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Preimplantation diagnosis: a discursive test case

Editorial

Bioethics lives on controversy. If, to take an admittedly unrealistic example, we all agreed on how to judge biotechnological developments such as preimplantation genetic diagnosis (PGD), reflecting on this consensus would be a rather idle matter.

Yet controversies can also represent a menace for bioethics – when some positions and arguments remained unarticulated in the public sphere, out of fear they might be received there in a problematic way. Classical examples of this sort of complicated topic include abortion, human embryo research, and active euthanasia. PGD clearly has this kind of polarization potential. These are cases where even philosophical discussions can quickly turn into political debates, and where the instruments of careful ethical analysis, conceptual openness and fair exchange, constantly risk being replaced by seemingly «bigger guns», such as polemics and discrediting opinions different from our own.

Swiss debates can in general be commended for remaining relatively unexcited and sober, and thus enabling the presentation and deliberation of the full spectrum of possible arguments. In the discussion on PGD, for example, the danger of the slippery slope has been acknowledged in principle, but it has not been used – as is frequently the case elsewhere – as a «killer argument» and conversation stopper. Rather, this technology was rejected some years ago based mostly on safety issues, which can – and indeed should – be regularly revisited with growing experience. The matter of where to set limits for clinical applications will need to be renegotiated as well, especially in the light of recent discussions in the Netherlands regarding tests for risk genes, for example for colon or breast cancer. As suggested by the results of a *publifocus* of the TASwiss, Swiss citizens are inclined to argue for limits that are analogous to those defined for prenatal diagnosis. That public discussions yield such results should not surprise us. We should expect a deliberative democratic approach to legislation on PGD to give greater salience to issues closer to individual concerns; and these can sometimes contrast with technical aspects of the debate. In philosophical terms, for example, PGD raises questions related to eugenics more intensely than prenatal diagnosis. As no pregnancy is involved at this stage, limiting PGD does not imply mandating gestation, resulting in a lesser degree of explicit tension with reproductive rights. Allowing prenatal diagnosis thus seems less problematic. From a couple's perspective, however, the choice to initiate a pregnancy without having fully decided whether or not to accept this child into the family can conceivably be heavy enough to discourage conception entirely. From this vantage point, and given appropriate limitations, preimplantation diagnosis can seem more like a solution than a problem. Bringing these levels together is a crucial challenge. This debate is also a profoundly human one, in which personal stories brought into the public sphere by individuals and families have weighed in on discussions, and sometimes confronted our understanding of relevant philosophical concepts. Although this issue of *Bioethica Forum* cannot hope to fully cover the issues related to PGD, we have tried to give space to opposing voices on the vexed question of the moral status of human embryos (Baertschi and Rager), as well as to explorations of PGD's possible applications from ethical (Rehmann-Sutter), and legal (Andorno) perspectives. Given the controversy surrounding this topic, we are happy to include a number of viewpoints (Pók, Mauron, Müller, Goetz, Kramar) in our discussion section. PGD is in many ways a test case for discourse in bioethics. The issues it raises span the entire spectrum from abstraction to application, including philosophical questions, legislative quandaries, dilemmas regarding clinical applications, and potential impacts of this technology on aspects of social justice and personal lives. It has the ability to signal both how constructive our debates can be – or fail to be – and whether we are able to connect these different levels in a manner that does justice to the complexity of the issue.

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