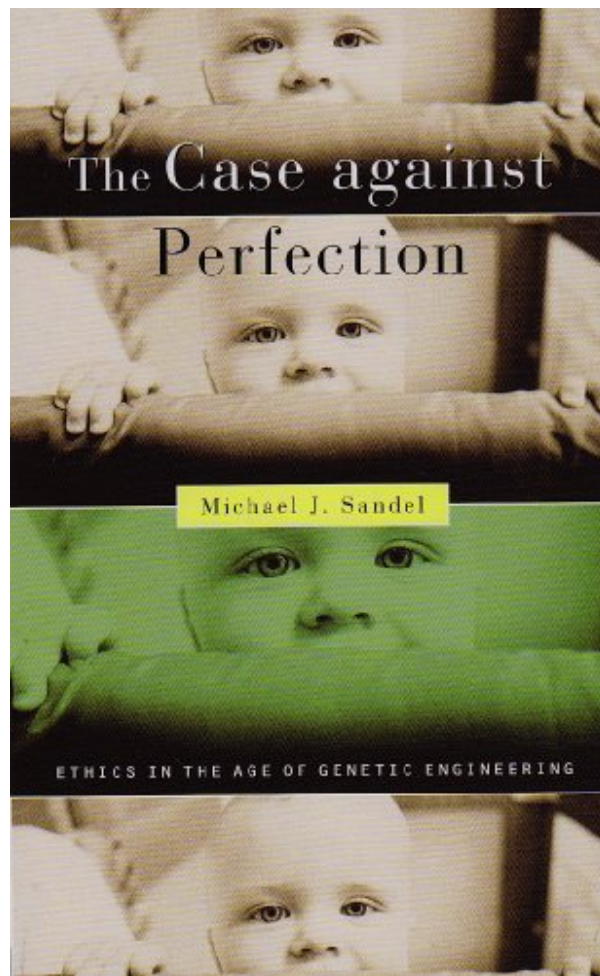
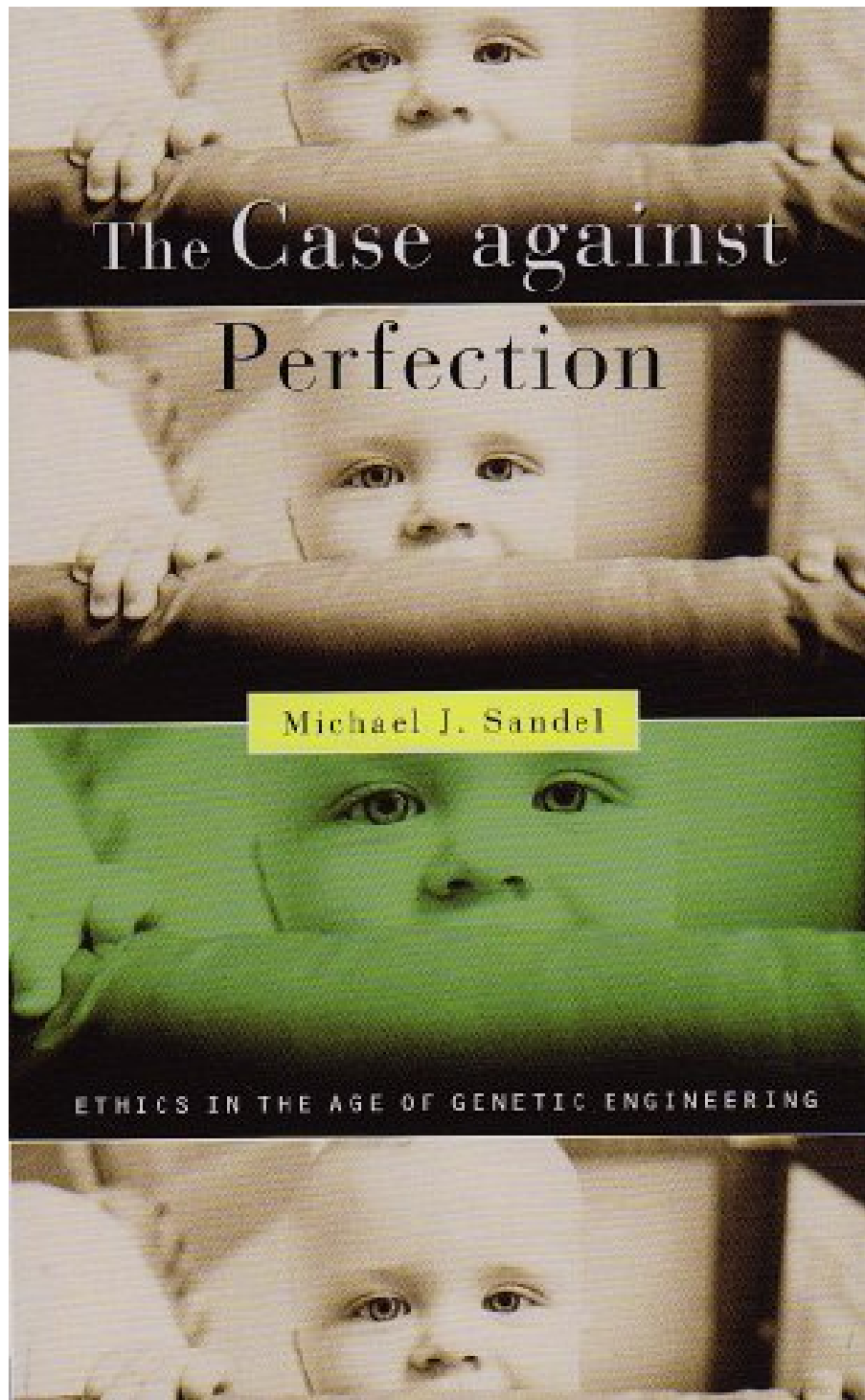


