Recognizing the Autonomy of Future Generations: The Genetic Enhancement Debate

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With the rise of new technologies such as Clustered Regularly Interspaced Short Palindromic Repeats (CRISPR), genetic modification has entered the world of possibility for future generations. The limits of genetic engineering are not yet fully understood and, if taken too far, could pose a major threat to the structure of society and the members within. Though this technology can potentially delete genes associated with diseases, it can also promote the idea and industry of "designer babies," such as working to enhance human capabilities cognitively, physically, or cosmetically. Though, at first glance, this may seem beneficial, if taken too radically, this technology could work to violate the rights of those who cannot yet speak for themselves. Hence, by implementing genetic enhancement technologies, individuals of future generations lose their autonomy and are subject to changes and alterations they did not ask for and potentially may oppose. Violating these individuals' autonomy inflicts harm upon both them and society, as it goes against a social framework that seeks to maximize individual dignity and freedoms. Considering these issues, society should not implement non-therapeutic genetic engineering to enhance the characteristics of future members of society because it violates their autonomy.

I. Nature of the Genetic Enhancement Debate

As society progresses and innovates new technologies such as CRISPR, new pathways and opportunities emerge for individuals of current and future generations. However, as societal capabilities and

opportunities arise, fueled by these new technologies, it is important to recognize the moral responsibilities that accompany these advancements. Society must first ethically question these new possibilities before partaking in them. Genetic engineering debates center on key issues such as consent, health and safety concerns, regulation, and distributive justice.

The issue of consent involves questioning if it is ethical to modify individuals who are not yet born and hence cannot consent to these procedures. Those advocating for genetic engineering express the belief that, despite the lack of consent from the individual, the parents can substitute in making this decision with the intent of pursuing the best interest of the child. Ultimately, they argue that the supposed improvements to the child's wellbeing due to these enhancements outweigh the initial need for consent. On the other hand, those in opposition to genetic engineering advocate for the autonomy of the child above all and express that this technology violates the child's individual rights. The opposition to this technology argues that these enhancements can be detrimental to the wellbeing of the child and disrupt the social framework of society that seeks to promote freedom of choice.

It is important to distinguish between non-therapeutic and therapeutic genetic engineering technologies. Therapeutic genetic engineering technology refers to the process of manipulating genes exhibiting the presence of mutations that would otherwise result in the development of diseases. This technology works to preserve and potentially save the lives of future children through advanced medical technology. Non-therapeutic technology works to alter and enhance children who would otherwise be born completely healthy. Therapeutic technology is necessary for the child's wellbeing, whereas non-therapeutic technology is nonessential. Children possessing congenital diseases could have their autonomy preserved through therapeutic technology. Genetic engineering could prevent implications from their disease, like shortened life spans or severe disabilities, which could constrain their ability to exercise their autonomy and therefore potentially better enable that child's autonomy. Non-therapeutic technologies can suppress a child's right to an open future by shaping their life around parental and peer expectations rather than allowing them the freedom to determine their own path.

Non-therapeutic genetic enhancements should not be implemented because they violate the autonomy of future generations, negatively impacting these individual lives, as well as the social framework that looks to promote individuality and freedom. This immoral action leads to a loss of children's rights to an open future, a damaged sense of wellbeing, and constraining expectations that make it difficult for these generations to thrive and experience the same freedom and opportunities that generations before them received. These future generations will also feel an increased pressure to conform to genetic enhancement trends, further constraining their autonomy and ability to exercise it. These effects can then translate into their children's lives as a result. The pressure associated with this loss of autonomy creates a dangerous generational cycle that silences the voices of future generations and their essential right to exercise their autonomy and choose their own paths in life.

II. Arguments of Non-Existence, Wellbeing, Expectations, and Social Life

Respecting autonomy means respecting the right of another individual to make many significant decisions on their own behalf without distortion from external forces (Christman 2003). Hence, when ethically questioning the implications of genetic enhancement, we must foremost inspect and understand whose rights are in question. Since these modifications alter the genes of future generations and affect their lives directly, this debate involves questioning what entitled rights these individuals possess. As a result, the capacity to be one's own person and independently make decisions about the course of one's life is a basic human right; unfortunately, the reality of genetic enhancement would violate this basic right to individual autonomy.

Dena Davis directly addresses the autonomy rights of future generations in "Genetic Dilemmas and the Child's Right to an Open Future." Davis claims that although these children may not be able to exercise their rights before or when they are born, these rights should protect genetically engineered children to ensure they can exercise them in the future (Davis 1997, 3). Davis demonstrates why these future children have rights by explaining Joel Feinberg's argument. He denotes "rights in trusts" as the overall right of a child to an open future (Davis 1997, 3). Feinberg argues that these future

children still have a right to their autonomy because they will be born as human beings. These individuals will one day flourish into adulthood, where they should be able to exercise these "rights in trust" equally like other humans. Society should preserve and protect their right to these freedoms because, as rational beings, all humans equally possess them. At a Human Rights Council meeting, members recognized future generations as belonging to the human family, therefore maintaining the equal and inalienable rights described in international law (Ohlsson and Skillington 2023, 9).

