

# The illiberality of perfectionist enhancement

Teun J. Dekker

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**Abstract** With the rapid advance of bio-genetic technology, it will soon be possible for parents to design children who are born with certain genetic traits. This raises the question whether parents should be allowed to use this technology to engineer their children as they please. In this context it is often thought and argued that liberalism, which has a reputation for being permissive of all kinds of practices, grants parents the right to do so. However, I will argue that, on an understanding of liberalism that is identical to the one used by the defenders of genetic design, liberals should wary of such practices. Liberalism, in its most general form, requires that any time individuals exercise power over others they justify it without relying on any particular conception of what a good life is. When we design children to have certain traits that are only useful for realising some conceptions of the good life, we are implicitly endorsing those conceptions. Hence this practice cannot be justified in neutral terms, and liberals should be sceptical of it. Only when we engineer our children to have traits that are useful for all conceptions of the good life can liberals allow the use of this new technology. Indeed, liberalism holds that this is morally required.

**Keywords** Eugenics · Genetic enhancement · Liberalism · Perfectionism

## Introduction

Liberals have a reputation for being a permissive bunch. The general perception is that liberalism holds that, under certain background conditions, euthanasia, gay marriage, gambling, prostitution and recreational drugs should all be available to competent adults who choose to avail themselves of them. Admittedly, there is the question concerning what the appropriate background conditions are for these freedoms to be justified, but the general sentiment of liberals is thought to be that all these goods should be available in society. Hence one might think that when considering how society should deal with the prospect of eugenics, i.e. the use of biotechnology to create offspring with particular characteristics, liberals would be similarly permissive. It is indeed the case that most theories of eugenics that are described as liberal have in general been tolerant of the idea. Liberals of very different temperaments have declared their willingness to embrace genetic technology (e.g. Dworkin 1986, Chapter 13; Posner 1992, pp. 429–434). Furthermore, the most prominent advocates of restricting the use of such technology are typically not in the liberal camp (e.g. Kass 2003; Sandel 2007). On eugenics, the battle line seems to have been drawn between liberals and non-liberals.

In the literature on eugenics there are two prominent theories that claim to represent the liberal attitude to eugenics. A very prominent theory, described as Liberal Eugenics holds that as long as the use of eugenic technology is non-coercive, state-neutral and individual, parents may use the possibilities of biotechnology to design their children as they see fit (e.g. Agar 2004; Fletcher 1974; Harris 1992; Kitcher 1996; McGee 2000). However, Liberal Eugenics is by no means uncontested as the liberal theory of eugenics. Fox (2007) has argued that actually the

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T. J. Dekker  
University College Maastricht, Maastricht University,  
6211 KH Maastricht, The Netherlands

T. J. Dekker (✉)  
P.O. Box 616, 6200 MD Maastricht, The Netherlands  
e-mail: teun.dekker@ucm.unimaas.nl

Liberal Theory of Offspring Enhancement, or Theory of Enhancement for short, is the liberal answer to the problem of eugenics. This theory differs from Liberal Eugenics in that it morally requires parents to use genetic tools to give their children certain “natural primary goods”, i.e. genetic traits that are valid for all paths of life. However, it agrees with Liberal Eugenics in allowing parents to genetically manipulate the DNA of their offspring with regard to other genetic traits, i.e. traits that are only useful for certain plans of life. As such both theories are fundamentally very willing to embrace the tools of genetic enhancement, and permit parents great discretion in how they may use them on their offspring.

