

THE ETHICS OF GENETIC CONTROL
Ending Reproductive Roulette
by Joseph Fletcher
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Reviewed by PEG TITTLE

Fletcher approaches the ethics of genetic control with a very definite humanistic perspective (this is explicitly stated in the preface, and implicitly, delightfully, through the title of one section, "Let's Play God").

He also approaches the subject with a definite utilitarian perspective. But this is not to say his is a ruthless cost-benefit approach: he recognizes the need to identify and prioritize values--his over-riding value is "human welfare and happiness" (120) and his guidelines are compassion, consideration of consequences, proportionate good, the priority of actual needs over the ideal or the potential, a desire to enlarge choice and cut down on chance, and a courageous acceptance of our responsibility to make decisions" (148).

Generally speaking, he is in favour of genetic control (he consciously uses 'control' instead of 'engineering' or 'manipulation'), seeing it as active responsibility for reproduction rather than passive laissez-faire: "We might call the issue control ethics versus fatal ethics, or choice ethics versus chance ethics" (128). However, his utilitarianism is act-based rather than rule-based: each situation must be considered for its unique set of facts.

Covering artificial insemination, surrogate pregnancy, nonsexual reproduction, and genetic control and screening, he divides his book into six chapters: ideas, facts, doubts, issues, answers, and hopes. The chapter on doubts--an 'objections and replies' chapter--is particularly good (it includes, of course, his treatment of religious objections). The chapter on facts is thankfully clear (I have been appalled at the ignorance of my university-level students with regard to cloning--zombie factories...). And all are very readable, proving that difficult ethical questions are not beyond an average intelligence.

While I agree with most of what Fletcher says, sometimes the difficult details are left unaddressed (though with situation ethics, there's no point in dealing with details until you have the situation before you), and sometimes a point is left undeveloped (for example, his claim that "It would be selfish to be sterilized by a simple tubal section ... if excision and transplant of the gonads could help a sterile neighbour to have a child" [163] seems to be to be particularly undeveloped). Nevertheless, this is definitely one of the better books on the ethics of genetics that I've read.