

Genetically engineering 'ethical' babies is a moral obligation, says Oxford professor

Genetically screening our offspring to make them better people is just 'responsible parenting', claims an eminent Oxford academic.



Peter Illingworth, an IVF clinician who worked on the study, said the death rate among babies born after single embryo transfer was just a fraction above the rate of 10 per 1000 for all births Photo: Ben Birchall/PA

By Richard Alleyne

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Professor Julian Savulescu said that creating so-called designer babies could be considered a "moral obligation" as it makes them grow up into "ethically better children". The expert in practical ethics said that we should actively give parents the choice to screen out personality flaws in their children as it meant they were then less likely to "harm themselves and others".

The academic, who is also editor-in-chief of the Journal of Medical Ethics, made his comments in an article in the latest edition of Reader's Digest.

He explained that we are now in the middle of a genetic revolution and that although screening, for all but a few conditions, remained illegal it should be welcomed.



He said that science is increasingly discovering that genes have a significant influence on personality – with certain genetic markers in embryo suggesting future characteristics. By screening in and screening out certain genes in the embryos, it should be possible to influence how a child turns out.

In the end, he said that "rational design" would help lead to a better, more intelligent and less violent society in the future.

"Surely trying to ensure that your children have the best, or a good enough, opportunity for a great life is responsible parenting?" wrote Prof Savulescu, the Uehiro Professor in practical ethics.

"So where genetic selection aims to bring out a trait that clearly benefits an individual and society, we should allow parents the choice.

"To do otherwise is to consign those who come after us to the ball and chain of our squeamishness and irrationality.

"Indeed, when it comes to screening out personality flaws, such as potential alcoholism, psychopathy and disposition to violence, you could argue that people have a moral obligation to select ethically better children.

"They are, after all, less likely to harm themselves and others."

"If we have the power to intervene in the nature of our offspring — rather than consigning them to the natural lottery — then we should."

He said that we already routinely screen embryos and fetuses for conditions such as cystic fibrosis and Down's syndrome and couples can test embryos for inherited bowel and breast cancer genes.

Rational design is just a natural extension of this, he said.

He said that unlike the eugenics movements, which fell out of favour when it was adopted by the Nazis, the system would be voluntary and allow parents to choose the characteristics of their children.

"We're routinely screening embryos and fetuses for conditions such as cystic fibrosis and Down's syndrome, and there's little public outcry," he said.

"What's more, few people protested at the decisions in the mid- 2000s to allow couples to test embryos for inherited bowel and breast cancer genes, and this pushes us a lot close to creating designer humans."

"Whether we like it or not, the future of humanity is in our hands now. Rather than fearing genetics, we should embrace it. We can do better than chance."

Full article appears in September issue of Reader's Digest, out 21st August