Feinberg explains how violating the "rights in trust" of humans who cannot yet speak for themselves can be detrimental to their ability to exercise their future autonomy by depicting an analogous scenario. This scenario illustrates a Jehovah's Witness child that requires a blood transfusion, but the child's parents' religious views object to this life-saving procedure (Davis 1997, 3). In this case, although the parents should be free to exercise their religious beliefs in their own decision-making, translating these beliefs at the cost of the child's life and wellbeing is not ethical and does not enable the future autonomy of that child, similar to genetic engineering. One of the most influential thinkers among this debate, Jürgen Habermas, maintains the belief that prenatal germline enhancements are detrimental to future children's autonomy (Pugh 2014, 148). Habermas establishes the idea that our bodies partly determine us as they enable us to perform actions. Hence, genetically engineering a child who grows up to disagree with these modifications could lead to a sense of self-alienation as that child's body is in dissonance with their desires. He argues that if manipulated, human bodies can potentially constrain the aspirations and actions that are achievable for individuals. Therefore, to maintain the right to an open future, these future children need protection from limitations placed on their abilities by external forces like parental goals. Habermas's connection between the body and the mind works to explain the true value of autonomy and how decreased autonomy can directly lead to a loss in wellbeing, such as through self-alienation.

Habermas also shares the idea that genetic intervention could undermine the child's ability to perceive himself or herself as an

autonomous agent. It is assumed that human rationality allows humans to regard themselves as autonomous beings with free will to independently create and establish their own paths in life. The ability to exercise one's autonomy and utilize free will is central to a person's identity and sense of self. Therefore, when parents make decisions that limit or direct the path of future generations, these children may feel like their lives are already decided for them and they can no longer make meaningful decisions regarding their future. For this reason, genetic modification restricts future children's sense of personal identity and risks the loss of children's experience of independence. These repercussions could lessen that child's confidence to independently make decisions or recognize their free will and right to make those decisions as autonomous agents.

It is important to recognize there are grave repercussions that accompany violating the autonomy of future generations. Allowing parents to expend large amounts of money, time, and energy to genetically implement their own wishes for their child's life can create unfair expectations for that child. Davis argues that violating these children's autonomy based on parental preferences or desires can be detrimental to the wellbeing and development of that child. The action of sexual selection through genetic modifications can introduce harsh expectations that can harm the mental health of a child over time (Davis 1997, 3). For instance, parents who desperately want a boy could use genetic engineering to make this sex selection simply because they love football and want their son to be a football player. Suppose their genetically modified son ends up hating sports and instead would rather partake in the arts. Since these parents devoted their resources financially and emotionally to having a son, when he does not perfectly mold into what they wished for, they are going to develop some animosity and feel a sense of disappointment. If the child becomes aware of the motivation behind these modifications, despite his own desires, he may feel significant pressure to conform to these expectations established by his parents. Hence, these intense expectations could affect the sense of that child's individuality and ability to grow into their own person who is able to create their own path, free from their parents' overwhelming wishes. It is clear that these children never asked for their lives to be centered around these expectations, and the pressure to conform to their parents' desires instead of their own

demonstrates the constraint that genetic modification places on these individuals' autonomy.

Allowing the genetic enhancement industry to flourish into societal realms not only creates the potential for consequential effects on individuals but also on society and its framework. To elaborate, this industry promotes the idea that no person is ever good enough, cognitively, aesthetically, or athletically, without the result that this product is providing (Kourany 2013, 11). Accordingly, the concept behind this technology creates a culture where members of society feel they are not good enough and ultimately inadequate unless they are genetically modified. Parents and individuals may feel pressure to conform to societal pressures and trends resulting from this technology and hence make decisions to also become enhanced in these ways. Once again, it is transparent that societal pressure resulting from the genetic enhancement industry can lessen individuals' ability to independently exercise their own autonomy.

As an illustration, picture a scenario where the standard for all members of society is to have blue eyes and blonde hair and achieve this standard through genetic engineering. There would be situations where parents decide to conform to these societal preferences instead of their own and modify their children to have blue eyes and blonde hair. This pressure stems from the valid fear that their child will be bullied or outcast for not having these modifications. Further, since these parents are conforming to the desires of society rather than using their own judgment to produce decisions on their children's behalf, it is recognizable that this technology can constrain autonomy, more specifically the parent's ability to exercise their autonomy in this scenario.

