

The *Humanitas* Project

A Center for Bioethics Education

To: Jay Johansen
The Pro-Life Science and Technology Symposium – 2005

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The *Humanitas* Project: A Center for Bioethics Education

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Subject: Abstract – Proposed Lecture for the 2005 Symposium

The New Eugenics: Designing Our Descendants

Abstract

When many people hear the word “eugenics,” they think of Nazi Germany in the 1930’s and ‘40’s. Most, however, are unaware of the connections between Nazi eugenics and a prominent eugenics movement in the United States that only went into decline as Nazi atrocities became known during and after World War II. But eugenic thinking is not dead. It is being resurrected and defended by prominent philosophers, researchers, and bioethicists who advocate using some of the new and developing biotechnologies to design our children, or in some cases, to even redesign the human race.

The “new eugenics” is made possible and is, in some ways, driven by the development of new biotechnologies. Prenatal testing is one of the oldest examples. The drive to insure that only genetically healthy children are born has led to the development of other genetic tests, such as Preimplantation Genetic Diagnosis (PGD), which allows for the screening of embryos created in vitro. Currently, PGD is used to screen out embryos that are carriers of genetic diseases and for sex selection. In the future, it may be used to select physical features such as eye color and physical ability.

Advocates of the “new eugenics” range from bioethicist Arthur Caplan at the University of Pennsylvania to biophysicist Gregory Stock at UCLA. Caplan would encourage a sort of “consumer eugenics,” where it is acceptable for parents to make choices about the genetic makeup of their children in the same way they choose music and tennis lessons today. Stock would go even further, advocating the use of the new biotechnologies, as they become available, to “seize control” of the evolutionary process, in order to become the masters of our own evolutionary development.

These are ideas and technologies that the pro-life movement must understand and engage before they become everyday realities.

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