

DISPUTATION CLIV 0.5

November 3, 2016

Dearest Peucinians,

Two weeks ago, we decided around the table that the works of art provide greater inspiration than the works of nature. It has been a while since we have met in Massachusetts Hall, but thankfully we have gathered several times since to feast around a square table plopped awkwardly in the middle of Thorne and to bask in haunting dystopian narratives. And speaking of dystopia, this week we take a break from pondering the timeless questions to tackle a one that lurks on the horizon.

RESOLVED: WE OUGHT GENETICALLY ENGINEER OUR CHILDREN

Presented By: Hypatia '17

What hell hath we wrought upon ourselves?

Those that aspire to the character of philosophers have listed dozens of attributes that supposedly separate mankind from the other animals: reason, empathy, speech, imagination, souls, perfectibility, philosophy, and so forth. Whatever their reasons, all agree that humans are somehow uncanny. Hannah Arendt tell us that man is a miraculous being, for “the fact that man is capable of action means that the unexpected can be expected from him, that he is able to perform what is infinitely improbable.” Perhaps it is the combination of all these traits that allows us the push the boundaries of what is possible and venture into the unknown, creating, building, and innovating on a grand scale.

Scientific consensus tell us that, barring government intervention, genetic engineering as a marketable commodity will be a reality in just two or three generations. This will undoubtedly be heralded as miraculous in the Arendtian sense, for we will be one step closer to conquering the vicissitudes of fate entirely. Genetic illnesses, genetic predispositions to illness, and physical deformities will be consigned to the pages of history textbooks. Environmental illnesses and physical trauma will still pose a danger to humanity, but our lifespans will increase by 30 or 40 years. Perhaps a few generations thereafter, we will surpass even this feat. If we have these capabilities, are we not obliged to employ them for the good of mankind, and particularly for our children?

But we ought to pause and consider the implications of this technology, as Arendt begs of us. Scientists, she charges, endeavor to do the impossible merely because they can without asking themselves whether it is wise to proceed. What effects will increased lifespans and population growth have on our planet? Which features will we set our minds upon “fixing?” While will society look like once we have succeeded in permanently altering the human condition?

I submit that another attribute which separates us from animals is that we ponder our morality, and this fact alters our conduct in life. Are we to behave as gods on Earth, having first eaten from the Tree of Knowledge and now growing our own Tree of Life? Ethically, how does genetic engineering differ from the eugenics movement? Whither humanity?

*Thursday November 3rd, **8:10 PM**
3rd Floor of Massachusetts Hall
Semi-Formal Attire*

Yours,
μένω - Meno

Pinos Loquentes Semper Habemus