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Why Conservatives Care About Biotechnology

Adam Wolfson

Irving Kristol tells the story of how, in the mid-1960s, liberal intellectuals became possessed by many strange ideas and phantoms, one of which was that the progress of technology was going to create a dangerous excess of leisure in our society. As the economy became increasingly automated, it was argued, tens of millions of Americans would suddenly have nothing to do with their time. Where would they go? How would they occupy themselves? The Ford Foundation poured loads of money and resources into studying what became known as "the great automation question," and many conferences were held on the topic. The subject even made its way into one of Lyndon Johnson's presidential addresses. But the automation question turned out to be an utter fantasy, one which conservatives played a key part in debunking. But today, the tables are turned. It is conservatives who raise concerns over developments in (bio)technology, and liberals who scoff.

Now, I happen to believe that the advance of biotechnology is not a pseudo-problem or fantasy, as was the case with automation technology forty years ago. But it would be a mistake to assume that the problem of biotechnology is obvious. What is it about biotechnology and its advances that many conservatives find troubling? Three general areas of concern seem most important, though obviously the lines separating them are fuzzy: First, the continued development of biotechnology in certain directions will require the violation of truly basic moral strictures. Second, biotechnology will initiate a revolution in how we think about family, parenthood, the relation between the generations, work and achievement, and many other areas of human life. And third, biotechnology could bring about a fundamental rupture in human history, leading us into a "posthuman" age.

Morality and Progress

The first of these areas—call it the breaking of moral commandments—is what most disturbs biotechnology's conservative critics. It does so mainly because it raises the central question of the moral status of the embryo. In the recent report on human cloning by the President's Council on Bioethics, one finds the following two sentences, sentences that were endorsed by only its conservative members. The first sentence reads: "The cell synthesized by somatic cell nuclear

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transfer, no less than the fertilized egg, is a human organism in its germinal stage." And the second one reads: "[T]he embryo is in fact fully 'one of us': a human life in process, an equal member of the species *Homo sapiens* in the embryonic stage of his or her natural development." The import of these sentences is clear enough. The embryo is a human being, a person. Cloning-for-biomedical research, which involves the production of cloned human embryos for use in experimentation, can thus mean only one thing: the massive, industrial-scale violation of that ancient commandment, "Thou shalt not kill."

Yet even if one rejects the argument that the human embryo is fully one of us, as most liberals do, many other biotechnological advances will involve similar violations of certain fundamental and sacrosanct "Thou Shalt Nots." For example, as the President's Council's report also argued, in this case unanimously, cloning-to-produce children would necessarily involve unethical experimentation on the child-to-be. So far cloning in animals has produced very few successes, and these only with a high incidence of serious impairment, disability, deformity, and early death. Cloning advocates reply that over time these problems will be solved, but at what point do we say it's safe to try cloning or any number of other experiments in a human being, especially a child-to-be with no say in the matter? Conservatives (and many liberals as well) rightly tremble at the prospect of treating human beings as guinea pigs.

The problem with biotechnology for conservatives, therefore, is the way in which its progress seems to require the suspension of core moral beliefs. Its advance on many fronts will involve turning our backs on first commandments. In this regard, however, it's not entirely clear to what extent biotechnology is a new problem. The Left, for example, often makes the charge that for religious conservatives the debate about embryo research and human cloning is in fact a stalking horse in the abortion wars. There is some truth to this claim. Many conservatives believe that if the embryo were legally protected from invasive and destructive scientific procedures, a shadow of doubt would be cast over *Roe v. Wade* and the right to abortion. For these conservatives, the life issue is preeminent. Their priorities are evident in their evaluations of reproductive and research cloning. In their view, cloning-to-produce children is less objectionable than cloning-for-biomedical-research. In the latter case, they argue, the intention of the scientific researcher is quite simply embryo destruction and a general "will to power," while in the former case, the goal still remains, however morally confused, a human life—that is, a baby. Jody Bottum forcefully made this point in a recent issue of *The Public Interest.* The fact is that many in the pro-life camp tend to be less worried by the brave new world of designer babies than by the bad old world of abortion.