However, liberalism can, on a proper understanding of liberalism, hardly justify the unrestricted use of eugenics. When considering the two “liberal” theories of enhancement it seems obvious that the central feature of both theories, i.e. allowing parents to design their children according to their own understanding of the good, is patently illiberal, where I understand liberalism in much the same way the proponents of these theories do. In my view, allowing parents to create children of their own design is a violation of the autonomy of the children. Liberalism requires far-reaching restrictions on the use of eugenics. Due to the intergenerational nature of eugenics, this is one area where liberals must be strict. Hence I would like to propose the Theory of Neutral Enhancement. This theory takes on board the insight that parents have a moral imperative to give their children natural primary goods. However it differs from both theories in that it forbids the use of genetic technology if parents wish to use it to give their children goods that are useful for only certain plans of life. This seems to me the correct liberal stance towards the use of genetic technology for designing our offspring.

My argument will unfold as a commentary on the exchange between Liberal Eugenics and the Theory of Enhancement as Fox presents it. This exchange is crucial because it uncovers the incongruity between liberalism and Liberal Eugenics. I believe that Fox’s criticism of Liberal Eugenics goes right to the heart of what it is to be a liberal and what this requires in terms of eugenics. However, he fails to unearth the entirety of the problems with Liberal Eugenics, and consequently does not take his insight to its full conclusion. By considering Fox’s argument, and noting where it goes astray, it will become clear what liberalism really requires.

## Liberalism

Fox defines liberalism as a doctrine “affirming equal respect for persons as free and independent selves, capable of choosing their own values and ends.”(2007, p. 7) That

seems to me to be entirely correct. This may be interpreted as generating a commitment to both respecting and promoting equally people’s capacity to choose ends for themselves, i.e. their autonomy. These are the two central commitments of liberalism, and they will do much of the work in what follows. The aspect of respecting individuals’ autonomy finds central expression in liberal theory in the requirement of neutrality. Nobody may impose their ends, that is their idea of what a good life is, on others. To allow this would be respecting some people’s ends more than those of others (cf. Dworkin 1986, Chapter 11). This explains the liberal’s insistence on rights; there are things that may not be imposed on individuals, be it by other individuals or the state. In particular, given the liberal commitment to neutrality, nobody may force others into a specific plan of life on account of it being superior. I, your neighbour, or the state cannot impose upon you a religion, a way of thinking or anything else, for the reason that it is deemed correct. To do so would be showing unequal respect for the various plans of life and for individual members of society. Hence, neutrality requires that anytime anyone wields power over an individual, the use of that power must be justified through reasons that do not invoke any theory of the good (cf. Ackerman 1980, pp. 10–12).

Of course, liberalism is not anarchy, and does allow for the impositions of restrictions and obligations. Although these cannot be based on any particular theory of the good, they may be driven by the protection and promotion of individuals’ autonomy, which liberalism regards as a stated goal (Fox 2007, p. 7). Indeed, ensuring that individuals will not have any theory of the good imposed on them will often require considerable regulation. Freedom of speech, freedom of movement and all the core freedoms liberals cherish because they allow individuals to live their lives as they please, cannot be guaranteed by a government that refuses to defend these freedoms. Rather, the government must actively protect individuals’ freedoms and rights. For example, governments must ensure that those who refuse to respect other people’s rights are persecuted.

However, merely protecting individual rights is not enough. Individuals might have the formal freedom to live as they please, but they might simultaneously lack the physical, cognitive and financial resources to make effective use of that freedom. Freedom of movement means little to the handicapped if they do not have a wheelchair. More generally, the formal freedoms of liberalism must be accompanied with measures designed to allow individuals to autonomously choose and realise their conception of the good. This realisation leads to the second central commitment of liberalism, the promotion of individual autonomy. This promotion of autonomy can be achieved in many ways. It justifies a commitment to providing

individuals with education, as education allows individuals to choose their conception of the good more reflectively. It also legitimises measures designed to help people better realise their conception of the good, such as improving health or providing individuals with financial resources. Such measures are useful for all plans of life and hence they are advantageous to possess for anyone, regardless of their conception of the good. These measures do not violate the liberal insistence on neutrality; they do not make any conception of the good more attractive than others. Rather, they give individuals the means to realise whatever conception they have chosen and are in line with the liberal ambition to protect and promote individuals' autonomy. (cf. Raz 1986)

### Three contenders

There are three theories that claim to embody the liberal position regarding the use of genetic technology to design our offspring: Liberal Eugenics, the Theory of Enhancement and the Theory of Neutral Enhancement. Before I argue that both Liberal Eugenics and the Theory of Enhancement are illiberal and that the correct liberal theory is the Theory of Neutral Enhancement, I will briefly present the three theories that hope to claim the prestige of liberalism for themselves.