III. Objections, Conclusions, and Future Considerations

Despite the evidence provided that genetic enhancement technology violates and constrains the autonomy of current and future generations, opponents to this stance still provide several objections to this viewpoint. To begin, these opponents object to the right to an open future argument by stating that many parental decisions affect a child's autonomy in the same way as genetic engineering may (Shaefer, Kahane, and Savulescu, 2014). Genetic enhancement can completely constrain or shape a person's autonomy through non-consensual, irreversible decisions made on

their behalf for the course of their entire life. On the other hand, certain parental decisions other than genetic enhancement may temporarily constrain how one exercises the autonomy to which one is entitled. Though some parental decisions can affect a child's autonomy, these decisions are ones that are not deemed morally correct in the first place and hence cannot be grouped among all parental decisions to be used as an objection to the right to an open future argument. However, many of these regular types of parental decisions are inevitable and necessary for the development of the child and therefore irrelevant to this argument. If a parent only signed their child up for football despite their child's wishes to take piano lessons, that action would constrain the child's ability to exercise their autonomy and could be morally condemned. These types of parental decisions temporarily constrain the autonomy of that child, while genetic enhancement is a permanent constraint on a child's entire life. For example, a sex selection enhancement is a decision that a child will have to live with their entire life without their consent.

In addition, scholars such as Schaefer, Kahane, and Savulescu argue that autonomy enhancement could increase the autonomy of future generations and lead to a rise in the wellbeing of future generations. However, this is incoherent because enhancement would still be decided by the parent on behalf of their unborn child, who cannot yet consent to this procedure. Theoretically, this type of technology could be seen as beneficial, but in reality, it still violates the autonomy of these future generations since they are unable to consent to receiving it. The decision to enhance these children, regardless of it being to increase their autonomy, hypocritically violates their autonomy and creates a loss of personal identity for that child. Rather than using the consequential method of genetic enhancement, society should look to increase autonomy by externally increasing the ability of individuals to express their autonomy, such as by creating a culture and environment more enabling of free expression and choice.

In the same way, proponents of non-essential genetic enhancements invalidate the idea that the harsh expectations resulting from genetic enhancement would harm the child's autonomy. Instead, they detail that the opportunities arising from

this technology would outweigh any potential constraint on autonomy, and potentially this technology would improve the user's autonomy. However, despite any potential outcome, we should be concerned primarily with the fact that these children did not consent to this technology, and hence their autonomy is shaped by someone other than themselves. Likewise, the sort of autonomy they are experiencing may only result from their enhancement and not expression found intrinsically.

Advocates of genetic enhancement may argue that future generations' autonomy cannot experience violation by this technology since they are unborn and hence do not yet have autonomy. Although these individuals are not yet born, they still can exercise their future autonomy. Moreover, this nonexistent argument can be soundly grounded in the fact that future people are future human beings. Therefore, as humans they possess the same characteristics that living people do that entitle them to receive the same moral treatment (Meyer 2021).

Though the technology used to provide genetic enhancements can productively modify away potential diseases, society should be cautious before looking to use this technology to enhance capabilities in other ways, such as cognitively, aesthetically, or physically. Though there are many reasons to be wary of genetic enhancement, this essay focuses on the concept of violating autonomy. All humans equally share the right to free expression and the ability to exercise autonomy independently, so they can decide a path in life for themselves. Nevertheless, it is apparent that preserving this right that unites all human beings takes precedence above any sort of potential benefits this technology may grant. In conclusion, nontherapeutic genetic enhancements should not be implemented because they violate the autonomy of future generations, negatively impacting individual lives as well as the social framework that looks to promote individuality and freedom. This immoral action leads to a loss of children's rights to an open future, a damaged sense of wellbeing, constraining expectations, and pressure to conform to trends that make it difficult for these generations to thrive and experience the same freedom and autonomous opportunities that generations before them received.

Although therapeutic enhancement is generally deemed to be beneficial to society and nontherapeutic enhancement destructively violates autonomy, future research will likely need to reconsider the moral implications of therapeutic enhancement as well. In *Human Flourishing in the Age of Gene Editing,* for example, Rosemarie Garland-Thomson reframes and questions what society may deem as therapeutic enhancement (Parens and Johnston 2019, 5). She argues that genetic enhancement for congenital diseases like the one she was born with can take away disabled people's autonomy and strip them of the opportunity to grow and flourish into their personal identity that their disability allows. She, along with Habermas, who was also born with a congenital disease, argue that many of the diseases modern medicine considers altering through genetic enhancement are essential to the people at hand. This perspective not only offers insight into how it could feel to have one's autonomy violated through genetic modification but also demonstrates that determining what life experiences count as good or bad is complicated. Additional research could determine what constitutes true therapeutic enhancement. Garland and Habermas claim that disabled people should maintain their autonomy to become who they are through the bodies they were naturally born with. Instead of looking at these mutations as diseases, potentially society should look at them as simple proponents of human diversity that should be honored and respected.

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