The nature of this concern—about breaking or eroding fundamental moral commandments—was intuited years ago by the biologist J. B. S. Haldane. Born

in 1892 in Oxford, England, Haldane was a scientist who bridged the two cultures. Though a biologist by profession, his formal education was in the humanities, and he wrote numerous popular science books for the general public. He held some rather quirky and even outrageous views, to be sure, but unlike so many scientists today, he thought broadly about the effects of science on society. He was an advocate of what we today call biotechnology, though not a mere propagandist for it.

In the Council's debates, the liberal advocates of cloning-for-biomedical-research spoke with great solemnity of the need to treat the human embryo with respect. They would dismember it, but only with the greatest of reverence. In other words, they would have their cake and eat it too: maximum medical progress without so much as committing a misdemeanor, never mind a crime. Haldane spoke more honestly, I think. He claimed that the progress of biotechnology would require mankind to "adjust its morality to its powers." In Haldane's words again: "We must learn not to take traditional morals too seriously." For conservatives, this is a major source of unease with biotechnology: how it threatens traditional morality.

Ideals Under Assault

The second conservative concern with biotechnology has to do with the transformative effects it may have on our understanding of ourselves, and how this new understanding might eventually become embedded in social practices and institutions. In my view, this is where biotechnology's greatest challenge lies. To work my way into this complex problem, I will begin with some of Haldane's insights, move from there to the Council's cloning report, and conclude (if you will indulge me) by taking a quick pass at Thomas Hobbes.

It so happens that Haldane was especially interested in the potential applications of biological discoveries and inventions, and he believed that biotechnology's most profound effects would be found here. He readily acknowledged that biological inventions were not unique in this regard. However, as great as the promise and peril might be in the other sciences, Haldane believed that biology was where the action was, and that the most profound social effects would flow from its discoveries and applications. To him this was not simply a quantitative difference between biotechnology and the other sciences, but a qualitative one. The biological inventor is different in kind from other scientists. For example, the physicist, Haldane argued, is a modern-day Prometheus, and his inventions are thought to be a threat to some God—that is, a kind of blasphemy. The biological inventor, in Haldane's view, is of a different type and character. His ultimate aim is not to challenge the Gods but to overturn the human things—that is, our primordial moral intuitions. And thus the biologist's inventions will be viewed not as blasphemy but as, in Haldane's words, "perversion." One is

reminded of Leon Kass's argument of the automatic repugnance we tend to feel towards the prospect of human cloning, and moreover of the deep wisdom behind such repugnance. Haldane acknowledged the repugnance but saw no wisdom in it. Anyway, repugnance, he predicted, quickly fades into pious acceptance (a fact that Kass has also noted but lamented).

Of the social impact of the biologist's investigations and inventions, Haldane is nothing if not frank. He comments that while the biologists are "interested primarily in truth as such … they can hardly be quite uninterested in what will happen when they throw down their dragon's teeth into the world." What were the dragon's teeth Haldane foresaw? He predicted—and remember he wrote in the early decades of the last century—the abolition of many deadly infectious diseases, significant increases in life expectancy, the green revolution, embryo harvesting and artificial reproduction, powerful mood-altering drugs, genetic engineering, and even something so specific as estrogen treatments for menopausal women.

Regarding the effects of these inventions on society, Haldane's analysis is suggestive in that it foreshadows critiques later voiced by conservatives. As a result of the elimination of disease and increases in life expectancy, Haldane foresaw a society that has lost all familiarity with the meaning of death and is cut off from traditional rituals that once gave death meaning. He predicted the social demise of religion, as the doctor replaced the minister, and a decline in religious belief in an afterlife, as the possibilities of this life multiplied. As a result of gaining control over reproduction, Haldane predicted political controversies over the proper sex ratio and the kind of population (that is, with what distribution of talents) we should favor. He lamented the likely unraveling of conventional family life that would follow from the introduction of artificial reproduction. However, as a result of the separation of sex from reproduction, he foresaw (and welcomed) the possibility of a radical new sort of human freedom. Needless to say, Haldane got many of the details wrong, and perhaps overstated his case, but in the main outlines he was close to the mark.