Eugenics has a bad reputation. It is primarily associated with state mandated policies of the past where governments used force to achieve certain procreative results. Reacting to the horrors of such policies, Liberal Eugenics seeks to propose a more acceptable framework for the use of reproductive technology (cf. Agar 2004; Fletcher 1974; Harris 1992; Kitcher 1996; McGee 2000). It puts control of this technology in the hands of parents, i.e. it holds that as long as the use of eugenics is voluntary, individualistic and state neutral it is morally permissible. The criterion of voluntariness requires that decisions concerning the use of reproductive technology must be made by parents, free from coercion. The criterion of individuality requires that these choices be made by individual parents and for individual children, while the criterion of state neutrality requires that the government does not promote any conception of what sort of people there ought to be. Hence Liberal Eugenics gives parents enormous discretion to design their children as they please; they may decide to give their children any genetic goods that suits them, or none at all. So if parents wish to have a child that is particularly gifted in the field of music or athletics they may genetically intervene to achieve this result. But they might also decide to not to use the available technology in any way. Liberal Eugenics leaves parents firmly in control; anything goes as long as it meets the three requirements.

Fox's Theory of Enhancement differs from Liberal Eugenics in that it morally requires that parents use eugenic technology to give their children certain goods that are useful for all plans of life (2007, pp. 13–17). These goods, including health, basic cognitive functioning and the like, should be given to all newborn children, and hence Liberal Eugenics' parental discretion is limited in this respect. Parents do not have the right to not use reproductive technology to give their children these so-called natural primary goods. However, the theory agrees with Liberal Eugenics that parents have the right to give their children other genetic goods that are not useful for all plans of life. So under the Theory of Enhancement, parents who would like a musically gifted child may still use genetic technology to achieve this result. However, they may not decide to withhold certain traits that are useful for all plans of life from their future child. In this way the Theory of Enhancement maintains the general parental discretion of Liberal Eugenics, but subjects it to an exception when it comes to natural primary goods, which should be given to all children regardless of their parents' wishes.

The Theory of Neutral Enhancement further curtails parental discretion. It agrees with the Theory of Enhancement that parents have a moral obligation to give their children the all-purpose natural primary goods. However, it also holds that any other genetic intervention is illiberal. Parents do not have the right to give their children genetic traits that are not useful for all plans of life. Hence parents who desire children who are particularly gifted in some domain, such a music, maths or athletics, may not use reproductive technology to act on that desire. This technology must only be used to equip children with natural primary goods. Indeed, this is deemed a moral requirement.

In summary, one might distinguish two types of eugenics. The one is used to give children natural primary goods that are useful for all plans of life, while the other is used to give children other genetic characteristics. Liberal Eugenics holds that parents may practice both types of eugenics as they please. The Theory of Enhancement holds that the former type of enhancements is morally required, but the latter type of enhancement is still left to parental discretion. The Theory of Neutral Enhancement agrees with the Theory of Enhancement regarding the first type of eugenics, but forbids the use of the second type of eugenics.

