

Designing Children and Respect for the Given¹

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ABSTRACT

This chapter is about the relation between biomedical enhancement, religion, and our attitude to life. Several major thinkers have suggested that we cannot address worries about the ethics of human enhancement without first answering neglected questions about value, questions that verge on theology but can be pursued independently of religion. These thinkers include Jurgen Habermas, Ronald Dworkin, and G. A. Cohen. But the most influential example is Michael Sandel, who argues that the deepest objection to human enhancement is that it expresses a Promethean drive to mastery which deprives us of openness to the unbidden. In this chapter I will focus on Sandel's views.

I argue that Sandel misunderstands the notions of mastery and the unbidden and their significance. Once these notions are properly understood, they have surprising implications. First, the unbidden is best understood as referring, not to what is random, but to what is out of our control. Sandel associates 'the drive to mastery' with the aim of utterly removing the unbidden from our lives, but such an aim is both childish and incoherent. But it does not follow that we should not try to make things better, when this is under our control. It is one thing to accept things as they are, when we can't change them; another to accept them as they are, even when we can easily make them better. Sandel confuses the two. Second, to try to promote (or even protect) the acceptance of the unbidden is self-defeating, since such acts are themselves instances of mastery. If respecting the unbidden is a genuine value, then it calls for our complete passivity. Third, Sandel presents the acceptance of the unbidden as

1. This chapter offers a much abridged version of an argument I first developed in Kahane 2011. For further details, please consult the full paper. A version of this chapter was presented in the Carnegie-Oxford Conference in Tokyo, May 2012. I am very grateful to the audience there for extremely useful comments.

a value that we need to retrieve from theist religious traditions. But once it is properly understood, it turns out that theism does not, in fact, recognise this value, and indeed makes its full realisation impossible. Ironically, the absolutely unbidden can be fully appreciated only in the cold, purposeless world described by modern science.

Even more importantly, even if we accept the value of openness to the unbidden, this value cannot support Sandel's objection to genetic enhancement. Current reproductive arrangements are not as unbidden, or random, as Sandel presents them. There are numerous ways in which we can make them even more unbidden. But it would be absurd to replace, for example, the fairly predictable natural 'genetic lottery' with a genuine genetic lottery. Sandel also misrepresents what genetic enhancement would involve. In fact it is likely to increase appreciation for the role of the unbidden in our lives. And, ironically, the Judeo-Christian tradition that Sandel appeals to is far from opposed to attempts to control the reproductive process and its results.

If anything, it is opposition to enhancement that is likely to express a pernicious desire for mastery—a desire to control the future, to impose one's will on others, and to cling to a familiar and predictable kind of unpredictability.



One of the most important debates in contemporary bioethics is about human enhancement—the possibility that recent advances in science will allow us to radically change human nature; for example, by using genetics to create children who are smarter, happier or kinder. Some philosophers are excited by this possibility, but most people find it very scary. What is still unclear, however, is what exactly is supposed to be so dangerous or terrifying about the very idea of biomedical enhancement.

In this chapter, I will examine a suggestion made by the American philosopher Michael Sandel, when he writes that

In order to grapple with the ethics of enhancement, we need to confront questions largely lost from view—questions about the moral status of nature, and about the proper stance of human beings toward the given world. Since these questions verge on theology, modern philosophers and political theorists tend to shrink from them. (Sandel 2007: 9)²

2. His views here are based on Sandel 2004.

In other words, Sandel thinks that we can't fully address ethical worries about enhancement by appealing to *standard* moral concepts and principles—concepts like well-being, rights or justice. We need to go deeper than that, and address worries that arise out of what he calls '*religious sentiments*'. But Sandel insists that even if these sentiments are associated with religion, they nevertheless resonate '*beyond religion*'. We don't need to be religious, or believe in God, to accept their validity.

This is an interesting idea, and I think it might even be right. In fact, Sandel is not the only one to make this suggestion. Several important thinkers have recently said similar things –including Jurgen Habermas (2003), Ronald Dworkin (2002) and Jerry Cohen (2004). But in what follows, I will focus on how Sandel develops this idea in his bestselling book, *The Case Against Perfection*.

Sandel's argument in that book is rather obscure. But it's nicely encapsulated in two key passages. In one of them, Sandel writes that

the deepest moral objection to enhancement lies less in the perfection it seeks than in the human disposition it expresses and promotes ... The problem is in the hubris of the designing parents, in their drive to master the mystery of birth ... (Sandel 2004: 57. See also Sandel 2007: 83–85, 100.)

