

Book Review

**IN A BETTER WORLD?
PUBLIC REASON AND BIOTECHNOLOGIES ***

1. INTRODUCTION

Elvio Baccharini's *In a better world? Public Reason and Biotechnologies* is an example of a book which aims to provide innovative arguments for a very recent discussion. In this case the discussion is in applied ethics and, in a way, this book aims to change the frame of the discussion to one more similar to discussions in political philosophy. It does so by analyzing the justifiability of human modification procedures in terms of their justifiability according to public reason. Baccharini uses the idea of public reason in a Rawlsian sense, meaning that the standard against which policies will be judged is whether they can be justified, based on shared reasons, to all other members of the society as free and equal persons.

2. JUSTIFYING PUBLIC POLICIES AND LAWS

The first chapter of the book deals with the general question of justifying public policies and laws. A few important qualifications are in order about the author's Rawlsian framework. Firstly, it is not enough that everyone can endorse such policies, but it must also be possible that they can endorse them precisely because of reasons accessible to everyone. This means that comprehensive moral doctrines (such as religion, different kinds of ideologies etc.) or controversial philosophical views cannot be used as public reasons. Secondly, it is not necessary to obtain actual agreement; it is enough that a policy *can* be justified to everyone based on shared reasons if they were reasonable and, to a degree, rational. Thirdly, the original Rawlsian position is that the subject of social justice is the basic structure of the society, not individual interactions. All disputes above the level of basic structure, according to Rawls, are settled by the democratic process. Fourthly, unlike Rawls, Baccharini allows that scientific theories which are not completely uncontroversial may still be used as public reasons because although consensus is not achieved, all scientists, as well as all reasonable and rational persons, at least believe in the underlying principles of these theories.

In the rest of the first chapter, Baccharini discusses some objections to his conception. As a result, his final conception of a just society is of a society which respects principles which stem from the ideal of free and equal citizens and in which decisions are made by public reasoning, but with further refinements in order to address parts of objections by

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Miller, Farrelly and Wolff. He concludes that his theory accepts a degree of contextualism and is open to different ways of interpretation and realization of principles of justice, that in certain situations principles of justice do not have to be lexically ordered, that in the area of public policies a lot can be achieved by compromise and that in practical issues, the status quo has the advantage while appeal to inconsistency is not a decisive argument. Such accommodations present a great strength of this particular theory, because they make liberal theory more refined, better adapted to the real life situations, and better suited for discussions which are very practical in nature, like the one of using biotechnologies.

3. GENETIC INTERVENTIONS

Having outlined his theory, and therefore the standard against which human modification procedures are going to be judged, Baccarini starts discussing these procedures with the focus on genetic interventions. He also anticipates a possible objection concerning the idea that originally the Rawlsian concept of justice only had the basic structure of the society as its subject, not individual interactions. Baccarini emphasizes, however, that for Rawls, the family was a part of the basic structure and that, when it comes to raising children, their parents do not only act as individuals, but also as agents of the society. Therefore, these procedures are a proper subject for public discussion.

3.1. Justifying genetic intervention to the recipients

After determining that questions of parents choosing to genetically modify their future child are proper questions for applying public reason, Baccarini discusses what could, in general, be proper reasons for the state to intervene and limit the parents' right to influence their children and concludes, following Brian Barry in his analogy about influencing children through education, that there are two main groups of reasons; the state can intervene in order to protect the interests of the prospective agent (a child, or a future child) or in order to protect the society's interests because it is in everyone's (including the child's) interest that the future members of the society are productive and active citizens. Therefore, he concludes that the parents, if they want to genetically intervene with the embryo, have the duty to justify it to their child as a prospective agent and as a future free and equal person (p. 56).

As a general rule concerning genetic interventions, Baccarini posits that they are justified under two conditions: that they eliminate some generally recognized disabilities or add some talents without removing others (p. 61). Concerning the first condition, Baccarini emphasizes that this means removing only those disabilities which are disadvantageous no matter how we structure society. Concerning the second condition, it is important to note why it is not allowed for parents to remove some talents and add others. This follows from the respect for children as prospective agents; no matter in what way parents add and remove talents, it is possible for the child to have such life goals and conception of good life that this would harm their realization (p.59). This also holds if the preference for something is removed with the talent, because it lowers the number of options for the prospective agent and therefore harms him.