### From liberal eugenics to the theory of enhancement: natural primary goods enhancement

Now that the three contending theories have been introduced we may turn our attention to the question which

theory is most congruent with liberalism and its requirements. In order to do so I will explore the two types of eugenics along which the three theories differ, beginning with the question of how liberalism regards the use of eugenic technology to give children natural primary goods. As was discussed above, Liberal Eugenics holds that parents may but need not give their children these goods. It is not distinguished from other types of eugenics, which are also deemed permissible. This is typically justified by noting that liberalism allows parents great discretion in how they raise their children. Liberal societies permit parents to steer the development of their children in countless ways. Parents may exert considerable pressure on their children during their upbringing. They may enrol their children in sports programs and music lessons as well as teaching them about their preferred religion and the like. This parental discretion is characteristic of how liberal societies raise their children. Liberal Eugenics sees reproductive technology as nothing more than another tool with which parents can raise their children as they see fit. In this way, it is argued by analogy that parents should be unfettered in their use of genetic technology in designing their children. This is covered by the general discretion parents are said to possess in raising their children.

Fox is keen to challenge this analogy. He points out that liberals do not allow parents to do anything they please to their children (2007, pp 5–7). Abuse, maltreatment and neglect are not allowed, nor is the withholding of education. Rather, liberals make inoculations, primary schooling and the like compulsory. They do so because these measures promote individual autonomy. Liberals require parents to give their children a good start in life, by ensuring that they possess those characteristics that allow them to effectively choose and pursue their conception of the good. Hence the analogy Liberal Eugenics relies on, between accepted parental practice and the use of eugenics has another side to it. While liberals do permit parents considerable discretion in how they raise their children, they also require parents to equip their children with the resources they need to develop into autonomous individuals. So Fox extends the analogy, by arguing that just as liberals make things like elementary schooling and basic disease prevention compulsory, they should also make natural primary goods enhancement morally compulsory. Natural primary goods enhancement serves exactly the same function as these accepted practices, and is hence morally required as well. For this reason the Theory of Enhancement accepts the basic premise of Liberal Eugenics, but extends it to argue that liberal principle requires natural primary goods enhancement (Fox 2007, pp. 8–10). This is at the heart of Fox's case for compulsory natural primary goods enhancement, and he is right to point this out. I agree that the liberal commitment to enabling

individuals to effectively choose and pursue their conception of the good requires natural primary goods enhancement. However, the same commitment to individual autonomy that generates this conclusion is also a reason against allowing other forms of enhancement.

### **From enhancement to neutral enhancement: perfectionist enhancement**

If natural primary goods are genetic traits that are useful for any plan of life, the inverse correlate might be termed perfectionist natural goods. These are traits that are only useful for certain plans of life, and may very well be detrimental to many others. They might include musical ability and specific types of athletic prowess. All genetic traits that are useful for some plans of life but not for others are included in this category. Hence the distinction between natural primary goods enhancement and perfectionist enhancement is a very clear one; if we can imagine a plan of life for which the proposed enhancement is not useful, it is not a natural primary good. Under the Theory of Enhancement parents are perfectly free to use the tools of genetics to give their children these perfectionist natural goods.<sup>1</sup> They may do this because they deem certain characteristics particularly valuable; their design choices will be influenced by a particular conception of the good life, and this is obviously illiberal.

To render the issue a bit more vivid, consider the following case. A couple might delight in Castrato Opera and deem it the highest form of human expression. Castrato Opera is an Italian Renaissance form of opera sung by men without testicles, allowing them to hit the high notes. This couple designs a son who is born without testicles.<sup>2</sup> They hope that, by designing him in this fashion, he will choose a life dedicated to this art and live what they deem the good life. Both Liberal Eugenics and the Theory of Enhancement would allow this. For reproductive capacity is not a

<sup>1</sup> In formulating the Theory of Enhancement, Fox does hold that perfectionist enhancement is limited by harm to the offspring, others or an important public good (2007, p. 14). However, he argues that restriction for the sake of protecting public goods will be limited in practice. As to the 'harm to offspring or others clause', he does not elaborate how they should be interpreted. Judging from the context it seems that harm to offspring should be taken in a bodily sense. In this way it is parallel to the requirement of safety in his formulation of the requirement of natural primary goods enhancement. The fact that perfectionist enhancement violates your autonomy does not constitute harm. If he wishes to include this under harm, it results in a radically different theory. This should have been explicitly noted. However, judging from the objections Fox considers against the Theory of Enhancement and how he seeks to rebut them (2007, pp. 20–23) this is not the intended meaning.

