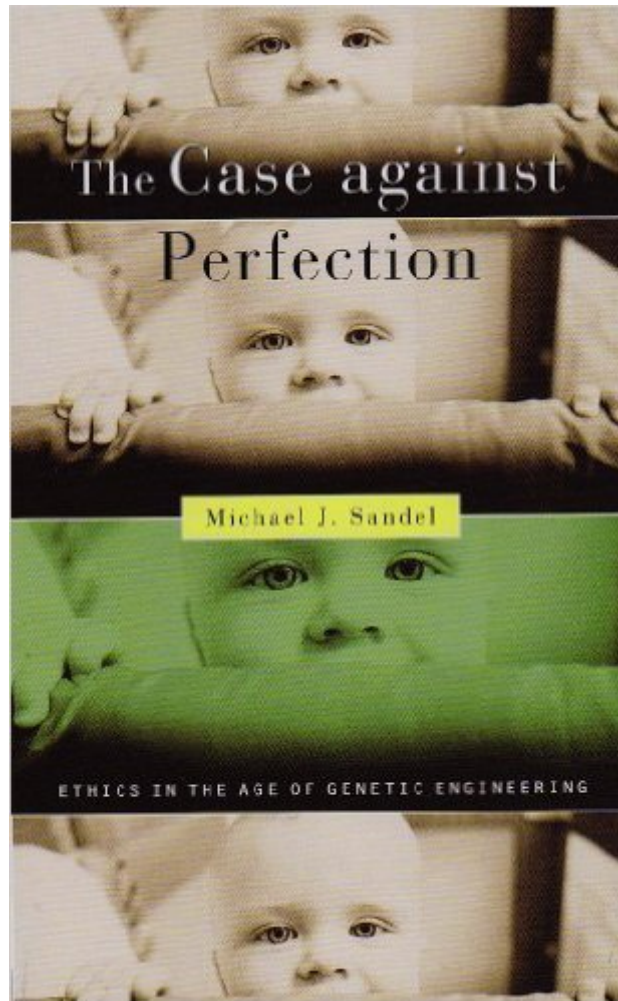


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The Case Against Perfection: Ethics In The Age Of Genetic Engineering



Synopsis

Breakthroughs in genetics present us with a promise and a predicament. The promise is that we will soon be able to treat and prevent a host of debilitating diseases. The predicament is that our newfound genetic knowledge may enable us to manipulate our nature—to enhance our genetic traits and those of our children. Although most people find at least some forms of genetic engineering disquieting, it is not easy to articulate why. What is wrong with re-engineering our nature? *The Case against Perfection* explores these and other moral quandaries connected with the quest to perfect ourselves and our children. Michael Sandel argues that the pursuit of perfection is flawed for reasons that go beyond safety and fairness. 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. Carrying us beyond familiar terms of political discourse, this book contends that the genetic revolution will change the way philosophers discuss ethics and will force spiritual questions back onto the political agenda. In order to grapple with the ethics of enhancement, we need to confront questions largely lost from view in the modern world. Since these questions verge on theology, modern philosophers and political theorists tend to shrink from them. But our new powers of biotechnology make these questions unavoidable. Addressing them is the task of this book, by one of America's preeminent moral and political thinkers.

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Customer Reviews

Sandel is a gifted, lucid writer, which is why I wish I could give this book more stars. But if I restrict myself just to its substance, I have to confess that more than once I felt like throwing this book across the room or shoving it into my garbage disposal. What an irritating and profoundly misguided book! Sandel seems to think that using biotechnology, especially genetic engineering, to enhance human life inevitably means encroaching on, and perhaps even destroying, our ability to appreciate the "gifted" character of life itself. The assumption is that appreciating what is "given" (whether by God or nature) requires holding back from enhancing our offspring and ourselves and accepting as normative the abilities and limitations of modern human beings. If we do proceed with genetic enhancements, then, according to Sandel, we are corrupted by a hubristic ethic of "mastery" over what is naturally given. This is wrongheaded--and for two main reasons. First, Sandel offers very little by way of defense of the normativity of the natural. Although he concedes that not everything that is natural is good (and rightly gives cancer as an example), he tells us almost nothing in this book, beyond appealing to a naïve, static, Aristotelian-style natural law theory, about why the fact that something is naturally given is in any way even relevant to its goodness, let alone why it ought not be improved. If he is going to be any kind of naturalist, he needs to go back and rethink the implications of Darwinian evolution for attempts to identify and enshrine an immutable human essence. (The prospects aren't good.)

The book was an interesting read, but frustrating. There was a genetic determinism about the discussion that made the author's stand feel naive. Clearly the variation in many human features are constrained to a particular range by genetics, but this does not mean that any individual can be engineered to guarantee the development a particular trait. Even extremely pro-genes books like *The Nurture Assumption* leave an important role for environment in human development (Harris just doesn't think parents are a particularly influential part of that environment). The gift argument is repeated throughout, but not supported very well. Sandel also discusses genetic modifications as arms races, but misses the fact that the "improvement" of human characteristics need not entail an arms race or a zero sum game. There are traits that have a value that is non-competitive. If research has found that people with a happiness score of 8-9 on a scale of 1-10 succeed most in life, it is correct to note that success in many fields is competitive. Yet, the feeling of happiness and enjoyment of life is not a zero sum game. Every human can enjoy this at the same time. If genetic engineering made us all 8-9 on the happiness scale, we would all benefit individually in our quality of life, though we would only be keeping pace with regards to competitive advantage. Again, Sandel misses this nuance and his discussions suffer from it. The part of the book I felt was worth reading

was the section regarding hyper-parenting. This was a point neglected in other books I have read on the subject, such as Agar's and Glover's. Nevertheless, the other books are far superior discussions of the subject with more exhaustive and nuanced discussions of genetic engineering.

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