And later, he adds that

the deeper danger is that [enhancement] represents a kind of hyperagency—a Promethean aspiration to remake nature, including human nature, to serve our purpose and satisfy our desires ... (Sandel 2004: 54)

Supporters of enhancement often mock these ideas. They think that, like 'intelligent design', they really are just religion in disguise. But I want to try to take them more seriously here. In what follows, I will ask whether we can make sense of Sandel's contrast between mastery and the unbidden, and about the relation of these notions to religion. I will then ask what would follow for questions about enhancement, genetic selection, and human reproduction if we did agree with Sandel that there is some special *value* in having an appropriate attitude to the unbidden.

So let's start by trying to clarify the notions of mastery and the unbidden. This seems to be the distinction between what we have mastered, and what we haven't, or can't. Other philosophers speak instead about the distinction between chance and

choice, or more precisely, between what is under our control, and what isn't. Notice that the unbidden, in this sense, can be either relative or absolute. Something can be outside *your* control, but still in someone else's control. It's unbidden only in a relative sense. For something to be absolutely unbidden, it needs to be outside of *anyone's* control. Sandel seems to be talking about the unbidden in this absolute, unqualified sense.

When we face some decision, we can leave things either to chance, or to choice. But there seems to be a clear presumption in favour of mastery—*against* leaving things to mere chance. After all, whenever something occurs, it can be good, bad, or indifferent. If this occurrence is under our control then (so long as we aim at the good) the outcome is more likely to be better than if we left to chance. This is why, when we *can* make the outcome better, we *should* bring it about (when permissible). So if something really matters to us, it's hard to see why should we ever leave it to chance rather than to choice.

You might think that many religious traditions disagree. After all, many religions tell us to resign ourselves to fate, however grim. For example, many theists believe that everything that happens plays some role in a divine plan—even if this plan is inscrutable to us mortals. And this might mean that we sometimes have reason to just let the dice fall where they may.

This belief can have extreme implications. For example, the Moravian Church, an evangelical Protestant movement, held at one point that all important decisions should be decided by chance—they even used a lotteries to decide whether some couple should marry or not! But these religious practices don't involve genuine, unqualified 'openness to the unbidden'. After all, in a universe in which God exists, nothing is ever unbidden in an absolute, unqualified sense. These believers assume precisely that things are never decided by pure chance, but express God's good will. To say, 'Thy will be done' is not to be open to the (absolutely) unbidden, but to submit to God's bidding.

But if God doesn't exist, and things really do happen simply by chance, why on earth shouldn't we intervene to make them better? What could be Sandel's problem with mastery? In the closing words of his book, Sandel writes that the drive to mastery threatens 'to leave us with nothing to affirm or behold outside our own will'. The idea here seems to be that unless we recognise something external to our will (something 'unbidden'), we do not fully recognise, and relate to, the world outside us. Perhaps the

idea is that if we had (or even thought we had) complete mastery, then we wouldn't be able to distinguish between fact and fantasy, and could only live an egocentric, solipisistic existence.

This idea echoes a famous passage in Milan Kundera's novel *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*:

the heavier the burden ... the more real... [our lives] become. Conversely, the absolute absence of a burden causes man to be lighter than air, to soar into the heights... and become only half real, his movements free as they are insignificant. (Kundera 1984: 5)

However, we need to distinguish two senses of mastery. There is first what we can call *extreme mastery*: a kind of Satanic desire to master absolutely everything. Such an aim is childish. And it's not even logically possible. Even God can't make $2+2=5$, or make murder a good thing. But that's anyway not relevant to us mere humans. After all, we can't even predict (let alone control) the weather. But there is a more sensible form of mastery: the aim of improving things, to the extent that is within our power. This needs to be guided by a realistic appreciation of our limits, and by external standards of value and morality. And such mastery makes sense only in relation to an external world.

We should also distinguish two ways in which we could accept the unbidden. We can, as Sandel comes close to recommending, simply let chance decide what happens, even if we can intervene to make the outcome better. But a more sensible approach would be to change things for the better, when we can; but to also recognise limits to our power, and learn to accept things as they are when we can't change them. This is really an obvious and familiar point.

