Designer babies: where should we draw the line?


Designer babies are often presented in the popular media as a kind of apocalyptic spectre of things to come in a brave new world where reproduction is the province of white coated scientists and potential parents in pursuit of trophy children. In this realm physical, intellectual, and social perfection is sought through the manipulation of genes and selection of favoured traits and attributes to the detriment of individuals who cannot compete and of society more generally through the loss of natural selection. It is therefore a pleasure to discover a short readable book that sets out the discussion and its many nuances in concise and accurate terms that will be accessible to all and should help to dispel some of these science fiction myths through scholarly debate.

This volume is part of a collection of books under the title Debating Matters that sprang out of a series of public debates organised by the Institute of Ideas. The conferences were intended to reinvigorate debate and the contestation of ideas and contemporary issues the Institute regards as ‘too frequently sidelined’. The arguments are presented by an authoritative who’s who of commentators who offer their own insightful readings of the technologies themselves and the law as it pertains to their use, which is clearly and succinctly written and will be invaluable to readers interested in the current major and ongoing debate about the ethical and moral issues that surround the whole area of reproductive technologies.

The underlying popular distrust of reproductive technologies seems to stem from the fact that its use offers people choices that would not be available through nature. In this vein Josephine Quintavalle entitles her piece ‘Leave it to nature’, implying that this is a fallacy, since an embryo has no rights that can be protected and nobody would have a cause of action in a discrimination complaint. Aside from that discrimination is of course only problematic when it is unfair.

So are we about to enter a brave new world of designer babies? Well, not so that you would notice. Access to artificial reproduction is limited by law, ethics, and money. The Human Fertilisation and Embryology Act 1990 charges the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority with responsibility for determining that the technologies are used within accepted legal and ethical parameters and the role that these technological interventions genetic diagnosis may be put have been similarly proscribed so that until very recently it was acceptable to use it for the benefit of the potential child produced but not solely for the benefit of a sibling. At this point Juliet Tizard injects a reality check into the discussion explaining that choice is problematic not because it is likely to lead to designer babies as popularly envisaged but because it is limited through financial and regulatory constraints and therefore is applied inconsistently leading to disadvantage. Currently most couples can obtain only very limited access to treatment services through the NHS and this is further hindered by overregulation generated by fears of where the technology might lead if left to develop unchecked. With such limited availability it seems unlikely that the balance of society will be threatened by the choices of couples who have no alternative but to use reproductive technology to produce their desired child.

This book, and the series to which it belongs, aims to present a ‘robust intellectual approach’ through stimulating and thought provoking essays. It certainly achieves that. In addition, Ellie Lee’s introduction provides an overview of the technologies themselves and the law as it pertains to their use, which is clearly and succinctly written and will be invaluable to readers seeking an understanding of the terminology and the role that these technological interventions might play in overcoming fertility problems. As an informative and intelligent introduction to the debate and the key issues Designer Babies: Where Should We Draw the Line should therefore be recommended to anybody who has an interest.

H Biggs