**THE CASE AGAINST PERFECTION: ETHICS
IN THE AGE OF GENETIC ENGINEERING
BY MICHAEL J. SANDEL**



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Breakthroughs in genetics present us with a promise and a predicament. The promise is that we will soon be able to treat and prevent a host of debilitating diseases. The predicament is that our newfound genetic knowledge may enable us to manipulate our nature—to enhance our genetic traits and those of our children. Although most people find at least some forms of genetic engineering disquieting, it is not easy to articulate why. What is wrong with re-engineering our nature?

The Case against Perfection explores these and other moral quandaries connected with the quest to perfect ourselves and our children. Michael Sandel argues that the pursuit of perfection is flawed for reasons that go beyond safety and fairness. The drive to enhance human nature through genetic technologies is objectionable because it represents a bid for mastery and dominion that fails to appreciate the gifted character of human powers and achievements. Carrying us beyond familiar terms of political discourse, this book contends that the genetic revolution will change the way philosophers discuss ethics and will force spiritual questions back onto the political agenda.

In order to grapple with the ethics of enhancement, we need to confront questions largely lost from view in the modern world. Since these questions verge on theology, modern philosophers and political theorists tend to shrink from them. But our new powers of biotechnology make these questions unavoidable. Addressing them is the task of this book, by one of America's preeminent moral and political thinkers.

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Short Atlantic Monthly article way better

By txsierra

I bought this book because I really enjoyed the Atlantic Monthly article that preceded this effort. Unfortunately, this book didn't include any additional substance but a lot more fluff. I was totally bored with the effort and pretty disappointed. I would not recommend spending \$20 on this book, but rather dig up a pdf of the article and enjoy it instead.

66 of 80 people found the following review helpful.

A very imperfect case

By Danno

Sandel is a gifted, lucid writer, which is why I wish I could give this book more stars. But if I restrict myself just to its substance, I have to confess that more than once I felt like throwing this book across the room or shoving it into my garbage disposal. What an irritating and profoundly misguided book!

Sandel seems to think that using biotechnology, especially genetic engineering, to enhance human life inevitably means encroaching on, and perhaps even destroying, our ability to appreciate the "gifted" character of life itself. The assumption is that appreciating what is "given" (whether by God or nature) requires holding back from enhancing our offspring and ourselves and accepting as normative the abilities and limitations of modern human beings. If we do proceed with genetic enhancements, then, according to Sandel, we are corrupted by a hubristic ethic of "mastery" over what is naturally given. This is wrongheaded--and for two main reasons.

First, Sandel offers very little by way of defense of the normativity of the natural. Although he concedes that not everything that is natural is good (and rightly gives cancer as an example), he tells us almost nothing in this book, beyond appealing to a naïve, static, Aristotelian-style natural law theory, about why the fact that something is naturally given is in any way even relevant to its goodness, let alone why it ought not be improved. If he is going to be any kind of naturalist, he needs to go back and rethink the implications of Darwinian evolution for attempts to identify and enshrine an immutable human essence. (The prospects aren't good.) Beyond that, he needs a response to a long line of critics of Aristotelian naturalism, from Hume to Moore, who with good reason have attacked the idea that one could straightforwardly infer what "ought" to be from what "is." Sandel's Aristotelian naturalism is highly doubtful, and since the rest of his evaluations seem to depend upon it, they would appear to be highly doubtful as well.

Second, Sandel treats the sense of reverence, awe, and mystery that we feel towards nature, including our

own current way of being, as if it were a kind of non-renewable resource--as if it were like, say, a finite, exhaustible quantity of petroleum lying under the earth's surface. This is ludicrous. It is much more probable that no matter how much human beings enhance themselves--no matter how tall they can grow themselves, how big they make their muscles, how much more powerful they make their memories, or how much they can genetically enhance the powers of their offspring--they will always be limited both by their environment and by their competition with each other (and possibly other beings). As a result, we will never reach the sort of smug self-satisfaction to which Sandel refers near the end of his book: we will never entirely "banish our appreciation of life as a gift" nor ever find ourselves with "nothing to affirm or behold outside our own will" (p. 100). No doubt there are people (and have for a long time been people) who failed to appreciate what is given them, but this has to do with the lack of a certain kind of sensibility, a kind of imaginative obtuseness. It has nothing directly to do with whether we can make ourselves live somewhat longer, grow somewhat taller, remember more, think somewhat more quickly, and the like. No matter how much we enhance ourselves, there will always be what is "given" relative to that stage of advancement and over which we have no control. We will never become masters of the universe, and, if we really do have enhanced mental abilities, we will not fall into the delusion of thinking that we are.