If Haldane described how the inventions themselves can transform our social life, the President's Council on Bioethics made a slightly different and I think more subtle point. The Council was concerned not merely with the social effects of biotechnology's applications but with how moral acquiescence to the applications—whether or not they ever become widely available and used—posed a serious ethical problem in and of itself. In other words, the Council objected to cloning-to-produce-children for the impact it would most likely have on *how we think* about certain fundamental human experiences, such as the meaning of parenthood or procreation.

While it is true that most of the Council members endorsed this particular theme, it is a particularly conservative concern. Ever since John Stuart Mill at least, liberalism has taken a very narrow view of social harm, even denying that

the very concept exists. For contemporary liberals any suggestion of the need to nurture sound public opinion on certain basic matters is condemned variously as censorship or paternalism.

The Council's report took a very different approach. It objected to human cloning in large part because of the deleterious effects it would have on societal attitudes about procreation and parenthood. Rather than viewing our children as gifts to be accepted with gratitude, in a "cloning society" we would come to think of children as mere products of our will—products that might be shaped and molded to conform to our desires. Human procreation would take on the semblance of manufacture, and parents would come to think of themselves as "smart shoppers." Of especial significance, the Council in its report repeatedly emphasized that it was the idea of cloning-to-produce-children itself that was dangerous, not the extent to which it became embedded in social practices and institutions. As the report states: "The introduction of *the terms and ideas* of production into the realm of human procreation would be troubling *regardless of the scale involved* (emphasis added)." With these words the Council expressed a quintessentially *conservative* concern about biotechnology or any number of other issues, for that matter. The problem of biotechnology has less to do with the applications it unleashes than with the novel ideas it introduces. What's at issue is the shaping of public opinion in potentially harmful directions.

Let me further develop the point by briefly returning to the embryo question. It is not clear to me that the great debate about embryo destruction—which closely resembles the abortion debate, though of course there are important differences between the two—is the debate we should be having today. It is true that embryo destruction is a weighty moral matter, and how we settle it is a matter of significance for the character of the country. But the most significant forms of embryo research aim at controlling the genome of the next generation, whether for reasons of health or enhancement, through both genetic screening and possibly one day directed genetic engineering. This is what should most concern us.

Eugenic control is a radically new type of authority or power—one not previously seen in human history. It is quite different from the sort of control exercised, for example, through education or socialization. A person can overcome, or at least revise, these parts of his personal history and makeup. Indeed, one might say that this is what it means, in the terms of modern liberalism at least, to be an individual: to take control over one's past and to make it one's own, to be autonomous. However, genetic control cannot so easily be shaken or thrown aside, and thus, as the philosopher Jürgen Habermas has argued recently in *The Future of Human Nature*, eugenic control threatens two of modern liberalism's central principles: autonomy and equality. First, the child with a humanly chosen genome will not feel himself to be fully free, and nor will he be viewed as such by others,

certainly not by those who selected his genome. Second, the child with a chosen genome will in some important sense not be the equal of those who have done the choosing. What's at stake here is not simply the moral status of the embryo, as important as that is, but our commitment to certain core public values.

To better appreciate the nature of this concern with public opinion let me make a somewhat different run at it. The completion of the mapping of the human genome a few years ago was met with all sorts of thunderous applause and bright hopes for how this discovery might improve the human condition. New treatments were promised for any number of diseases. Yet the decoding of the human genome did not entirely escape political considerations. The matters of human equality and racism were always in the background. The private company that led the way, Celera Genomics, made much of the fact that the DNA in its analysis was a composite of many different races and ethnic groups. (To the chagrin of many, it was later revealed that the DNA used was in fact mainly taken from the company's founder, Craig Venter.) And President Clinton himself ballyhooed the moral lessons to be learned from the unpacking of the human genome. Here is what Clinton said:

> I believe one of the great truths to emerge from this triumphant expedition inside the human genome is that in genetic terms all human beings, regardless of race, are more than 99.9 percent the same.

