



BOOK REVIEW

DESIGNING BABIES

Robert Klitzman

Oxford University Press: Oxford, 2019. 360 pp. ISBN: 0190054476
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Designing babies describes how technologies such as in vitro fertilization (IVF) and pre-implantation genetic testing (PGT) allow parents to shape their children's traits. We can already reduce the risk of a variety of diseases through genetic selection, and eventually we will probably be able to influence traits as complex as intelligence, height, or aggression through a combination of embryo selection and gene editing.

Throughout the book, the author relays stories from pseudonymous patients and fertility specialists. Instead of focusing on the broad social implications of biomedical technologies that will eventually allow us to select the traits of our children, Professor Klitzman mainly describes how patients and physicians *talk about* issues related to infertility, surrogacy, and the use of assisted reproductive technology.

For readers with an interest in how IVF and PGT work in clinical settings, this will be a welcome contribution. However, *Designing babies* does not engage much with the literature on the ethics of genetic enhancement. Despite its title, this is not a book about the socially transformative power of new biomedical technology. It is instead a series of anecdotes and discussions between patients and physicians that has implications for clinical ethics, including bedside manner, and for how new technologies surrounding IVF might be regulated.

To his credit, when he discusses regulations, Professor Klitzman refrains from advocating the kinds of legislative nostrums that are sometimes invoked by moralists who worry about parents misusing their powers to create chimeras or clones. He recognizes that prohibitions do not enforce themselves, and that when one country

restricts reproductive services, others are more likely to offer them. We appear to be past the idea that disgust reactions or abstract moral intuitions are sufficient to justify policy. There is no talk about locking Pandora's box.

Perhaps the most important regulatory topic raised in *Designing babies* is the role of health insurance companies and government agencies in distributing access to IVF, PGT, and genetic counseling. The cost of procuring eggs, creating viable embryos, and scanning them for polygenic traits is high. The complexity of decisions will grow as genetic information increases. And without interventions in the market, the newest reproductive technologies are likely to remain unaffordable to many, especially as the number of traits we can influence through embryo selection rises. More accurate tools and more powerful predictions await us.

Professor Klitzman understands that as genomics and assisted reproduction develop, it will become especially important to enable poor parents to afford some of the advantages that rich parents will be able to buy. But how do we decide which kinds of procedures poor parents should be able to access, especially when these procedures are expensive and involve a coercive redistribution of resources? As a first pass, it seems sensible to subsidize enhancements that are likely to have social benefits, rather than social costs. But this is easier said than done. I'll leave it to the reader to think through what kinds of traits satisfy these criteria, when legal restrictions or social norms are more likely to work, and what kinds of rules will strike a balance between parental liberty, children's interests, and social welfare.

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