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Robert Lebel

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Book Review

GENETIC FIX by Amitai Etzioni, Macmillan, 1973.

Reviewed for Linacre by Father Robert Lebel, S.J. of the Jesuit School of Theology of Berkeley, Calif.

Professor Etzioni has attended a three-day international symposium, prepared a collection of quotations and ruminations, found a catchy title, and put together a new book. This effort will win him some public acclaim. But to those professionally involved in bioethics, genetic counseling, biomedical research, etc., *Genetic Fix* offers little which is startling or novel.

The text strictly follows the symposium schedule: one part of the book devoted to each day. Individual papers are treated in more or less detail, depending apparently on the author's interest.

In his opening chapters, Etzioni lapses at times into overstatement, ensuring continued reading. His semi-journalistic, semi-autobiographical style is tedious to anyone seeking solid information. There is no pinning him down to clear statements of espoused policy—although his general biases are eventually discernable. Stopping to define 'oocyte' and 'mitotic' would suggest he intended a wide popular readership; but the man in the street is unlikely to be familiar with 'perivitelline space' or 'zona pellucida,'

neither of which is explained. On the other hand, almost any college freshman would know better than to refer to J. D. Watson as the "discoverer of DNA."

Etzioni emerges from the book as a kind of folk hero struggling against the villainies of unbridled research scientists and 'paternalistic' medics. The leitmotiv of the book is his grand idea of review commissions (local, national, international) to evaluate human experimentation, genetic counseling techniques and policies, etc. Anyone in touch with the literature knows this is no great new breakthrough. Senator Mondale's ongoing efforts to establish such a commission by federal legislation *is* referred to. But there is a distinct flavor of the author being some sort of unsung prophet for the idea. Certainly, the idea *is* to be enthusiastically pushed.

Etzioni does have a talent for formulating good questions. Some of the chapters are well organized, notably "The Right to Know, to Decide, to Consent, and to Donate." His interest in patients' being fully informed—about their own problems, the risks of experimentation, chances of transplant success, and significance of genetic disorders, etc.—is well stated and well chosen as a concern. For example, he points out that before making a

decision on aborting a Down's Syndrome fetus, the prospective parents should visit institutionalized 'mongoloids' and families where such children are loved and cared for.

He asserts that genetic counseling should be made available to all (but never imposed on any) prospective parents; another good point. Full information is the only sound basis for truly moral decision. The observation is cited, that women show higher risk of premature delivery in pregnancies subsequent to an abortion (cf. *Lancet* 10, June, 1972).

One of the delights of this book is that the author seriously thinks it worth his trouble to take occasional pot shots at "the Church," as though this represented any kind of monolithic body of opinion on matters of bioethics . . . or anything else! He ridicules Lejeune for considering abortion undesirable, and assumes Moltmann must be a Protestant since he sounds like a reasonable man. It is even flatly stated that "the Church" opposes all genetic intervention. It may be, after all, that Etzioni does intend this book to be classified as fiction.

On the other hand, it is disheartening to find once more in print the claim that the beginning of embryonic life is a 'scientifically unanswerable' problem. Rumbings on behalf of IQ being a primarily

inherited quantum had a similar depressing effect on this reader. And it is not at all encouraging to find Etzioni holding out on the basis of 'a feeling' against the solid argumentation of Steinberg and Fraser. These two workers sought to dispel the notion that genetic engineering is capable, in the foreseeable future, of significantly 'dirtying' or 'improving' the human gene pool.

The eight appendices comprise 20% of the book, and some of its best material. The never-released FDA pamphlet on the dangers of oral contraceptives, Dr. Apgar's interesting 17 guidelines for prospective parents, and the actual text of Mondale's bill would otherwise be difficult to come by. Other appended material is of less interest, being dreadfully repetitious of an already rather repetitious text. Two items could easily be found in any good library . . . including Etzioni's own somewhat outdated article "Sex control, science and society."

The author admits being long-winded, and sets out to prove the point in *Genetic Fix*. The real contributions of this book could have been made in an article of moderate length. The book is not recommended for those already informed about bioethics, genetic counseling, etc. It will gain a wide pop-eyed 'Gee-whiz' popular readership, and help the author to support his wife and four sons.