

The Genetic Revolution and American Democracy

A Conversation with Eric Cohen and William Kristol

*In April 2002 a group of journalists, intellectuals, and policymakers gathered at the Ethics and Public Policy Center to consider the moral challenges and political consequences of the biotechnology revolution. The event marked the publication of *The Future Is Now: America Confronts the New Genetics*, a new volume edited by **William Kristol**, editor of *The Weekly Standard*, and **Eric Cohen**, a fellow at the Ethics and Public Policy Center. Their remarks will be followed by an edited version of the ensuing discussion, moderated by Center president **Hillel Fradkin**.*

Hillel Fradkin: This forum is the first in a new project at the Ethics and Public Policy Center called "Biotechnology and American Democracy." The project, while new, is a faithful expression of the mission of the Center, which is to clarify and reinforce the bond between the Western moral tradition and the public debate over domestic and foreign policy issues. Perhaps no issue of public policy is more in need of such moral and political clarification, and few equal its importance for the future of our democracy.

President Bush underlined the importance of the bioethics issues by making them the theme of his first special address to the nation, given on August 9, 2001. The challenges of biological and genetic progress, the President said, "may well define our age." These issues did not appear overnight, of course. Leon Kass, a contributor to *The Future Is Now* and a participant in our conversation today, began to draw attention to them thirty-five years ago. But it is nonetheless fair to say, as Cohen and Kristol write in their introduction, that "for years we have been 'progressing' step by step down a road while averting our eyes from the road's destination." This book and the Center's project are attempts to invigorate and inform that democratic discussion, and to expand the nation's thinking about the political, moral, and philosophical dimensions of biotechnology.

Speaking first in this forum will be Eric Cohen, a fellow at the Ethics and Public Policy Center and director of its Biotechnology and American Democracy project. Eric also serves as a senior consultant to the President's Council on Bioethics. He previously was a fellow at the New America Foundation and managing editor of *The Public Interest*.

ERIC COHEN

In January 2002, the President's Council on Bioethics began its first meeting with a reading of Nathaniel Hawthorne's story "The Birthmark," a parable of a scientist's obsessive effort to remove a "crimson stain" from his wife's cheek. The story is about the mad quest for perfection—the revolt against "sin, sorrow, decay, and death"—that ends with the destruction of its momentarily perfected subject. Fortunately, most Americans—and most scientists—are not so mad. But the animating myth of both modern technology and modern democratic politics is that misfortune is not inevitable, and that health and happiness are possible for everyone. We do not worship progress. We don't believe it is our "destiny." But we think and act as if progress is always possible, and as if the future will always be better than the past.

One has to admire America's optimistic spirit, its technological creativity, its faith in the future. But there is a danger, too, in living too much for the future. C. S. Lewis (in a passage brought to my attention in an essay by Gilbert Meilaender) explained this in the guise of "Uncle Screwtape," a senior devil giving advice on how to tempt human beings away from "the Enemy," by which he means God and the good. As this devil put it: "We want a man hagridden by the Future—haunted by visions of an imminent heaven or hell upon earth—ready to break the Enemy's commands in the Present if by doing so we make him think he can attain the one or avert the other."

The belief that the future will be better than the past—indeed, that it cannot be otherwise—is at the very heart of the American biotechnology project. As biotech spokesman Carl Feldbaum declared at last year’s industry conference: “Our revolution is about more than science. Make no mistake, it touches the whole earth, potentially every individual, and we have to keep faith with global society. Only then will we be doing our jobs and delivering on the promise of our distinct revolution, which so far we can all be very, very proud of.”

Of course, those who are less sympathetic to this revolution also speak in such grand terms; the title of our book (*The Future Is Now*) may be a case in point. But it is worth reflecting on whether advances in biology and genetics are in fact a “revolution” and whether the key moment in this revolution is “now.” If so, is the genetic revolution good for us?

What kind of revolution is it? Is this revolution utopian or bourgeois or none of the above? Does it expand the American commitment to equality by making those with

“saddles on their backs”—like diseases, disabilities, or simple mediocrity—more equal? Or does the coming age of genetic choice and control threaten to unravel our commitment to equality—by enshrining the principle that only some lives are fit to live?

The first question is whether there is a genetic revolution and whether the key moment is now. After all, many of the arguments and dilemmas in the current biotech debate are indeed very old: the clash of religion and science; the humanitarian desire to relieve man’s estate, and the moral hazard of seeking such relief by any means possible; the promise of technology to improve the human condition, and the danger that our technological hubris will lead to the abolition, self-destruction, or degradation of man.

