

REVIEWS

QUO VADIS HUMANITY? ON GENETIC ENGINEERING

Book review: Michael Sandel, *The Case against Perfection: Ethics in the Age of Genetic Engineering*, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Cambridge (Massachusetts), London (England) 2007, pp. 162

by Agata Miętek

The most important task of contemporary science is to serve humanity. It seems that technology develops in two different ways. On the one hand technology does everything to make human's life carefree, easy and safe. But on the other scientists do their best to solve most pressing problems so that people could once and for all forget about troubles like AIDS, cancer or Alzheimer's disease. Until today technical progress was followed by the progress of the humanity but it seems that contemporary hi-technology left behind moral reflections of people. Michael Sandel's book *The Case against Perfection: Ethics in the Age of Genetic Engineering* is a moral reflection on those problems accompanied by technological changes. It is an attempt to establish a border that cannot be crossed – on its one side human being is still a human being but on the other one it is just an artificially stimulated machine.

Michael Sandel is one of the most important contemporary political philosophers.

Along with Alasdair MacIntyre, Charles Taylor and Michael Walzer he is classified as a communitarian (although he is uncomfortable with this label). He is the Anne T. and Robert M. Bass Professor of Government at Harvard University, where his courses are ones of the most popular ever. He lectured on almost all continents. He is the author of *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice*, *Liberalism and Its Critics*, *Democracy's Discontent: America in Search of a Public Philosophy*, and *Public Philosophy: Essays on Morality in Politics*. *The Case against Perfection: Ethics in the Age of Genetic Engineering* is his latest book.

In 2001 Sandel was invited to take part in President Bush's new project - President's Council on Bioethics. The council advises President's administration on cases connected with bioethics. All members are appointed directly by President for a two-year term and they cannot be officers or employees of the Federal Government.

Sandel served in the President's Council on Bioethics during its first term and, as he points, he had not had expecting the invitation. But the perspective of the debate on the most pressing problems of bioethics was irresistible.

Sandel's activity in President's Council on Bioethics was the very first impulse to write *The Case against Perfection: Ethics in the Age of Genetic Engineering*. Initially he had written a short text about genetic enhancement, for the Council. That text became a basis for the essay on the same subject published in "Atlantic Monthly" (2004). Also his experience from university and open lectures was very useful.

The Case against Perfection: Ethics in the Age of Genetic Engineering consists of five parts: 1. The Ethics of Enhancement; 2. Bionic Athletes; 3. Designer Children, Designing Parents; 4. The Old Eugenics and the New; 5. Mastery and Gift. An epilogue – Embryo Ethics: The Stem Cell Debate – can also be found in this book.

Are contemporary liberal societies able to give their members clear answers for the most complicated questions? Are strict statements possible in liberal discourse – statements that would allow to dissolve doubts of those who see cloning as a new hope for mankind and those who question moral aspects of cloning? Sandel gives an answer for both questions: „In liberal societies, they reach first for the language of autonomy, fairness, and individual rights. But this part of our moral vocabulary does not equip us to address the hardest questions posed by cloning, designer children, and genetic engineering.” (p.9) Bioethics should control

genetic technologies that make human beings demiurges that are even able to create an exact copies of themselves. Bioethics cannot longer avoid „questions about the moral status of nature, and about the proper stance of human beings toward the given world”. (p.9)

How is conversion from using drugs created for curing to use them for treating healthy people possible? This conversion is possible because philosophy stopped searching. Simultaneously liberal language is useless when trying to strictly condemn or affirm those phenomena because it does not create any strongly rational supports for strict and sure judgments. Sandel considers four problems: muscle, memory, height enhancement and sex selection. All of which are possible thanks to genetic engineering and all use methods invented for curing not perfecting. The question that should be asked is obvious – what is the moral difference between using exactly the same methods for curing and for perfecting people? Sandel rejects explanations related only to such ideas as fairness or equality. Should it be morally justified to choose only female embryos from all prepared for in-vitro fertilization? Should all those who consider themselves as short (though their height is objectively normal) be allowed to use hormones reserved only for sick? Would there be any moral difference between using the same drugs to cure Alzheimer's disease and to enhance memory of the health person who wants to be better prepared for the exam? Everyone understands that there are some moral differences in all those situations, but not everyone can name them.

