

## MEDIA MATERIALS

Professor Julian Savulescu - ASMR Medallist 2005

### Biography

Professor Julian Savulescu is Uehiro Chair in Practical Ethics at the University of Oxford. He established and is Director of the Oxford Uehiro Centre for Practical Ethics. He is also Head of the Melbourne-Oxford Stem Cell Collaboration at the Murdoch Childrens Research Institute, devoted to examining the ethical implications of cloning and embryonic stem cell research. He was editor of the *Journal of Medical Ethics*.

Previously, he was Director of the Ethics of Genetics Unit at the Murdoch Children's Research Institute, Royal Children's Hospital, Melbourne, Australia. He was also Director of the Bioethics Program at the Centre for the Study of Health and Society at the University of Melbourne. He was also the Chair of the Department of Human Services, Victoria, Ethics Committee.

Julian Savulescu is qualified in medicine, bioethics and analytic philosophy. He has published over 100 articles in academic. He has worked as Clinical Ethicist at the Oxford Radcliffe Hospitals. He received his medical degrees and his doctorate at Monash University, Australia, under Peter Singer.

### Questions & Answers

#### **Surely genetic enhancement interferes with nature?**

Most people implicitly reject this view. We currently screen our unborn children for disease – even mild correctible diseases. We interfere in Nature when we vaccinate, give antibiotics, provide pain relief to women in labour and treat cancer. No one would object to treating disease or a disability in a child, if it were possible. Why not then treat an unborn child with genetic technology if that intervention is safe and would make the child's life go better? It is nevertheless true that a parent should unconditionally love and accept a child, even if that child suffers from a disease or is disabled in some way.

#### **Couldn't using this technology have potentially disastrous social effects?**

If a proposed intervention does not improve well-being or opportunity and places an individual at unfair competitive advantage, there is no argument in favour of it. In this case, a manipulation is not an enhancement. Issues of social consequences are not particular to enhancement – there is an old question about how far individuals in society can pursue their own self-interest at cost to others. It applies to education, health care and virtually all areas of life. Only justice can resolve this.

#### **Isn't this proposal eugenic like the Nazi 'super race'?**

Eugenics was the movement early last century which used selective breeding to prevent degeneration of the gene pool by weeding out criminals, those with mental illness and the poor, on the false belief that these conditions were simple genetic disorders. This movement had its despicable peak when the Nazis moved beyond sterilization to extermination of the 'genetically unfit'. What was most objectionable about this, apart from a shoddy scientific basis, was that it involved the imposition of a State vision for a healthy population and aimed to achieve this through coercion. Modern eugenics in the form of testing for disorders, such as Down syndrome, occurs very

commonly but is acceptable because it is voluntary and gives parents the choice over what kind of child to have and enables them to have a child with the greatest opportunity for a good life.

### **How would we decide whether an enhancement would be 'better' for an individual?**

This is a critical question. Is it better for the individual to have certain characteristics (laziness, empathy, memory, impulse control)? If an unborn child is shown to have a gene predisposing to a particular disease – will this mean that the child is guaranteed to develop that disease? These questions are difficult to answer. Humans have the capacity to make a judgment and act on the basis of reason. When we make the decision to improve our lives through currently available enhancements, we express our rationality. This is fundamental to the human spirit. With developing genetic technology, the same consideration of rational choice applies.

### **Performance enhancement in sport is seen as 'un-Australian'; wouldn't genetic enhancement be the same?**

Where genetic enhancement benefits an individual, such as having better memory or control of impulses, it is not cheating. It is making that person's life go better. What is bad about performance enhancement in sport is where one group cheats to the disadvantage of the honest. In Australia, everyone has a right to a fair go.

### **What are the costs and side-effects of this technology?**

Current technologies (such as genetic screening) have been shown to be cost-effective with low side-effects. It is important that this aspect of developing technologies be balanced with the potential for additional years of healthy life.