<sup>2</sup> It is impossible to offer the child the option of having his testicles removed later in life, as by that time, his voice will have broken.

natural primary good; it is not useful for all plans of life. *Ex hypothesi*, it is a handicap for those who wish to become Castrato singers.<sup>3</sup>

As it happens, their son decides, after reviewing many potential plans of life available in society, that he wishes to pursue the life of a playboy. For this plan of life his parents' design has left him ill-suited. It has limited his life plan and diminished his autonomy, by robbing him of his most preferred option. What is more, this fact is not a matter of bad luck, beyond anyone's control, but rather a matter of conscious design. Had this not been the case, he could not have blamed his parents for his condition. But in this case, his most preferred option would have still been available had his parents not designed him as they did. We can imagine the child, miserable because his parents have denied him his preferred way of life, asking them why they designed him as they did.<sup>4</sup> Their response will be that they wanted him to sing Castrato, because they deemed it a particularly valuable way of life they wished for their son.<sup>5</sup>

This example may seem exotic, but it is symptomatic of a large range of cases. There are many characteristics that are advantageous to have in certain fields but disadvantageous to have in others. The complex constellations of traits and characteristics that individuals possess make them more suited for some plans of life than others. If one is physically strong but has limited fine motor skills, is a natural leader and does well in hierarchical organisations, one is well suited for a career in the military, but perhaps less suited for life in an artistic commune. If one is nimble and elegant in movement one is suited for the ballet, but ill-suited for playing ice-hockey. Those who have an inclination for thinking analytically might make great philosophers, but bad poets, and having a steady palm makes one a good surgeon, but a bad expressionist painter.

When parents design their children to have certain perfectionist natural goods, they are actively making some plans of life more accessible and attractive than others. Such intervention requires justification. It cannot be that

<sup>3</sup> A wider theory of natural primary goods, which holds that they include traits that are useful for most rather than all plans of life is unavailable. For this raises the question which plans of life are excluded and why. Why is the life of a Castrato not worthy of inclusion in the determination of what counts as a natural primary good? The only answer that may be given is that this life is somehow not as good as others, which is precisely the sort of violation of neutrality liberalism avoids.

<sup>4</sup> Here I borrow a narrative device from Ackerman (1980, pp. 3–5).

<sup>5</sup> Perhaps they will be determined to be more thorough next time, by seeking genetic tools that ensure that their next child will have the desire to be a Castrato singer written into his DNA. It is unclear to me if Liberal Eugenics or the Theory of Enhancement would allow this total eradication of autonomy, but this is perhaps the ultimate violation of liberalism, making children machines to do their parents' bidding. No theory that allows this can have even the slightest claim to being liberal.

they intervene for no reason, and hence it is legitimate to ask why parents decided to give their children certain perfectionist natural goods that are useful for realising some conceptions of the good but not others. Ultimately, the only thing that can justify choosing one set of characteristics over another is the value judgment that these characteristics and the plans of life they give access to are superior in some sense to other characteristics and plans of life. There is an infinite range of perfectionist natural goods parents might give their children, and in order to choose which ones they wish to endow their children with, parent must rely on particular values. Without such values to act as a yardstick, there can be no reason to select a particular set of perfectionist natural goods over another set. Hence parents giving their children perfectionist natural goods that are useful for realising certain conceptions of the good constitutes an endorsement of those conceptions of the good. When we ask what the justification of using eugenics in this way is, the answer will always be based on some parental conception of the good.

