

When is selecting baby traits the right thing to do?

Although the word was not actually used (or at least I did not hear it), this was a polemic making the case for 'eugenics'. That is, the improvement, even 'perfection' perhaps, of humanity by actively intervening in its inherited biology.

In its pursuit, [Professor Julian Savulescu](#), presenting the first session of the [Progress Educational Trust's 2014 annual conference](#), [The Commercialisation of Life](#), made a good case for parents being given more of a choice in the attributes of their children. After all, what's not to like in the idea of preventing inherited genetic diseases? Preventing diseases is what public health is all about, isn't it?

Genetic screening, followed by the discarding of unwanted embryos (perceived as 'flawed') and implanting unflawed ones, denies life to an individual with a genetic disease in favour of an individual who does not have it. Health is better than disease. The life that does result is arguably a better life than the life (or lives) denied. That argument is the pivot on which the moral imperative of the title turns.

Not that it stops there. A life could be made better not only by preventing negative attributes, like diseases, but by enhancing positive ones – a capacity for happiness, perhaps? Are there genes for a pervasive feeling of wellbeing? Some scientists think there are (or might be). Acceptance or rejection of an embryo could be made on the basis of its 'well-being genotype'.

Cunningly, Professor Savulescu got us to connive with him on this extrapolation, asking for a show of hands on whether we would like to live longer, particularly if we could avoid the downsides of age. We mostly stuck our hands up ? not that surprisingly. Of course, what we would like as being advantageous for ourselves, or our children (higher IQ for instance), is not necessarily what we would like to see for others (or their children). Evolutionary theory reminds us that once an adaptive trait has spread through an entire population any competitive advantage its gene once had is lost; and not only that, any concomitant disadvantage for individuals it carries is what remains. A high IQ seems to carry more risk of unhappiness than a lower one.

Read full, original article: Commercialism and the moral obligation to create 'designer' babies