We can now finally turn to enhancement, and the ethics of reproduction. In natural reproduction, genetic material from the parents is randomly combined to create the unique genetic endowment of the resulting child. In the future, reproductive technologies might allow us to select at least some aspects of the characteristics of future children. To do so, Sandel argues, would be deeply wrong, because such mastery would undermine our openness to the unbidden. Reproduction should remain a mystery, unpredictable and outside human control.

There are many problems with Sandel's argument.

(i) Consider first the point that reproduction, as practiced today, is actually not

that unpredictable. Parents anticipate and value expected similarities between themselves and their children. And, of course, people can control who they reproduce with, and when. Finally, needless to say, birth control is a form of control.

We could easily change that. Instead of ‘willfully’ selecting whom we marry this could be decided by lottery. Instead of letting couples decide if and when to reproduce, contraception could be made mandatory—but with random flaws so that conception is always possible, but never predictable. We could even replace the highly limited genetic lottery with a proper lottery, so that it will be impossible to predict what our children will be like: black or white, tall or short, handsome or ugly. This would be absurd. But shouldn’t it be better, on Sandel’s view?

(2) Second, genetic selection involves far less mastery than Sandel thinks. Genetics is incredibly complex, and there is a great gulf between genotype and phenotype. Enhancement will inevitably be a matter of calculating probabilities, which is extremely complex given that genes interact with an unpredictable environment. Only someone in the grip of a crude genetic determinism could worry that genetic selection would simply erase the unbidden from reproduction.

(3) Perhaps Sandel’s problem isn’t with removing the element of the chance from our life, but in undermining our appreciation of the unbidden? This is suggested when Sandel claims that ‘parenthood, more than other human relationships, teaches ... “an openness to the unbidden”’ (Sandel 2007: 45). But parenthood couldn’t be the only or even the central way to appreciate the unbidden, otherwise people with no children would have a deficient sense of reality. Religious tradition of course rejects this absurd idea—think of Catholic nuns and priests. There are surely plenty of other ways to learn to appreciate the unbidden. One example, by the way, is natural science, where we confront an indifferent, ‘unbidden’ reality abstracted from everything human.

(4) More importantly, it’s just not true that enhancement must be a kind of a wilful self-assertion, and a rejection of any external reality or constraint. Proponents of enhancement argue that we have reason to use biotechnology to bring into the world children with a range of talents and capacities most likely to lead to a good or flourishing life. To have such an aim is hardly to indulge in self-assertion. It is indeed a form of mastery, but it is a sensible kind of mastery that answers to what is outside one’s will: the welfare of a future person, and standards of the good life.

Actually, genetic selection is likely to make prospective parents *more*, not less, acutely appreciative of the unbidden. In vitro fertilisation is a highly demanding, un-

pleasant and uncertain process. And parents who use reproductive technologies to try to promote the well-being of their child will be engaged in a risky project against a highly resistant external reality.

(5) Finally, if we should be suspicious of anything, it's rather of the motivation that drives *opposition* to enhancement. Let us set aside the point that to try to actively promote the unbidden is self-defeating, because, inevitably, this is itself a form of mastery. But opposition to enhancement might be self-defeating in a further way, by itself expressing an unpleasant drive for mastery, and a failure to accept the unbidden. After all, such opposition seems to express precisely a desire to master technology and social change, to control the future—perhaps even to impose one's will, and fears, on others. It seems to express a desire to cling, not to unpredictability per se, but to a very predictable and familiar kind of unpredictability. Thus Sandel's worries, far from expressing openness to the unbidden, might in fact express deep fear of an unpredictable, risky and alien future—that is, fear of losing control.

(6) Let me end with a brief note on genetic selection and religion. The Judeo-Christian tradition is actually in some tension with Sandel's view, and not only because it leaves no space to anything absolutely unbidden. After all, in the Old Testament, God gives his blessing, and active assistance, to Abraham and Sarah's pursuit of post-menopausal sex selection. Sarah, by the way, was 90 years old. And, on most theist views, we are born with certain characteristics and talents precisely because God wills it so. God, then, selects our genetic endowment. We are His artefacts, playing some role in His cosmic plan. If genetic selection involves a vicious attitude, what does that say about God?

I conclude that Sandel's argument against enhancement is not successful. Sandel misunderstands the notions of mastery and the unbidden, and what follows from them. In fact, respect for the unbidden is actually perfectly compatible with a sensible form of mastery. And genetic selection will not remove the element of chance from our lives: it might actually *increase* our appreciation of a resistant external reality, and the limits of our power. If anything, it is actually opposition to enhancement that might express a problematic refusal to face the unbidden.

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