No liberal can think that this is a good and valid reason for such action, and that children whose parents design them to be suited for certain particular plans of life have no complaint against them. Parents who avail themselves of eugenics are exercising power over the next generation. Liberalism requires that this be done in a neutral fashion. But I have argued that endowing individuals with goods that are useful for only some conceptions of the good cannot be justified in a neutral fashion. Hence allowing perfectionist eugenics is a blatant violation of the neutrality requirement that is so integral to liberalism that was discussed in my treatment of the doctrine above. For that reason liberals cannot allow parents to use the tools of genetics to design their children as they please. Yet this is exactly what both Liberal Eugenics and the Theory of Enhancement would have us permit. I conclude that both Liberal Eugenics and the Theory of Enhancement violate the core principles of liberalism in leaving perfectionist enhancement to parental discretion; any such enhancement is inherently based on a conception of the good and in violation of the liberal insistence on neutrality.

Another way of seeing this is by reflecting on the role of paternalism in Fox's argument. Fox holds that compulsory natural primary goods enhancement is justified by the allowance liberals make for paternalist action. And it is true that liberals do allow paternalist action under certain conditions. Fox follows Dan Brock (1988) in holding that:

Paternalism is justified if and only if two conditions hold: first, the individual for whom the good is intended is not at the relevant time capable of free choice; and second, it can be reasonably expected, on the basis of evidence about the individual's particular motivations

and objectives, that she would upon regaining autonomy be grateful for the state<sup>6</sup> having under the circumstances so acted on her behalf (Fox 2007, p. 8).

Compulsory natural primary goods enhancement, which is in effect others making genetic choices for children, is allowed under this rule. First of all, by virtue of the nature of genetic enhancement, children cannot choose their genes freely when they are conceived. Hence the first condition is satisfied. Secondly, we can assume that individuals will be grateful for genetic enhancements that are useful for any and all plans of life. In this way, natural primary goods enhancement meets the paternalism test, and qualifies as a liberal policy.

But perfectionist enhancement fares quite differently. While it does, like all intergenerational eugenics, meet the first test, it obviously fails the second test. It cannot be assumed that the children would eventually be grateful for perfectionist enhancement that is practiced on them in the name of paternalism. It seems obvious that, given liberalism's insistence that individuals choose their own plan of life, perfectionist enhancement cannot be justified by hypothetical consent. For this reason perfectionist paternalism cannot be allowed by Fox's own test, and the Theory of Enhancement's allowance for perfectionist enhancement is denied.

## Objections

Fox seems aware of objections to perfectionist eugenics similar in spirit to this one, and makes attempts to dismiss them. However, his rejoinders are ineffective. For example, he considers Habermas' objection against Liberal Eugenics that being the product of genetic design undermines the conditions required for the human experience of freedom (2003). Habermas notes that children who are designed by their parents will not feel the authors of their own lives, but rather feel compelled towards a particular plan of life they cannot reject or revise (2003, p. 62). This objection is similar in some respects to my objection from autonomy although it is consequentialist in nature. It rides on the assumption that designed children will experience these undesirable consequences. One might doubt this. However, my objection relies on the liberal prohibition on individuals exercising power over others in a non-neutral fashion. Even if designed children would still feel free, this charge stands because of its deontological nature.

Fox replies to Habermas that the Theory of Enhancement does not suffer from this problem (2007, pp. 18–19). This is because it is the state that administers the natural

primary enhancement in his theory. How this reply is available, given the fact that Fox notes (2007, p. 15) that mandatory enhancement is a matter of *prima facie* moral obligation and not state action, is unclear. But even if it were available, I fail to see how the fact that the state has designed me will make me feel more capable of rejecting that design than if I had been designed by my parents. As I will argue below, who is designing me is neither here nor there, as far as the liberal response to eugenics is concerned. A further problem with Fox's reply is that the Theory of Enhancement still allows parents to design their children with perfectionist natural goods. And this is fundamentally the root of the objection. Perfectionist enhancement, which is only useful for certain plans of life, is a far bigger threat to the conditions of human freedom than natural primary goods enhancement. This is because the former type of enhancement is used to make certain life-plans more attractive and easier to achieve. Knowing that I was designed for any plan of life may simply be empowering, but knowing that I was designed for one particular life undermines my experience of liberty in the way Habermas suggests. Both Liberal Eugenics and the Theory of Enhancement are susceptible to that charge. However, the Theory of Neutral Enhancement does not suffer from this problem, as it forbids the type of perfectionist enhancement that is most threatening to the conditions for the experience of human freedom.

