David DeGrazia


In *On Liberty*, John Stuart Mill wrote, “The fact itself, of causing the existence of a human being, is one of the most responsible actions in the range of human life” (Chapter V, paragraph 15). DeGrazia’s *Creation Ethics* seems to agree with this and takes up a wide range of questions that prospective parents must ask themselves concerning reproductive choices. But the issues that DeGrazia addresses are not ones that Mill likely contemplated; they are instead ones that have been thrust upon us by recent developments in biotechnology. Chapter 1 provides a rather detailed account of the claims that will be defended in the remaining six chapters.

Chapter 2 addresses the moral status of prenatal human beings and its implications for ethical and policy issues. DeGrazia defends the view that humans are essentially animals, and so our origins are to be understood biologically. He holds that each of us comes into existence soon after conception. He holds that sentience is sufficient for having interests and therefore moral status. DeGrazia defends McMahan’s time-relative interest account (TRIA) of the harm of death, which says that the harm of death is a function of both the value of the future life lost by the individual and the degree of psychological relatedness between the individual just prior to death and the later individual who would have lived. This implies, plausibly, that the death of a 15-year-old is far more tragic than the death of a fetus or of someone in his 90s. DeGrazia does not argue, however, that sentience is necessary for moral status. This is because he thinks that the view that potential is sufficient is at least defensible, even though he himself does not endorse it. Modesty is appropriate here because ethics may be “partly indeterminate” (45). But even if a kind of pluralism regarding prenatal moral status must be acknowledged, DeGrazia argues that fairly liberal public policies regarding abortion and embryo research must be endorsed.
Chapter 3 discusses genetic enhancement and the use of biotechnology to create children with traits that their parents want. Examples of possible genetic enhancements discussed include immunity to HIV, muscle development, memory expansion, reduced need for sleep, and sunnier dispositions. Long-term possibilities include the creation of a new species, “post-humans” (67–68), or superior moral agents, “post-persons” (68–69). DeGrazia considers two broad objections to pursuing genetic enhancement. The first objection is that genetic enhancement may undermine human identity. Two kinds of identity are discussed: numerical and narrative. No matter what genetic enhancements are employed, numerical identity will remain the same, and so that is not a problem. Narrative identity is more complex. DeGrazia understands it in terms of authenticity, which he explains as “being true to oneself and presenting oneself to others as one truly is” (75). Here DeGrazia seems correct when he says that “self-creation through genetic enhancement can be perfectly authentic.” By extension, “[u]se of genetic enhancement is likely to have a significant effect on one's narrative identity, but this effect on identity is not, by itself, morally problematic” (77).

The second objection is whether the changes sought through genetic enhancement pose a threat to human nature. The objection assumes that there is such a thing as human nature, that genetic enhancement threatens it, and threatening human nature is morally wrong. While DeGrazia maintains that there is no characteristic that is both a plausible basis for moral status and possessed by all humans, nevertheless there are traits associated with personhood that are possessed by most developed humans. These include the capacity to act autonomously, sociability, self-awareness, and the like. There are also other less noble traits possessed by most humans, such as aggressiveness and tendencies toward irrationality. Threats to human nature could be understood either as altering it or surpassing it. It is hard to see how mere alteration could be wrong. But suppose that genetic enhancement produces a new species of superior post-humans. Such creatures will be moral agents, but we don't know how they will treat ordinary humans. In the face of uncertainty, with both prospects for good but potential dangers, society might either prohibit the pursuit of enhancement or regulate it; DeGrazia endorses the latter.

Chapter 4 discusses three prenatal genetic interventions: prenatal genetic diagnosis (PGD) (which confusedly lumps together testing fetuses and fertilized eggs prior to implantation), prenatal genetic therapy (PGT), and prenatal genetic enhancement (PGE). In addressing PGD, DeGrazia focuses on three objections advanced by disability advocates: (1) the loss-of-support argument, (2) the expressivist objection, and (3) the view that so-called disabilities are just differences. Objection (1) is unconvincing because it is not obvious that