

An Ethics for the Wonderwoman and Superman

- James Kachappilly¹

Clones, Genes and Immortality: Ethics and the Genetic Revolution. By John Harris, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998. viii + 328 pp.

The world is at the dawn of a new age, where wonderwomen and supermen are galore, as one would believe, that it is possible to greet on the street a replica of Lenin or Hitler. The book under review, *Clones, Genes and Immortality: Ethics and the Genetic Revolution* by John Harris delves deep into the issues and problems related to human reproductive technology and genetic engineering. This is a retitled and revised version of *Wonderwoman and Superman* and the author explains the possible mindset of a person who would need to analyse the moral and ethical perspectives with regard to the manipulation and alteration of the genes and cells.

Towards Wonderwoman and Superman

The book is written with the stated goal of helping the layman to form his own vision about the 'dos and don'ts' in human biotechnology. In eleven chapters, the author makes a sincere attempt to lay bare the all-intriguing and complicated concepts in human genetic engineering. A believer may have to frown on certain occasions when the author treats problems of frozen embryos, prenatal screening, termination of foetus

while his liberal ideas sound contrary to the views of the organised religions and certain political leadership.

Advanced research has made it possible to have only ideal children by choice while people can preserve the embryos for future use. The author does mention that the 'clinical and conscious control of nature for one's personal conscience and priorities has produced much hostility' (p. 14). By the manipulation and alteration of genes, transgenic humans and animals could be created through *in vitro* fertilization. It is enough to treat a person on the cellular and molecular level.

The developments in genetic engineering have made changes in the understanding of the creation of new offspring without a biological mother. Scientists could today treat human beings, animals, plants and other organisms in order to improve the quality and remove the defects inherent in the basic biological structure of living organisms. John Harris limits his study only to the modifications of human nature by discussing the developments in biotechnology. Contrary to the general belief that scientists could soon create the replica of another individual, in the wake of the announcement of the birth of "Dolly", the first cloned animal, John Harris states that cloning does not "produce identical copies of the same individual person" but "produces identical copies of the same genotype" (p. 27). In his explanation of the embryo, John Harris describes those who follow many ideas as foxes and those who bring many themes under one vision as hedgehog. For the author, the embryo could be studied as fox and hedgehog.

Genetics and Morality

Harris is of the opinion that life begins at conception is false because human egg is alive before conception, so too is the sperm and both elements through their interaction bring about a change, leading to conception (p. 47). The foxy approach highlights the need to protect the embryo while it possesses many characteristics. The human embryo needs attention and protection not for what it is but for what it can become. While discussing the crucial question of when an individual's life begins, John Harris notes that doing something to a pre-person for its benefit or to end its life cannot be worse, holding on to the argument that it would not have been worse if that person did not come into existence (p. 80).

The exploitation of embryo for research to create healthy offspring cannot be avoided in the future. Cells of the human embryo regenerate more than that of adult brain cells. This naturally leads to the discussion of cloning embryos and cells or cell lines. It is also possible to create twin embryos and to destroy one for the benefit of the other. For the author this is ethically correct and in dire needs a necessity. One of the issues treated in the book is the moral status of the embryo. If the circumstances permit, it is legitimate to undertake therapeutic and experimental research on the embryo.

Persons and Non-persons

The author treats extensively “prenatal screening” and the rights and wrongs of termination of the foetus. He defines a person as a creature capable of valuing its own existence and narrates the differences that exist between abortion, infanticide and murder. It is not wrong to terminate unfertilised egg, while differences exist between persons and non-persons. The termination of pregnancy is in order when the conceived child has defects, so that there will not be needless suffering. Further, to avoid “avoidable suffering” according to John Harris, the screening of would-be parents is necessary.

Another important theme that Harris takes up is that of the birth of children who possess malformation. The author presents cases argued in the American and English courts, where people went to the courts against doctors who treated their parents for not giving adequate information about the troubles involved in bearing children with possible severe illnesses or malformation. With regard to the cases of disability, one should adhere to the norms of social justice, which imply that those who were maltreated have a right to legal remedies and those who are born disabled have to accept the situation as it is.

There are consequences for considering the human organism as a research material. Exploitation of the dead and the living are the two themes, which deserve the attention of all. In order to avoid all confusion that arises out of the uses of the dead bodies, and to deal with “sentimental morality” which is no morality at all (p. 124), the author proposes that all dead bodies must be made public property and should be owned by the state. Transplantation of embryos is another factor that deserves atten-

tion in the case of exploitation of the living. John Harris takes up also issues related to the voluntary and involuntary donation of organs that involve the buying and selling. Two conceptions that deal with the exploitation of organs are the wrongful use, without any commercial or financial value to the transaction and the imbalance in the idea of the 'value of an exchange of goods and services' (p.145). According to the author, it is legitimate and ethical to use others as a means to our ends. He points out the example of blood transfusion.

It goes to the credit of modern genetic technology that even human beings could be produced *in vitro* with the manipulation of genes, which make the world abundant with wonderwomen and supermen. The developments in genetic engineering can produce more hybrids, which in general can create many different sorts of people, with more power and talents. Everyone has the inner quest to change the world and make it a better place to live. Improvement in molecular engineering has produced the thought that with the ability to change the nature of human beings the interest in changing the world will diminish. Therapy in the somatic and germ line calls for moral difference between the two. Changes in the somatic line involves alterations in the genetic structure of the individual and it will not be transmissible to its offspring, while changes made according to the gene line would transmit to the offspring too (p. 197). Therefore, John Harris mentions the arguments against germ line therapy. It must be noted that genetic alteration can also provide new breeds in the society, with its advantages and disadvantages. One must not forget that all these issues raise the question of justice too.

Areas of Reconciliation

The author has tried to look for points of unity from the ethical and moral viewpoints in the field of human reproductive technology and genetic engineering. These effects have proved that through sophisticated means the nature of human beings could be modified. John Harris tried to answer the question whether scientists should go for changing the human biological structure and if so how and to what extent. One could say that the author has succeeded in stating his position emphatically with the support of reasons, to spell out the policies necessary for keeping in tune with the possibilities opened up by advanced research in biotechnology.

On the whole, the work investigates the moral and ethical concepts in biotechnology with regard to cloning and exploitation of the embryos. The author has carefully scrutinized the main issues and has set forth possible steps one could take in order to avoid confusion and misunderstanding between science and the moral disciplines.

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