

**We
need
to
talk
about
this**

About the new eugenics. Third edition.

Angelina Souren

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Third edition
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by

ANGELINA SOUREN

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“All the elements for your happiness are already here. There's no need to run, strive, search or struggle. Just be.”

– Thich Nhat Hanh

4. Why we need to talk about this

This is not about whether you are against or for progress in science and technology.

We might end up wrecking the good life if we were to proceed full steam ahead with the little we know right now. If we allow the unbridled application of germline modification of embryos by using techniques like CRISPR, right now, with the little we know now, we might end up demolishing society.

We might not.

If we do, then that mistake will be likely impossible to correct.

We may think that we have enough safeguards in place, but we won't know whether we really do until after we've come to depend on those safeguards.

When you look back into history, you will notice that we've often been completely unable to predict any negative effects of what we saw as awesome scientific and technological progress. Sometimes, we overlooked things that are blatantly obvious in hindsight and I am still scratching my head over how the heck we managed to do that. We've even given a Nobel Prize in medicine for one of an invention that backfired badly, namely DDT. In other cases, such as that of thalidomide, its disastrous effects were ignored for the sake of profits. (See Chapter 11 for more about this.) A lot of it we were simply completely unable to predict. A recent bit of scientific news was that ibuprofen affects male fertility in humans. Would you have foreseen that?

So let's look into this some more.

First, concerning the use of genome-editing techniques such as CRISPR, we need to make a distinction between interventions that only affect the individual in question and interventions that (theoretically) will also be present in offspring and may not be reversible.

The first concerns so-called somatic cells. Alterations are made to DNA in cells that are not part of human reproduction hence do not get passed on, but can cure a disease such as when these cells do not make a

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protein that the body needs to be able to function well.

Interventions that will be passed on to offspring are called germline modifications.

The use of CRISPR appears to be a form of human enhancement.

I see no major problem with people who want to CRISPR themselves just like I don't want people to criticize the fact that I would love to be able to run on grass again every day (like I used to), or that one of the first things I do in the morning is to make a large mug of nice, strong coffee. This is along the lines of whether or not you take a painkiller, which kind and how many or whether you should eat anything containing peanuts if you have a nut allergy.

Human enhancement is something we all do. When you have a mug of Java before you go for a run or when you're working late, you do this because the coffee enhances your capabilities at that point. It makes you a "better" person for a while, better within the scope of what you want to achieve at that point. Caffeine is also a bronchodilator, so if you have mild asthma, your coffee will give you a double boost.

The element of risk plays a role, along with questions about a person's free will and freedom to make decisions for oneself. We all take risks on a daily basis, even when we open the front door. We take risks when we drive our cars and take public transport.

Is the practice of pre-embryo, sperm and egg selection based on (genetic) characteristics as a form of human enhancement? I feel that it is not. There is no attempt to change anything if an embryo or fetus is not chosen or aborted. It is pure discrimination, preferring one person over another, as harsh as it may sound. I suppose that that would be old-style eugenics, then.

The use of CRISPR in ART concerns the enhancement of a non-consenting human, however. There is a big difference between doing something to yourself and doing something to another being. This is a crucial difference; I will come back to this in Chapters 7 and 8.

Using CRISPR to cure (prevent) serious health conditions is one thing. But what happens when parents tweak properties of children that do not result in remediation of a health condition? Take an imaginary case in which parents tweak what would have become a brown-eyed, brown-

haired girl and end up with a red-headed girl with green eyes. Would that be a different person than the girl with the brown eyes and brown hair would have been? Or could we say that the brown-haired brown-eyed girl became enhanced, even though this would be a matter of personal taste?

I don't know how to answer that question. I have experimented a little bit with my own external properties and it is both fun and amazing to see how differently people respond to you on the basis of hair color alone, or on how you dress, but also quite shocking. How we are treated does influence us. Does that turn us into different people? Perhaps not, but it can determine a lot of our behavior and our opportunities, so it certainly influences how we live our lives.

How would you feel if a stranger walked up to you on the street and started cutting your hair out of the blue?

The problem with this is that you haven't given consent. (Let's not go into the legal intricacies of consent and the need for reform.) That is a major problem of using CRISPR in ART. Something is being done to you that you probably cannot change and will likely be stuck with for the rest of your life and for which you cannot give consent.

What kind of risk do those children run? (That is, apart from the scientific/technological risks inherent in the use of these new technologies, such as that one gene can code for several properties so that removing one can also introduce health risks.)

