similarly, at the beginning of chapter 5, arguably the moral epicentre of his book, Sandel writes: "The problem with eugenics and genetic engineering is that they represent the one-sided triumph of willfulness over giftedness, of domination over reverence, of molding over beholding."



Harvard University Press

Such a position is in direct contradistinction to that of the transhumanist movement and its champions (e.g., Nick Bostrom, James Hughes), who advocate the ethical use of technology to improve the human condition and expand human capabilities.[1–3] That Sandel should instead take a "bioconservative" stance on these issues comes as no surprise — he was a former member of the President's Council on Bioethics in the Bush administration, a politically appointed group composed almost entirely of individuals with conservative views.

Based on an April 2004 article in *The Atlantic Monthly*,[4] which has been expanded to 176 pages, Sandel's book is organized into 5 chapters plus an epilogue on stem cell research. The book is aimed at the intelligent layperson rather than at biologists or ethicists; as such it is refreshingly written with a minimum of technical jargon. I found the book to be especially well written and easy to read.

Nevertheless, I found Sandel's arguments to be rather unconvincing, in large part because he seems to confuse what is natural with what is moral. In particular, I felt that some of his arguments were merely religious teachings about the sacredness of divine gifts recast along secular lines, as in the comment that "the drive to enhance human nature through genetic technologies is objectionable because it represents a bid for mastery and dominion that fails to appreciate the gifted character of human powers and achievements."

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