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Book Review

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Book Review

Erratum

The citation for this review is 4 *RISK* 263 (1993) in most commercial databases.

JOHN HARRIS, WONDERWOMAN AND SUPERMAN: THE ETHICS OF HUMAN BIOTECHNOLOGY. (Oxford University Press 1992) [271 pp.] Acknowledgements, further reading, index, introduction, notes. LC 91-23939; ISBN 0-19-2177540-0. [\$22.95 cloth. 200 Madison Avenue; New York NY 10016.]

In this volume, John Harris, Professor of Applied Philosophy at the Centre for Social Ethics and Policy at the University of Manchester, presents a series of hypothetical ethical dilemmas that may arise as biotechnology progresses. While the title of the book focuses on the ultimate in potential human eugenic engineering, the creation of a wonderwoman or superman with physical capacities beyond those of current humans, his inquiry is broader — but not so broad as to encompass bionic engineering

To lay a foundation, Harris begins by briefly tracking developments in biotechnology, particularly genetics. Then he addresses research on embryos and, e.g., in vitro fertilization and uterine implantation. He also examines storing embryos as sources of human cellular material and discusses clones. With regard to the latter, he ponders the potential for the vainglorious, in seeking immortality, to replace nuclei of stored embryos with their own.

Harris also considers “wrongful life,” discussing litigation over whether it is better to be alive with a physical defect or to have never been born. After briefly reviewing the legal system’s reticence to recognize an individual’s right not to have been born, he concludes that “wrongful life” lawsuits should rarely succeed and proposes that, if we judge some people as “better off dead, we should make it easy for them to achieve the death they seek by legalizing voluntary euthanasia.”¹

Further, Harris explores possible solutions to dilemmas presented by wide-ranging potential for commercial and noncommercial exploitation of tissues — primarily human embryos, aborted fetuses, anencephalic infants, living tissue donors and cadavers. With regard to the last, for example, he proposes that cadavers be regarded as “public property” and observes that:²

¹ At 96.

² At 103.

It has always seemed curious to me that the state can order a post-mortem examination to satisfy its curiosity about the cause of death, but not order cadaver transplants in order to save the lives of living citizens.

Not until the seventh chapter, does the book turn to the philosophical and legal implications of potential wonderwomen and supermen however created. He begins by analogizing to a possible objective of education, a sound mind in a sound body, and, quoting Shylock's inquiries in the Merchant of Venice,³ quickly shifts to the question of what it means to be "human."

If we can create superhumans, can we not also create subhumans? Will transgenic "humans" with genomic implants from other animals be *human*? Regardless of method, will some be engineered, e.g., for tolerance to environmental pollutants and harsh working conditions? Will they be used to improve the living and working conditions of "natural" humans — or "superhumans"?

After raising such spectres in the last five chapters, Harris concludes by noting that all knowledge can be used for evil and by warning:⁴

If we fear such a world we must make sure that it does not become a reality. But our distaste for such possibilities should not prevent us from availing ourselves of the benefits of genetic screening. As always and as with any innovation whatsoever, it is up to us to decline the burdens.

Bradley J. Olson[†]

³ Act III, scene i, quoted at 143.

⁴ At 235.

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