

## Designing designer babies

The temperature has been raised in the already heated debate on so-called 'designer babies', as an Oxford University academic publically pledged his support for embryo screening of personality traits. [Alex Slingsby](#) discusses the potential impacts of such selections on our future generations

Tuesday 21 August 2012



Photo Credit: Carl Zeiss Microscopy

An Oxford University academic, Professor Julian Savulescu, has raised the temperature in an already heated debate on the so-called 'designer babies', by publicly pledging his support for embryo screening of personality traits. Savulescu proposed that it would be unethical to ignore this particular advance in genetic engineering, even describing the opportunity as a "moral obligation".

Embryo screening involves the pre-implantation testing of an embryo, as part of an IVF treatment. It has been suggested that, within the next five years, IVF clinicians may be able to screen each and every embryo for its physical and psychological features; if the results are not as desirable as hoped, those particular genes would be screened out of the process. Certain genes linked to depression and violence, such as the MAOA 'warrior' gene, will also be highlighted in the process, allowing parents to 'perfect' their offspring.

Wouldn't it be better to preserve some faith in our future generations? After all, we've survived as a species thus far. Perhaps, some of the World's most influential and intelligent people wouldn't be here today if they had been screened as embryos and it had been decided that they didn't fit the bill. We should be able to accept that not one person is a perfect mix, as that's the whole point of our species. We're diverse, and it is our diversity that allows us to develop as an international species. Remove the diversity, and we wouldn't be half as interesting or adept.

Dicing with the lives of thousands of children is considered to be morally acceptable by Savulescu, the expert in practical ethics, as long as the outcome is that of a more stable and safe society. But how can we judge what our nation will be like in twenty years, when history has shown that society is inherently unpredictable, and liable to change. In addition, study upon study into psychological development has shown that personality traits are not simply the outcome of genetics; upbringing and life experiences affect a personality beyond the grasp of genetics. How can we 'morally' select an embryo for its

admirable genes, when we can't be sure that the person will grow into them?

It seems that Savulescu's point of view on the matter is fundamentally flawed. It certainly would be a step in the right direction to determine if your child is more susceptible to health problems, but where will this search for 'perfection' finish? Once people are able to pre-determine personality traits, pre-determined physical traits such as hair colour and height are just around the corner, with the potential to turn the nation into a nightmarish sequel to *The Stepford Wives*.

The problem is that if we start messing around with future personalities, IVF clinicians will be treading a very thin line between 'success' and treating our future generations as guinea pigs, something I hope nobody in their right minds would advocate. Perhaps we should slow the process down a few notches, before we all start affixing 'Made in the UK' labels to our embryos.



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## One comment

[Matt Sharp](#)

21 Aug '12 at 5:17 pm

Alex, this is actually a reasonable analysis. Certainly more reasonable than the many Telegraph readers who jumped to write 'OMG SAVULESCU'S A NAZI' type of comments. However, it is also fairly superficial, which is understandable given that most people haven't had the chance to consider the issue of designer babies in serious depth.

You raise some important questions, the most important one being "where will this search for 'perfection' finish?"

This is an understandable concern. We don't want parents to start treating their children as commodities that can be designed as they please. This would no doubt harm the child-parent relationship. It would also harm what theologian William F. May calls an "openness to the unbidden", in this context meaning a parent's ability to deal with the unexpected/unplanned in terms of how their child turns out. In turn, this can increase an acceptance of others in society. For example, a parent who finds out their child is gay may learn to become much more accepting of homosexuality, whereas if they could have somehow prevented their child being gay, they would not have not have become as tolerant.

However, we could impose restrictions on what sort of physical and personality traits parents are allowed to select. Parents should not be able to express discriminatory attitudes (e.g. if there happen to be certain genes that increase likelihood of homosexuality, they should not be able to select against them). And they should not be able to select purely superficial traits, such as hair colour and height.

But why should this mean they should not be allowed to select for or against certain personality traits that would likely improve a child's life and society?

You argue that "how can we judge what our nation will be like in twenty years, when history has shown that society is inherently unpredictable, and liable to change."

Whilst it is true that we can not predict exactly what society will be like, we surely have some idea. And remember, the alternative to making rational selection of traits is to depend on biological processes that are even more out of touch with what a future society will be like. Our biology evolved in the forests and plains over millions of years. How is this at all relevant to modern/future society? Why should we trust a 'blind watchmaker' more than a sighted one?

Finally, you correctly point out that personality is a consequence of environment and upbringing as well as genetics. However, this is no argument against making genetic modifications, it just means they may not be entirely accurate.

Consider the flip side of that argument. We know that our environment influences, but does not entirely determine, our personality. Does that mean we should not bother to improve our environment and quality of our upbringing? Generally, sending children to school will make them more educated and help improve society, but for some children it may be detrimental. Does that mean we should not attempt to educate children? Surely the wise thing to do is take whatever action is likely to have the best outcome, even if on an individual level it can't be guaranteed? So even though genetics does not entirely determine personality, if there are certain personalities we deem better for individuals and society (e.g. non violent and non depressed), should we not select those genes that push us in the right direction?

Even though I've been quite critical of your argument, I want to commend you for writing this article as this is a topic that's becoming increasingly relevant, and it's important that the media acts to stimulate debate.

(btw I've written a number of articles on designer babies/genetic selection on my blog if anyone's interested: <http://experimentsofliving.wordpress.com/>)

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