

**Anca Gheaus**

**Paper title** Choosing one's future children: How would we read the message?

**Abstract**

Is there anything wrong with the possibility of choosing, through genetic engineering, the characteristics of one's future child – such as gender, IQ, behavioral dispositions, or eye or skin color?

Much of the normative debates concerning genetic engineering revolve around the issue of personhood and the sanctity of life. Some critics of genetic research defend their position by arguing that embryos have a moral status that should prevent their instrumental treatment. If embryos have moral status, the argument goes, then it is morally wrong to create embryos for the sole aim of advancing research; as a consequence, the freedom to choose the characteristics of one's future children should be limited to what is scientifically achievable without artificial creation of embryos and the inevitable destroying of many (pre)embryos.

In this paper I do not engage with the debate over ontological arguments concerning the moment when a new human life can reasonably be said to begin and should be protected. Instead, I argue that, even if embryos do not have a moral status, there is an important argument from care and recognition against using genetic engineering in order to determine the characteristics of one's future children (other than for medical reasons).

My approach relies on a feminist ethics of care, broadly conceived as an ethics of responding to (one's own and others') needs. I argue that one of the central emotional needs we have is to imagine ourselves as the object of our parents' unconditional love. The fulfillment of this need is seriously threatened whenever we feel that our parents' affection depends on our willingness or ability to fulfill a certain (often idealizing) image of how their children should be.

Education and socialization sometimes entail the risk of making children feel unloved in a way that severely damages their self esteem and self confidence.

If people were to choose through genetic engineering the characteristics of their children this practice would sharply enhance the risk. As children of parents who have genetically chosen our characteristics, we may feel that their affection is conditional, rather than directed at us as individuals. The image of our parents becomes the image of a parent who wanted a so-and-so baby, rather than the baby we happened to be - no matter what particularities we happen to have. Inasmuch as the chosen characteristic - such as gender or race - is associated with histories of discrimination and oppression the problem may take on a political dimension of (lack of) recognition.

It is beyond the scope of this paper, however, to draw conclusion about whether genetic engineering-related research should be allowed or not. Instead, I remain within the domain of an individual ethics informed by the importance of emotions.

**Biography**

Anca Gheaus has earned her doctorate from the Central European University in Budapest with a thesis on the feminist ethics of care, entitled "Care and Justice: Why they Cannot Go Together All the Way."

She has published several articles, book chapters and critical reviews on various topic in ethics, political theory and gender studies. Most recent publications include "Irreversible Moral Damage", in Benjamin Schreier (ed.) *Culture and Irreversibility*. Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Press, 2007, "La propriete de soi en vaut-elle la peine?" in *Raisons Politiques* 23, 2006 and "Gender Dimensions of the Romanian Tutoring System", in Justyna Sempruch, Katharina Willems and

Chiara Casarella (eds.) *Multiple Marginalities. An Intercultural Perspective on Gender in Education*. Kongstein: Helmer Verlag, 2006.

**Institutional Affiliation** Currently she is a Hoover Fellow at the Chaire d'Etique Economique et Sociale at the Universite Catholique de Louvain.