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A brave new bioengineered world

A top expert on bioethics says there are some troubling questions that will need answers soon.

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ROCHESTER - The seductive promises of bioengineering - stronger and smarter people living longer - will probably be a reality sooner rather than later.

"Modern biology is just entering puberty," said Leon Kass, the chairman of President Bush's Council on Bioethics. "We ain't seen nothing yet."

Kass spoke before an audience at the Rochester Institute of Technology last Thursday night. And while Kass noted we should be grateful for bioengineering's coming of age - for longer, healthier lives, for pace makers and organ transplants and potential cures for Parkinson's and Alzheimer's on the horizon - there are a lot of areas we should be wary of.

Biotechnology, Kass said, can be used for terrorism, through engineered strains of deadly bacteria. It can be used for social control, through mood-altering drugs or mandatory birth control. And it can be used to put children into a freakishly competitive world where staying drug-free means being noncompetitive with children who use new drugs to stay awake longer, remember more and keep focused.

"We are concerned not just by what others could do to us but by what we could do to ourselves," he said.

Gene therapies can create superior musculature structures in animals, "literally creating Mighty Mouse," Kass said.

Those therapies were developed to treat muscular dystrophy in humans, Kass said, "but the football and basketball coaches are lining up not far behind."

The fundamental question facing mankind, Kass said, is to distinguish between therapy and enhancements, between what is medically useful and good and what is just advantageous.

"The more you think about it, the more problematic it becomes," Kass said. In a world where you can "cure" anything, how do you distinguish social-anxiety disorder from shyness? Hyperactivity from spiritedness? How tall is "abnormally" tall? How short is too short? Is a post menopausal woman's inability to have children a deficiency? How about a 60-year-old man's inability to play hockey? If we can boost the IQ of a child who's having trouble reading, should we do it? Doesn't that imply we should also "fix" everyone who doesn't have a photographic memory?

What do we treat and what do we say you're stuck with?

Kass did not provide simple answers to these questions - and he acknowledged that the answers are still open to debate. But he did provide guiding principles that he said could help us draw such critical distinctions.

First, he said, we should have "respect for the naturally given."

"Not everything in the world may be put to any use we desire," he said. "We should ask ourselves: What is essential to human nature that is good and worth protecting on its own terms? What is precious in human nature?"

Second, he said, we should respect the dignity of human activity.

We have a deeply held belief that people should work hard for our successes - even when it appears effortless, he elaborated.

Why? Because we believe that in some way it relates to character.

"Children who are pacified by drugs are not learning self-control, they are learning that it is unnecessary," he said. "A drug to eliminate fear does not create bravery."

Perhaps, Kass said, technology that improves people's ability to work for what they want and struggle for what they need is in accordance with the dignity of human activity, while technology that makes them more inert and less inclined to build character is not.

This idea, he suggested, is why we are already suspicious of people whose lives revolve around watching television or taking drugs: Taken to excess, these already existent technologies turn us into passive agents outside of human striving.

"Don't listen to anyone who promises you better than human if he can not account for the depths of what it is to be human," Kass said.

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