Was the equality of all men the great truth to emerge from the mapping of the human genome? I have no idea. What's noteworthy about the president's comments (and those of many others to the same effect) is the heartfelt attempt to ground human equality in modern genetic science. This is, however, the wrong place to look, and a moment's reflection will show why. Let's say that after carefully studying the findings of the human genome project, and after consultations with his scientific advisors, President Clinton came reluctantly to the conclusion that humans were not created equal after all. Would a rethinking of our moral and political views on the subject be required? This is not a hypothetical question, since in the past the best available science has in fact been taken to support the doctrine of human inequality. Think of the science of IQ in our own day, or Darwinism in the nineteenth century, or natural history in Thomas Jefferson's day—all of these branches of modern science were thought by brilliant scientists and humanists alike to demonstrate the inequality of men, and, in some instances, serious political consequences followed from these scientific findings. Even today, a debate has ensued in several medical and science journals over whether or not "race" is a valid genetic or biological concept, and what social meanings might conceivably follow from such a conclusion.

Thus in suggesting that science is needed to confirm human equality, Clinton put that equality at risk. What for Thomas Jefferson was a "self-evident"

truth was for Jefferson Clinton a hypothesis awaiting confirmation from scientific experts. This is an old story. Thomas Jefferson himself came to doubt the principle of human equality based on the findings of the natural scientists of his day.

The problem here is not unique to biotechnology. There is a tendency today to view modern science as society's final arbiter of truth. This should be resisted. In the United States, at least, the equality of man was a discovery of political science, not of modern experimental science. What I mean by a discovery of political science can be seen by looking back to Thomas Hobbes's understanding of human equality—an understanding that via John Locke had at least a measure of influence on the American Founders, including the author of the Declaration of Independence. As any reader of *Leviathan* will recall, Hobbes was an early exponent of applying the discoveries and methods of modern science to politics. However, when it came to the question of human equality, he took a different approach. Here's what Hobbes had to say, in his own inimitable fashion, about human equality:

> If Nature therefore have made men equall that equalitie is to be acknowledged: or if Nature have made men unequal; yet because men that think themselves equall, will not enter into conditions of Peace, but upon Equall termes, such equalitie must be admitted.

Hobbes called this the "ninth law of Nature"—a law of nature that paradoxically overruled a purely scientific understanding of nature. One might say that the human equality of the liberal tradition is more a political truth, or a truth about man's political nature, than a truth of biological nature.

I have said that the way in which old beliefs decay under the onslaught of the new is an especially conservative preoccupation. But this is not just a conservative worry. Certainly, those liberals who raised a ruckus at the publication of Charles Murray and Richard Herrnstein's *The Bell Curve* were deeply concerned about how the findings of science might come to affect publicly held norms. And I would argue that liberals should also be concerned about research that exploits and manipulates life at its earliest stages—if not for the sake of the embryo then for the impact such research could have on the liberal ideals of autonomy and equality. The larger point is that more is at stake with biotechnology than the quality of its inventions—our common principles, mores, and public understandings are also affected.

Biotechnology As Ideology

The third conservative concern with biotechnology I find a bit more difficult to put my finger on, but I will try at least to flag the issue as I understand it. The concern here is that technology (and biotechnology in particular) will fundamentally distort human existence, and in far more radical ways than anything

imagined by Haldane or the President's Council. Here the concern is less with biotechnology and technology per se than with what is sometimes referred to as "technologism"; it's biotechnology as a form of ideology or false consciousness.

One way of getting at the point is to describe the very opposite take on biotechnology. In a recent issue of the *Economist*, it was stated that "what really matters [about biotechnology] is not what is possible, but what people make of these possibilities." I would call this the classical liberal view of technology. Technology and biotechnology are tools like any other—subject to good or evil use. Technology is, in a word, value-neutral. I have already described the ways in which this is not the case, the ways in which the mere introduction of a biotechnical invention can have broad social ramifications and even challenge our fundamental moral intuitions. Yet the trouble with biotechnology, in the view of many conservatives, goes even deeper. Several conservatives, for example, have recently made the argument that biotechnology is a form of ideology akin to communism or libertarianism—an ideology, like these others, that obscures the truth about human beings. The concern is that biotechnology distorts the distinctively human. It does so both by the utopian hopes it fills us with, and, unique to biotechnology, by the actual effects it has on us directly through its applications.