Sandel points at the whole bunch of less relevant dangers for humanity that come out from the genetic enhancement of i.e. athletes. All of these dangers of them are obvious at the first glance, but after careful analysing they cannot be sustained. These are things like: „our ability to act freely, for ourselves, by our own efforts, and to consider ourselves responsible – worthy of praise or blame for the things we do and for the way we are.” (p. 25) What should be really considered is what is the most important component in sport – gift or effort? Political correctness makes almost everyone unable to admit that it is about gift. Because gift is something that cannot be achieved – it is something indefinable and it is something that differs people from the beginning and makes them unequal. But in an unexpressed way everyone admits that gift is the sport’s point. It is hard to imagine anyone who would like to watch basketball teams full of those who work really hard, but are not talented rather than team with five Michael Jordans. And that is why doping is a real cheating – because it demotes sport’s essence – perfection of a natural talent. It is the telos of the sport that makes all doubts about genetic enhancement of athletes justified. And it is the only way to find the border between those achievements that support sport’s development (like sport shoes) and those that demote its idea (steroids). The same reasoning can be used to estimate other human activities.

Other problem considered by Sandel is the case of parents designing their own children. The point again is to find a reason why sending children to best schools and paying for their additional music lessons is socially

acceptable and at the same time parents’ desire to genetically program their own children arouses to indignation? Parent’s problems are very important because hyper-parenting, driven by the will to get their children the best start in life, is manifested in new and more invasive ways. To discover the border that cannot be crossed the idea of parenthood must be found. Parenthood is an “openness to unbidden”. To make a decision to have a child is to be prepared to get the most unexpected. Parental love is unconditioned and it does not depend on the satisfaction that the child brings. Is this the way parents that choose their children can be seen?

And that gets Sandel to eugenics. Although people got used to thinking that the end of world war II means also the end of eugenics. Nowadays eugenics is still existing as a free-market one. It is the matter of eugenics when parents precisely program their children. They can eliminate embryos that have a potential to be wrong, but they can also eliminate those that are likely to have undesirable characteristics. Moreover they can use a very tall donor’s sperm and combine it with an egg cell of a woman that is a Harvard graduate to get a very tall and very intelligent child.

Genetic engineering and eugenics are the triumphs of unconditioned voluntarism. “I do not think that the main problem with enhancement and genetic engineering is that they undermine effort and erode human agency. The deeper danger is that they represent a kind of hyperagency, a Promethean aspiration to remake nature, including human nature, to serve our purposes and

satisfy our desires. The problem is not the drift to mechanism but the drive to mastery.” (p. 26) Why is it morally unacceptable to promote solutions that in fact make people’s life easier? Because human beings are not self-made men and their talents are given to them rather than achieved. Denial of this fact causes the disturbance of three „key features of our moral landscape – humility, responsibility, and solidarity”. (p. 86) Those features let human change the world and at the same time they learn him how to manage with failures. Their elimination will surely make people unable to admire anything but themselves and their own will. When humility disappears responsibility grows – that will lead to situations when people will not be able to count on anyone (God) or anything (fortune) but themselves. After responsibility’s eruption there will be no one except the

subject to blame. Finally, it is easy to imagine what will happen to solidarity. It will be impossible to make people whose parents got them the best start in life and who are sure they will not die of cancer to pay insurance premiums. Uncontrolled progress and unlimited access to genetic engineering is surely going to disturb the balance and order – that is what the humanity should be really worried about.

In *The Case against Perfection: Ethics in the Age of Genetic Engineering* Sandel tries to find answers to questions that worry everyone who realises how deeply the progress of high-technology affects individuals. Liberalism cannot give satisfying answers for those doubts. In the face of genetic dangers Sandel’s book is more than useful for those who search for arguments to oppose to them.

Book review: *The US Foreign Policy After the Cold War*, (ed.) J. Zając, Wydawnictwo Adam Marszałek, Toruń 2006, pp. 225

by Renata Podgórska

The world unrivaled position of the United States, a country which determines many aspects of global policy, attracts a lot of interest as regards underlying objectives for US decisions in the field of external relations. The consequence with which the US acts on the international arena raises questions concerning objectives of the US activity and goals they would like to achieve. The American foreign policy provides basis for establishing national foreign policies for several countries, including Poland. Thus, interest is

growing concerning the policy, as well as its nature, directions and priorities.

The Polish literature comprises few works that discuss the issue of the US foreign policy. Thus, attention should be drawn to the initiative of scientific employees, mainly related to the Warsaw University, who attempt to describe conditions, nature and objectives of the US foreign policy after the Cold War.

The paper *The US Foreign Policy after the Cold War* edited by Justyna Zając, has been published by Wydawnictwo Adam Marszałek.