Two further possible objections are mentioned: the child might object to having talents added because it will make it hard for him to decide what to do in life, or a child might complain that the parents did not give him the talent which he now wants. Baccarini

dismisses these concerns by saying that it is not a role of political structure to protect citizens from frustration when they can choose from a variety of life paths (p. 64), and, similarly, that no one can protest if he as an embryo does not receive the talents which he now wants, because “nobody has the right to get everything he wants” and such a right could never be realized for everyone anyway (p. 67).

2.2. Justifying genetic interventions as a society

In chapter 3 it remains to be seen whether genetic interventions can be justified from the standpoint of distributive justice. There are worries, says Baccharini, that the final result of using genetic intervention will be inegalitarian for at least three reasons: because the differences will become too great and the enhanced citizens could lose their sense of solidarity with the rest of the population (p. 70), because it would further weaken the support for redistribution since everyone would be responsible even for their talents (p.71), or because enhanced citizens would accumulate greater power in the society and become a sort of a ruling class (p.71). Baccharini dismisses these worries by saying that egalitarians should be wary of levelling down objection and that having more talented population will benefit everyone, while there is no reason to believe that these enhanced persons will be less concerned with other people. No matter how brilliant a person is, he still needs social cooperation (p. 79). To the concern about accumulation of power, Baccharini replies by agreeing with Ronald Lindsay that even if this is possible in theory, in practice it would take too long to accumulate such an amount of power and genetic interventions would, in the mean time, become widely available.

4. CLONING

In chapter 4, Baccharini discusses cloning. He notes three kinds of arguments against cloning; arguments from intrinsic immorality of cloning, arguments from intrinsic harmfulness of cloning for humans, and arguments from unjustifiable motivations for cloning (p.83). These three groups of arguments are then analyzed in terms of public reason.

4.1. Arguments from intrinsic immorality of cloning

Arguments from intrinsic immorality of cloning might take several forms; they can claim that cloning harms the specific natural order of human reproduction and therefore relations between humans (p.85), that it reduces human reproduction to that of less developed beings (p. 86), or that it hampers differentiation among persons (p.87). Baccharini rejects all these arguments. The first and the second one are rejected because they appeal to a controversial moral doctrine of natural order and normativity of nature which we cannot expect all reasonable persons to accept. The third one is rejected because Baccharini considers it factually wrong and claims that cloning would not harm differentiation because not everybody would choose cloning as a method of reproduction, and differences in tastes would even in case of cloning bring about different results.

4.2. Arguments from intrinsic harmfulness of cloning

Several influential arguments are mentioned in this section. There is an argument that cloning is wrong because the new person’s dignity will be damaged because she is not

unique and might even lose the spontaneity of her life when she looks at the life of the original, or when others judge her life as predetermined (p. 89, 90). There is also an argument that such a procedure would reduce women to mere technical reproductive functions (p. 91).

Baccarini disagrees with all these arguments. He claims the person's dignity would probably not be damaged because of a lack of uniqueness, no more than the dignity of twins is damaged. Furthermore, he claims that if people would have factually incorrect beliefs about the clone (the predetermination of their life) then we should try to fix this social situation, just as we have done with many other prejudices, instead of banning cloning. Finally, to the feminist criticism he replies that there is nothing in the process of cloning itself that would make it privilege men over women.

4. 3. Arguments from unjustifiable motivations for cloning

The following group of arguments claim that cloning is wrong because the motives of the person who wants to clone himself are unjustifiable. Kitcher's argument is presented here, and it claims that whenever a person tries to plan a life in advance, this cannot be justified, as life should be autonomous. Baccarini replies that determining one's genes by cloning does not mean determining one's life. Furthermore, there can be at least some justifiable motives for cloning, for example, a lesbian couple that wants to have offspring.

5. EXTENSION OF HUMAN LIFESPAN

In chapter 5 Baccarini discusses the justifiability and the most notable objections to the extension of the human lifespan. What he writes about here is virtual immortality – a person cannot die of natural causes, but can still be killed or commit suicide.

In objecting to such a procedure, Kass claims that it would destroy one of the things that make us human – our mortality. Baccarini replies that this is precisely the kind of controversial moral doctrines which cannot produce public reasons. The fact that mortality is what makes humans human is quite disputable and controversial (p. 102).