Well, for one, these people could end up having been modified according to fashion trends that put them at a disadvantage as adults. As Hank Greely, a law professor who specializes in bioethics at Stanford, has pointed out, the people who got the first nose jobs ended up regretting them badly when the type of nose they had chosen went out of fashion. Breast augmentations have gone through a similar fashion cycle.

In an interview with Dutch TV, bioethicist Julian Savulescu offered the theoretical example that parents might want to control whether or not their child is going to be gay if they are living in a society in which gays are persecuted. That situation, however, could be wildly different by the time that youngster reaches puberty. These parents would have chosen a way to eradicate their own worries. They would not have asked the child what the child wanted.

In the discussion about designer babies, also the topic of height sometimes crops up as an example to discuss. There have been studies that seem to indicate that the taller you are, the more successful you are in life. There are countries in which people are undergoing complicated

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procedures so that they can become taller, just like there are Asian people who undergo surgery to make their eyes appear more western.

When you look into it in more depth, you may find that this successfulness is probably not determined by height, but by childhood nutrition and the associated benefits of that as well as by the nature of the society in which people are living, which values those societies hold high (according to, for example, Hofstede's system, or whether these values are western and capitalist/materialistic or not).

Dutch young people are now increasingly often signing up for surgeries that limit their height because they are, for example, fed up with bumping their heads in doorways. The Dutch are the tallest people on earth and this appears to be a result of plenty of dairy in the children's diets in combination with the fact that they are growing up in a prosperous, egalitarian society, in which there is no massive deep poverty like in the U.K.

So shouldn't we rather be creating more egalitarian societies and eradicate childhood poverty instead of contemplating the tweaking of genes that make children grow into taller adults?

Besides, taller people put a higher environmental burden on the planet, have higher costs of living and are at risk for certain health conditions. They may also have shorter life spans.

So you could just as easily argue for tweaking genomes to encourage a form of dwarfism that does not compromise health. You could use social media marketing to make dwarfism attractive. I am not saying that we should, simply attempting to show that most advocates of any way of being (being taller, being smarter) have a bias that makes them ignore certain facts, simply because they are not looking for those facts, and that you could just as easily argue for the opposite.

A similar discussion can be had about whether or not to increase the IQ of one's offspring. It is not true that the higher your IQ is, the happier you are. A high IQ does not make you immune to assaults or robberies or to diseases like progressive MS or traffic accidents or even to the misfortune of breaking a leg when out skiing or horse-riding. IQ is a western, capitalistic value that a lot of people associate with high income and they take high income or rather, socioeconomic status, as a person's true measure.

Where would it stop? Would it stop with people who are 4 meters tall so that they could be considered more successful than the people who are 3 meters tall? Would it stop at an IQ of 300, which you can only accomplish if you keep average IQ right where it is, as IQ is a relative measure? The latter would, therefore, go hand in hand with increased inequality.

Would only the grandchildren of Bill Gates, Jeff Bezos, Arron Banks and Donald Trump be allowed to tweak their offspring, in practice? Or should we make it free and unlimited for all future parents?

What risks might society run if we were to allow germline application of techniques like CRISPR on embryos and newborns freely, given the little we know right now?

Again, this is aside from the inherent medical risks and so on, such as the fact that if you code for one desired property you often also code for an undesired property or get rid of another desired property (and aside from the fact that the tweaking the way I describe it here may never be possible in exactly this way).

I think that the greater risk is to society at large. If we proceed too rapidly we could be dissolving the glue that keeps societies together.

Medical insurance – as Michael Sandel has pointed out previously; if I recall correctly – was initially based on solidarity. Though this is often no longer the case, sadly, the idea behind insurance is that we all pay in and bear the burden of some people's medical misfortune together. Sandel is not happy with the idea of humans wanting to create perfect humans. In his article "The case against perfection" published in the Atlantic in 2004, Michael Sandel (who was a member of the U.S. President's Council on Bioethics at the time) referred to (social) solidarity within this context. If fate no longer controls most of our destiny, it becomes harder and harder to feel solidarity toward others, he argued.

I share that concern, but I make a distinction between inclusive solidarity, which I often refer to as "the glue that binds society" and exclusive solidarity (protectionism).

If there is enough to go around, for everyone, if nobody needs to fear a shortage, if there is abundance in a society and everyone feels provided for, it is much easier for people to feel generous toward strangers, people who aren't part of the in-group. That's what I call inclusive solidarity. When times are tough, people tend to restrict feelings of solidarity to their own group and exclude strangers. I call that exclusive solidarity. So-called old boys' networks are examples of exclusive solidarity.