This strikes me as a more radical critique of biotechnology, a critique with deep philosophic roots. Thirty years ago such arguments were mainly heard on the Left, but they have lately migrated to precincts on the Right. However forceful or forcefully made, I'm not terribly enamored of this kind of critique. We should keep in mind that biotechnology is in fact a catch-all name for a highly complex area of science that encompasses genetically modified foods, human cloning, stem cell research, anti-aging treatments, new disease-fighting medications, and a variety of biological agents with so-called "enhancement" capacities, whether of the mind, body, or spirit. And this hardly exhausts the list of what might fall under the label of "biotech." Haldane even considered the milking of a cow a kind of primitive biological invention. Though for the sake of simplicity I have spoken of "the problem of biotechnology," it would be a mistake, I would argue, to view biotechnology as somehow a totalizing worldview. There is no "Biotechnological Manifesto." The truth about biotechnology lies somewhere between the simplistic liberal view of it as a mere tool and the radical conservative critique of it as an ideology.

Conservatives and the Liberal Project

We conservatives should be mindful that our major concerns about biotechnology—its violation of moral commandments, its profound effects on public opinion and mores, and its ideological assault on the distinctively human—are raised within a certain political context. The American project is a liberal project. The United States is the "first new nation," thoroughly liberal and democratic almost

from the start—at least in intent, if not in fact. Most conservatives today have come to terms with this project, and, following Tocqueville's lead, they attempt to conserve what is most admirable in the liberal project. This is the approach—most realistic, most prudent, most true to the good of liberalism itself—that I would apply to biotechnology. After all, what are the ends of biotechnology, as stated by its advocates? These might be summed up as longer life, greater liberty, and a more effective pursuit of happiness. Now, these ends can be pursued in egregiously illiberal ways, but the ends themselves are part and parcel of American liberalism.

One does not have to dig very deeply into America's history to observe the close link between its founding ideals and the advance of science. One is tempted to say that biotechnology is the stepchild of Jefferson's devotion to science and Hamilton's promotion of manufacturing. Certainly, the early theoreticians of liberalism saw a close connection between their political ideals and the way in which science might promote them—which is not to say that liberalism and science are of the same origin or will always be compatible. Nonetheless, I would hazard to say that it is no coincidence that one of liberalism's first theoreticians, John Locke, was also a physician. His private correspondence is filled with graphic descriptions of the misery and suffering of sick friends. Not the alms givers of Christian charity, he predicted, but the physicians and inventors and scientists would become the great benefactors of humanity.

Now, none of this means that we conservatives must, in the words of Bioethics Council member and scientist Michael Gazzaniga, simply "let science roll." We should subject its new discoveries and inventions to our moral intuitions and religious judgments, not to mention our deepest liberal principles. There is a role here for regulation and regulators, as Francis Fukuyama and others have argued, as a way of managing the advance of new biotechnologies. But there is also the need for some absolute limits or bans on certain biotechnologies. One needs to establish bright lines and firewalls, to say thus far but no farther. We might consider bans, just by way of example, on human cloning or sex selection of children for non-medical purposes. And perhaps we should think about bans on Ritalin-like drugs for anyone under a certain age, just as we ban alcohol and cigarette consumption by minors. The details, of course, would need to be debated and worked out, but the need for limits should be clear to those who take the scientific possibilities and social significance of the new biotechnologies seriously.

It is also important to engage the public's attention, something better done through the political process than regulatory agencies. And here conservatives have an important role to play. Today, liberals tend to defer to scientific opinion. They are of the view that what's good for democracy is not necessarily more democracy but guidance by science. In contrast, conservatives have attempted with varying degrees of success to give sound moral and political content to the

public's visceral reactions to certain developments in biotechnology. More of that kind of educative function needs to be performed.

In the end, it's difficult to be optimistic that conservatives will win many of the biotech battles ahead. Yet conservatives need not win every battle, only the most important ones, those whose outcomes most directly implicate America's core liberal principles, not to mention Americans' most fundamental moral intuitions. This then is the conservative's task—to head off the prospects of a new eugenics, a eugenics that would ultimately spell the demise of liberalism itself. But such is the conservative's fate in America to come to liberalism's defense.