Something similar goes for Fox's arguments against Davis (2001, p. 33) and O'Donovan (1984, pp. 1–2), who argue that Liberal Eugenics gives parents too much domination over their children and how they turn out. Again this concern implicitly rides on protecting the autonomy of the child. Fox's paper argues that the Theory of Enhancement evades this charge because it at least restricts parental discretion over questions of natural primary enhancement (2007, pp. 19–20). But this is hardly comforting. Parents still have the right of perfectionist enhancement. It is through this type of enhancement that they exercise the greatest power over how their children turn out. This type of enhancement represents a far bigger threat of parental domination than natural primary goods enhancement, which does not steer children towards any particular plan of life. Again, the Theory of Neutral Enhancement forbids this type of enhancement and is hence able to evade these charges, while the Theory of Enhancement is not.

Perhaps Feinberg comes closest to articulating the liberal concern for the protection of the autonomy of the child (Fox 2007, pp. 20–21). Feinberg (1980) argues that a child has a right to an open future. In my view the problem is not so much the mere prejudicing of the child's future as such—which could also come about by bad luck—but rather the imposition of a theory of the good on the child. Nevertheless, our objections are quite similar. Fox's reply is twofold. The

<sup>6</sup> I assume this test does not only apply for state-inflicted paternalism, but for paternalism as such, regardless of who is practicing it.

first reply holds, following Taylor (1985, pp. 190–191), that individuals cannot exercise autonomy outside of a social environment, such as the family. They cannot make sense of their options if they are not given a set of values to guide their choice. Parents may restrict the autonomy of their children, so as to allow them to better exercise it. This is said to license perfectionist enhancement.

It cannot be denied that parents have discretion over how to raise their children. However, liberals do not see this discretion as an exception to the prohibition on imposing a theory of the good on others. Rather, this discretion is grounded in the recognition that children need to develop their capacity for autonomy, and that this is best achieved in a stable environment (cf. Ackerman 1980, pp. 139–168), as Taylor suggests. Parents may limit their children's autonomy in this context, so as to allow them to develop into competent liberal citizens. As this is achieved, the restrictions must be lifted. Hence the parental discretion Liberal Eugenics and the Theory of Enhancement rely on for their appeal is heavily regulated. It hardly justifies an unrestricted right to perfectionist enhancement or indoctrination, but something much more limited. Indeed perfectionist enhancement would be particularly limited in this understanding of restricting autonomy for the sake of autonomy, as liberals only hold this permissible while children are not yet competent adults. As they develop their own conceptions of the good, the restrictions of autonomy must be lifted. But genetic intervention cannot be removed; it is a permanent restriction of autonomy that no liberal can countenance. Hence the Theory of Neutral Enhancement, which forbids such genetic intervention, is the correct liberal attitude to this problem.

The second reply holds that the good of an intimate family life cannot be realised without respecting parental privacy. Any regulation concerning how the tools of perfectionist enhancement should be used constitutes an invasion of that privacy. But this would only be a reason to discard the child's right to an open future if the good of an intimate family life is deemed more important than the rights of the child. This may be a good argument, but it is not a liberal argument. However appealing, an intimate family life represents a particular conception of the good, and liberals cannot allow that contestable conception of the good to justify incursion on individuals' rights. And as the liberal answer to the problem of eugenics is at issue, rather than the correct one, this renders the rebuttal moot.