On the other hand, suppose Sandel is right, and suppose that we actually do have the power to erase the "given" and make ourselves true masters of the universe. I for one have trouble even understanding this possibility. But suppose (probably per impossibile) that it makes sense. Well, in that case, we would have become gods. And, if we really were gods, the accusation against us of hubris would be quite misplaced, wouldn't it?

An earlier reviewer mentioned a similarity between Sandel and Heidegger. Despite my more negative assessment of Sandel's book, that comment seemed to me to be close to the mark, since Heidegger too was a thinker who tended to mistake his own subjective preferences and concerns for deep ontological structures. Sandel doesn't like genetic manipulation and enhancement, and he projects this dislike, ironically in a rather hubristic manner, on a cosmic screen, as if it were deeply revealing of the nature of reality, life, and humanity. But it isn't. If my criticisms are correct, then an ethic of "giftedness," in which we appreciate the naturally given, can coexist with a determination to enhance our abilities and those of our children so as to make all of our lives as good (in our own eyes) as possible.

Don't worry. The universe will take care of reminding us that we have limits.

15 of 16 people found the following review helpful.

Perfect Debate

By Collin T. Corcoran

A Case Against Perfection, which I read in two sittings over 5 hours in one afternoon. I simply could not put the book down, Sandel proposes both sides in the debate of Cloning/Performance Enhancement/Gene Therapy etc... Sandel makes you guess and second guess, then triple guess your own beliefs on these issues. In the end, I felt well informed and satisfied with this book. I strongly recommend this book. Not lengthy, fast read, well written.

Enjoy.

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An illuminating ethical analysis of stem-cell research concludes this stellar work of public philosophy. (Ray Olson *Booklist* 2007-04-15)

[A] graceful and intelligent new book. (Carl Elliott *New England Journal of Medicine* 2007-05-17)

[Sandel] makes the compelling case that genetic engineering to gain advantage for ourselves and our children is deeply disempowering, because it turns us away from the communal good, toward self-centered striving.

(Anne Harding The Lancet 2007-07-28)

Anyone who thinks our culture is too competitive and consumer-driven should find that Sandel's diagnosis resonates. He provides not only a warning about the shape of the future, but equally an indictment of--or at least a call to examine--our individual moral lives and our contemporary social values. Those who support the practice of genetic enhancement argue that the technology is not substantially different from other forms of "enhancement" we use to improve our lives and the lives of our children. Sandel agrees, but he does not base his argument on any particular distinction about the means of enhancement; rather he is deeply concerned about the underlying impetus of mastery and dominion. (Debra Greenfield Bioethics Forum 2007-08-20)

Michael Sandel's dive into the sea of genetic engineering provides a great tasty gulp of contemporary ethical controversy. Quickly read, *The Case Against Perfection* is nonetheless dense with challenging quandaries, loaded with moral puzzles and filled with facts. An inveterate highlighter, I underlined half the book. (John F. Kavanaugh America 2007-08-13)

This rather small book presents, in very succinct fashion, many of the arguments against proposals to bioengineer human life. Sandel...argues with care and clarity not only against the more extreme cases such as human cloning, but also against the more modest proposals of gene modification. As the title suggests, the arguments are almost exclusively negative, although Sandel's most interesting and creative suggestion is the idea that such human bioengineering will cause human beings to lose the sense of life as a "gift," and that this will have a serious morally negative effect upon the entire social structure. (P.A. Streveler Choice 2007-09-01)

Sandel's arguments ultimately speak to our gut-level qualms about enhancement; and his aim in fact is to give these qualms a coherent moral basis...His book in the end is more a lyrical plea for reverence and humility than a lawyer's watertight "case against."...The ethicist Michael Sandel wants us at least to think about the line [between health and enhancement], however imaginary--and to think about where, in a hyper-competitive world, re-engineering our natures will ultimately lead. (Michele Pridmore-Brown Times Literary Supplement 2008-04-18)

For many years I have been ambivalent about reproductive innovations, from surrogate gestation to preimplantation screening for gender selection. After reading Sandel's exceedingly elegant little book, *The Case Against Perfection: Ethics in the Age of Genetic Engineering*, I could finally put satisfactory names to core values implicit in my hesitation: acceptance and solidarity. I encountered Sandel's book as a participant in the intellectual discourse about parenting. But the book's greatest value to me was its validation of the commitments of solidarity expressed in my volunteer work on behalf of poor mothers and of acceptance implicit in my determination to mother a child with catastrophic mental illness. (Anita L. Allen Chronicle of Higher Education 2008-05-16)

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