The Sorting Society

The Ethics of Genetic Screening and Therapy

Edited by

Loane Skene
and
Janna Thompson

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Preface

The contents and title of this book were inspired by a workshop held at Melbourne University in November 2005 under the auspices of the Australian Research Council Centre for Applied Philosophy and Public Ethics. The workshop brought together experts from law, medicine and philosophy. Many of those who participated are the authors of chapters in this collection.

The ‘sorting society’ expresses what many people believe will be the outcome of advances in genetic technology: a society in which gender and many characteristics of children are no longer the result of genetic luck but of deliberate selection. The book focuses on the ethical, legal and social issues raised by this technology. Is the prospect of a sorting society something that we should welcome or deplore? Do concerns about how parents or societies might exercise the choice given to them by genetic technology give us reason to restrain its creation or use, and if so how? Would a sorting society increase the freedom of parents and the wellbeing of children or would it undermine values that are central to a liberal democratic society? Would it adversely affect relationships between parents and children or the prospects for future generations?

These are questions of the most profound significance, bearing on the world in which our children and their children and grandchildren will live. Citizens as well as experts need to engage in wise reflection about the development of, use of and restrictions on genetic technology. This book is meant to be a contribution and stimulus to a debate which is likely to become more and more urgent in coming years.

The contributors are not in one mind about the prospects for genetic technology or its ethical implications. The book brings together a range of positions and considerations. Like the workshop from which it originated it is interdisciplinary. Most of the authors are philosophers but experts on genetics and law are also contributors. Our aim as editors is to present the issues in a form readily accessible to readers with no prior knowledge of genetic testing and its uses. We hope that this book will be of interest to philosophers, political commentators, scientists, lawyers, people with genetic conditions and their families – indeed to anyone concerned to be well informed about one of the major issues of our time.