By virtue of its intergenerational nature, genetic intervention requires the present generation to exercise power over the next. This exercise of power must, one day, be justified to the next generation. Liberals cannot believe that answers based on the theory of the good those who wield that power espouse justify perfectionist eugenics. For that reason liberals cannot allow parents, or anyone else for that matter, to use the tools of genetics to distribute

perfectionist natural goods as they please. Liberal Eugenics and the Theory of Enhancement are said to be an improvement over state-mandated eugenics because they take the power of genetics away from the state and put it in the hands of parents (Fox 2007, pp. 3–4). They are state-neutral. But this makes no difference for liberals, as they do not care merely about state neutrality, but about neutrality as such. In both theories of eugenics an external entity is allowed to wield power over the next generation, and that power must be justified in the same way, regardless of who is doing the genetic intervention. Where it concerns questions of eugenics, the relationship between children and the government is fundamentally no different from the relationship between children and their parents.

### The theory of neutral enhancement

In conclusion, the shocking illiberality of Liberal Eugenics scarcely lies in the fact that it allows parents to deny their children a good start in life—that is simply old-fashioned neglect. Rather, the central illiberality of Liberal Eugenics lies in the fact that it allows parents to design their children according to their own conception of what a good life is. The Theory of Enhancement fares no better in this respect, and can hardly to be said to represent a significantly more liberal attitude towards the question of eugenics than Liberal Eugenics.

Based on what I have argued above, it is now clear what would be the appropriate liberal attitude to genetic enhancement of the sort discussed. It seems that liberals cannot allow others, be it the state or the parents, to choose the genetics traits of children. The liberal respect for autonomy and the associated commitment to protecting individuals from other people's conceptions of the good, forbid anyone picking other people's genes. This is the general liberal rule. Having said that, there are exceptions that liberals would be willing to countenance. Genetic traits that are useful for all plans of life may be promoted without imposing any theory of the good. Indeed, given liberals' mildly perfectionist desire to promote autonomy, liberals should consider this type of enhancement morally required. This attitude is captured the Theory of Neutral Enhancement.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>7</sup> It is broadly similar to Bruce Ackerman's treatment of this issue in (1980, pp. 107–138). This excellent treatment of the issue has not had the prominence it deserves, and I hope that this article will revive interest in it. It differs from this theory in that it allows compulsory natural primary goods enhancement, while Ackerman only allows genetic intervention to prevent individuals to be genetically dominated by others. However, I take Fox's arguments to show that liberalism committed to promoting human autonomy can go further than the weaker criterion of genetic non-domination.

The conclusion that liberals cannot allow the unfettered use of eugenics is also significant for the larger debate about eugenics. Those who have been critical of eugenics have claimed that the liberal perspective on this matter runs foul of certain deeply held intuitions (e.g. Fox 2007, p. 24; Sandel 2007, Chapter 1). This has been based on the assumption that liberalism requires a permissive attitude towards eugenics. In particular, it has been noted that the theory might result in a world in which eugenic practices are widespread, which threatens many important goods, such as social solidarity or parental love. Because of this many will have held that liberalism is a morally impoverished framework for dealing with these matters (e.g. Fox 2007, p. 25). This is said to render liberalism an “impoverished framework” for considering the question of eugenics. However, I am not convinced that the Theory of Neutral Enhancement, which I have argued to be the correct liberal position on these matters, is quite as intuitively unattractive. Note that the Theory of Neutral Enhancement allows less enhancement to take place than the Theory of Enhancement, as the former restricts the perfectionist eugenics the latter would allow. It is better equipped to deal with the intuition that extensive eugenics in society would be undesirable. Furthermore, given the fact that the enhancement that is allowed by the Theory of Neutral Enhancement is universally required, it is unlikely that this would undermine social solidarity or parental love. The liberal response to the question of eugenics, especially when elaborated into the Theory of Neutral Enhancement, might be the shining star that guides us in these uncharted waters after all.

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