Baccarini also analyses some practical arguments from the standpoint of the society, which go against extension of human lifespan. The first one claims that this will create overpopulation on an already overpopulated planet (p. 112), and the second one that if people become much older, there will be no influx of new ideas, while the older people will be unwilling to leave positions which the younger would want (p. 113). Both of the arguments are deemed indecisive. Baccarini recognizes the worry of overpopulation but states that this can simply be regulated by making people choose between reproducing and extending their lifespan. Similarly, policies could be instated which would encourage the circulation of older and younger persons to desirable positions, which should not be a problem, as long as equality of opportunity is ensured (p. 113)

6. MORAL BIOENHANCEMENT

In chapter 6, Baccarini discusses the justifiability of moral bioenhancement – procedures which would increase the moral dispositions of people. He uses Persson and Savulescu's theory which states that human psychology and morality are adapted for living in small societies and with primitive technology. However, the conditions have drastically changed

and our moral sensibility is not sufficient to properly guide us anymore (p. 116). Some characteristics (biases) of human morality are very problematic, while technological development has made it possible for humans to seriously and permanently harm each other in a way which would render worthwhile life on Earth impossible forever (e.g. nuclear weapons) (p. 119). Persson and Savulescu therefore suggest changing human genetic and neurobiology in order to remove these biases, and believe that even compulsory enhancement might be required.

Some objections to moral bioenhancement are also presented in this chapter. John Harris believes that moral bioenhancement is unjustifiable because it removes the freedom of agents, a necessary condition for any kind of action to be moral (or immoral). Baccharini replies here that freedom of such agents would be no different than the freedom of virtuous people today (p. 127). Furthermore, Harris cannot appeal to the free will of agents, as this is appealing to a controversial philosophical theory and therefore not a public reason (p. 129).

Robert Sparrow presents different kinds of arguments against moral bioenhancement. He relies on the republican view of freedom as nondomination and asserts that moral bioenhancement is only justified when the agent himself chooses it. Any other procedure would be an imposition and a manifestation of domination over him (p. 130). Baccharini contrasts this view of freedom with the Rawlsian view and concludes that Sparrow's view is so demanding that it cannot even justify, for example, the education of children (since it is often paternalistic).

Another one of Harris's arguments is now presented; moral bioenhancement which would focus on moral emotions would actually harm the foundation of morality – reasoning. His view is that manipulating emotions could not result in moral actions in all situations, precisely because what is moral depends on the context (p. 134-136). Instead, Harris suggests cognitive enhancement which would make people better at reasoning. Baccharini has two responses: there is no reason not to supplement moral enhancement with cognitive enhancement, and better reasoning alone will not always lead us to more moral outcomes (p. 137,138).

Finally, to the objection of moral pluralism that it is unjustifiable to morally enhance someone if we do not have a standard idea of what it means to morally enhance, Baccharini replies that although we have to respect the fact of reasonable moral pluralism, there are some types of behavior which are clearly immoral, and provides a list of some such behaviors (p. 143,144).

In conclusion, Baccharini states that although there might be valid (but inconclusive) public reasons for moral bioenhancement, it would still be better to explore other, less coercive measures (p. 147), before using such a procedure.

7. CONCLUSION

In this book, Elvio Baccharini manages to provide us with an innovative set of arguments concerning the use of biotechnologies. He also manages to defend several (potential) future procedures, such as cloning and human life extension by showing how opposing arguments are either unconvincing or based on comprehensive moral doctrines which cannot provide public reasons, and how, therefore, liberal states should not ban these procedures.

Concerning moral bioenhancement, Baccharini's discussion with Harris about the necessity of fine-tuning moral enhancement and supplementing it with cognitive enhancement

if we want to achieve more moral behavior, is extremely important for the future of both this discussion and potential research. Any consistent account of true moral enhancement will probably have to take into consideration both of these claims.

Finally, on the question of genetic interventions, Baccharini also shows that many of the arguments used cannot produce public reasons because they rely on comprehensive moral doctrines or controversial philosophical theories. However, further analysis is needed in order to show that genetic intervention would adhere to the (lax) difference principle which Baccharini endorses. He seems to believe that genetic interventions would greatly improve society's aggregate capabilities which would benefit all members of the society, but in a world where even talents can be bought and accumulated by the rich (and where this would be an additional harm to equality of opportunity), it is at least possible that the whole social structure and perhaps even culture would change in a way that would make unmodified persons seriously disadvantaged. Further arguments from Baccharini about why this new world would not be hostile towards, for example, children of lower socioeconomic status, are required in order to demonstrate that it would truly be a better world.

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