The new eugenics may (initially) encourage exclusive solidarity, the

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selective protection of “our kind of people” over the protection of others. It could lead to the deliberate creation of different classes of human beings, a theme that was explored in the film *Gattaca* and also features in the novel “The ultimate brainchild” by Richard Bintanja. It is possible that this would eventually be evened out again, but we have no way of looking into the future to see how the unrestricted application of consumer eugenics would work out for our grandchildren’s children and their children.

Frances Kamm (who just like Sandel is based at Harvard University) has argued that a parent’s unconditional love includes seeking better attributes for a child, in her 2005 comment on Sandel’s 2004 article in the *Atlantic*. That reminds me of what Joseph Connolly describes in his work “Style” and I consider attribute-seeking in contradiction with unconditional love. The attributes are not sought for the child but for the parent(s).

Unconditional love means that you’ll love the child (person) as he or she is, with no condition attached. Kamm’s unconditional love, by contrast, seems to refer to the efforts and sacrifices a parent may be willing to make for the sake of their child. That is not the same. Unconditional love on the condition that a child complies with how the parents want the child to be, that is unconditional possessiveness.

Kamm, too, saw that the idea of seeking “better” attributes is problematic and came up with a concept she called sufficientarianism, which does not seek perfection but merely what is sufficient. This appears to suffer from the same problem. Who determines what is sufficient? Kamm, however, realized that as well. Next, she asked “...could we really safely alter people, not making disastrous mistakes?” and commented: “A deeper issue, I think, is our lack of imagination as designers.” Her concern was that “people will focus on too simple and basic a set of” what they consider good qualities. This is linked to the idea that parents might end up choosing what happens to be trendy at the time of choosing.

That is easy enough to solve, in theory. If, for example, there is a gene for musical talent, you could decide to give everyone that gene. If there are genes for being good at chess or good at basketball, you could give those to everyone as well.

At this point, I feel that I have to point out once again, keeping certain

scientists in mind, that I am not talking about whether or not this will be possible. That is not what this book is about. I want more people to think about and discuss the principle of doing such things, what the advantages and disadvantages could be and whether other approaches could be more effective, but I have seen what, for example, some professors in genetics have to say when non-geneticists start talking about what geneticists seem to feel is exclusively their field. This is a discussion about our lives and about the world we live in.

In her comment, Kamm also wrote that in her eyes, the duty to help others has to do with respect and concern for the values of other persons, regardless of whether or not we believe that they are to blame for the situation they are in. This was a comment on Sandel's view that the more chance – fate – there is in our life choices, the more reason we have to share our fate with others (inclusive solidarity).

Until I heard neuroscientist Rebecca Saxe speak about the neuroscience of hate (see Videos in Sources of information), I believed that inclusive solidarity is largely based on whether we can identify with other people or not.

Indeed, fate has something to do with that, as Michael Sandel has said. If we can see that we are all slaves to fate, it is easier to recognize that we're all in the same boat.

But it's more complicated than that. There is something that underlies whether or not we are able to identify with someone.

It is related to how secure people feel. They automatically translate other people's bad luck to what it means for themselves and how secure they feel determines how they see this. They subconsciously ask themselves whether the same bad luck could strike them too and if so, how they would like the people around them to respond.

Rebecca Saxe made me realize where some of this insecurity of insecurity comes from (but not all). When people feel that there is not enough of the good stuff to go around, they become less likely to share it with strangers, with people that they do not identify with. That's sheer biology. So if they can identify with the other person, they will want to help that unfortunate soul, but if they don't identify at all, then they won't. The greater the degree of inequality, the smaller the chance is that a person is able to identify with someone else.

What Saxe had to say fits with what social epidemiologist Richard Wilkinson (see Videos in Sources of information) has been saying as well, namely that everyone in society benefits from greater equality, even those at the top.

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As a consequence, we should be striving to create maximum equality in society, by which I mean that – among other things – we should eradicate the kind of deep poverty that determines what kind of adults children can grow into.

I do not see this as an alternative for the use of CRISPR in ART but as a condition for its continued use. These two developments should go hand in hand and feed back into each other.

I don't see equality in terms of "declaring everyone synonymous" but in terms of allowing everyone to flourish to the best of their abilities and personal wishes (provided the latter does not harm anyone).

To bring it closer to home, let's look at the example of male-on-female rape. Any woman of any age can get raped in any kind of situation or environment, but when a woman gets raped, a mechanism kicks in among many men and also among many other women that assesses other women's chances of getting raped and their own measure of powerlessness. It is reassuring to be able to tell yourself that you would never get raped or that your sister would never get raped and one way in which you can do that is by blaming the victim. Because you or your sister would never do that, hence you are safe and your sister is safe because "rape only happens to women who do something wrong".

"She should have been dressed differently." "She should have been home at that hour." "She should not have gone to that neighborhood." "She should not have worn lipstick." "She should not have had this many boyfriends." "She should have had a boyfriend." "She shouldn't have gone alone." "She should not have had dancing as a hobby." In spite of the "me too" wave, the blame mechanism is still alive and kicking with regard to male-on-female rape.

This same mechanism exists in many other instances of "bad luck".

Concerning the new eugenics, however, we have to be very careful not to equate "bad luck" with "having a child that does not fulfill our wishes". Having a girl in your own country or flying to another country so that you can have the desired male baby is not about "bad luck". It is about seeing your baby as a product, the way you would purchase a matching chair that fits neatly in the corner of the room and completes the set or buy a painting to add to the collection of artworks.

I think that these non-technological challenges of the new eugenics are

considerable. I think that we should also take it slow for that reason and give everyone a chance to weigh in on this discussion. We have made so many mistakes in the past when we enthusiastically jumped on the bandwagon of progress, only to find later that we'd been shooting ourselves in the foot. With our increasing scientific and technological powers also comes a greater chance that we do something very competently yet with such a scale of consequences that we end up regretting it badly, even more so than we've already done. (We've wrecked our own habitat, people, and while we are curing diseases after disease, we are also making ourselves sicker and sicker. We are clearly still missing something, still doing too many things that are not the right things.)

I find it worrisome that the new eugenics runs the risk of turning children into products that have to meet certain expectations of parents. Of course, parents having expectations for their children and that this can lead to excesses is nothing new. It was what inspired London-based author Joseph Connolly to write a bulky novel called "Style"; it was described as a "brilliant exposition of maniacal parental ambition within a society in thrall to celebrity and fashionable acquisition" and published in 2015.

Real life promptly followed this up with the college admission scandal in the U.S. Rich parents had been paying "designer label" schools under the table to get the schools to admit their children. It does not give me the impression that these parents had a lot of faith in their children, and I don't see bribing schools for your children as an expression of unconditional love either. Speaking of seeking better attributes for one's children...

I think that the unrestrained creation of children according to specifications could increasingly skew parental expectations and ambitions and might push them out of control, not just for a few individual parents, but as a general trend. This could hollow out the most-valued principle of parenthood, the concept of unconditional love, and this is closely tied to inclusive solidarity. Allowing the deterioration of the unconditional love parents (should) have for children and risking its eventual disappearance could have seriously deleterious consequences for humanity as it is the glue that keeps us all together. How would we make decisions in a cohesion-less world? Could we start seeing each other as enemies? Could we collectively move toward increasingly psychopathic societies – a trend that has already been detected – and if so, what might this look like in practice? Is it something we must avoid or would we see the development of a new kind of order that might actually work very well?

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We don't know. There is no way for us to know.

Traditional parenthood itself can be replaced. Commune life, kibbutzim and other alternative forms of living have shown that. You could turn parenting into a profession; you could attach licensing to parenthood.

In fact, there is another fascinating technological development that may end up solving many issues and steer our lives in a completely different direction. We will no longer have traditional gestation at some point. Women will no longer have to get pregnant, which would likely in itself also remove some of the unconditional love that most parents feel for their children.

Maybe we will lovingly grow our babies in cute little incubation pods at home. Perhaps having children will become a privilege or a duty with which only certain individuals will be tasked, the way we now task people with great IT skills with using those skills instead of telling them to go out to sea in boats and catch fish for our supermarkets.

Maybe babies will be created centrally and handed out to approved parents. In an interview for Dutch TV, bioethicist Julian Savulescu suggested that assigning children (embryos) to people randomly might be a good solution. The combination of these two ideas could be all we need to preserve unconditional love.

That may also be the time when we can safely and freely apply genetic selection and genome editing and gene therapy and, yes, have a more product-like view of children. I would still like this to be one that puts a duty to nourish and care on the shoulders of the parents and carers, instead of putting a duty to perform on the shoulders of the children.

(This development of artificial uteruses (artificial wombs, which already have been used successfully for sheep) will also settle all discussions on the topic of abortion, thankfully.)

By the time we grow children in pods, a lot more will have changed in society. I hope that by then, all kinds of men and women will get to eat their lab-grown honey mustard chicken filets, if they want honey mustard chicken for dinner, no matter what good or bad luck they may have had. I hope that by then, all real-life chickens will get to live their lives as free as a bird again, too.