Moreover, the debates themselves—over human cloning in particular and genetic manipulation in general—are also not new. Leon Kass and Joshua Lederberg, a Nobel Prize-winning geneticist, debated the ethics of human cloning in the *Washington Post* in 1967. James D. Watson, co-discoverer of the structure of DNA, testified before Congress about human cloning in 1971, declaring, “If we do not think about it now, the possibility of our having a free choice will, one day, suddenly be gone.” And the Christian ethicist Paul Ramsey addressed cloning in 1970 in *Fabricated Man: The Ethics of Genetic Control*. “To soar so high above an eminently human parenthood,” Ramsey wrote, “is inevitably to fall far below—into a vast technological alienation of man.”

Finally, we are already, in important ways, a “eugenic” society. We already tolerate or embrace surgical enhancements of our physical appearance, for no other reason than individual desire, and with no limit except our ability to pay. We already advertise, on billboards and in television commercials, drugs like Zoloft and Paxil that promise to make anxious people “happy” and imperfect lives more perfect. Some of us already pick and choose embryos based on their genetic characteristics or sex, taking what we like and discarding what we don’t.

And so, our problem is not simply or predominantly a lack of ethical dialogue or forethought about where the new genetics might take us. It is that biological and genetic science proceeds apace, one advance at a time, untroubled by the ethical warnings it often inspires, or by the many commissions that have met to discuss what biotechnology means for society. Descartes, among others, saw what it meant centuries ago: “that we could be free of an infinitude of maladies both of body and mind, and even also possibly of the infirmities of age, if we had sufficient knowledge of their causes, and of all the remedies with which nature has provided us.” Whether such “freedom” is truly possible, and whether it is compatible with the technological power that is its precondition, is what we may now be finding out.

With this in mind, I want to suggest **three reasons** why this moment is both distinct and important for confronting the new genetics, and why the new genetics is different, in degree if not in kind, from medical progress heretofore. I also want to suggest that American optimism about our capacity to shape the future for our benefit—to make life better than it is—may need to refocus itself on governing the very technology that claims to do just that. This requires, paradoxically, an optimism about our capacity to accept the imperfections of life, lest we endanger the human goods that such moral and anthropological realism makes possible, and lest, like Hawthorne’s scientist, we destroy the beauty of the one we love, so to speak, in a misguided effort to make her better.

The **first** reason why this moment is important is simply that a wave of biological and genetic advances has occurred over the last few years. In 1997 we cloned the first mammal; in 1998 we isolated human embryonic stem cells; in 2000 we completed the “first draft” of the entire human genome; and in 2001 we cloned human embryos (though scientists in China may have done this even earlier). At the same time, research proceeds in novel areas like artificial wombs, man-animal hybrids, and the screening of embryos according to their genetic traits. Much of what was predicted in the 1970s seems to be coming to pass, if not always as quickly or dramatically as many promised or feared.

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Moreover, the new genetics, while it appeals to the established goals of modern biomedical science—freedom from “the maladies both of body and mind”—seems different in important ways. For one thing, it allows one generation to choose the natural characteristics of the next. And the changes we make to ourselves—for example, by altering the chemical workings of the brain—may be so perfectly implemented that the self-medicating “patients” lose the capacity to know what they have become. The modifications themselves predetermine our judgment about whether such modifications are good, by making us the kind of people who cannot imagine life without them.

There seems to be widespread repugnance at the idea of parents designing children to the specifications of Olympic athletes or master pianists, or elites designing subordinates who aspire to nothing more than serving their maker’s needs. But what about the more apparently benign uses of genetic control, such as boosting the intelligence of a child who is below average, or ensuring that a new child is a genetic match for an existing child in need of an organ transplant, or screening out children with a greater likelihood of developing dread diseases?

The answer to this question—Why not design our offspring “for their benefit”?—has to do with the kind of people we would have to become to perform such experiments in the first place, and the kind of world that such a disposition seems to lead to. Indeed, the willingness to make the next generation something “better”—to test one’s hypotheses on one’s offspring—is also a willingness to gamble with their well-being. The supposedly beneficent reasons for genetically improving future generations and the moral disregard that such experiments would require are in direct conflict.

In this connection, it is also worth asking whether a world without suffering—perhaps the most laudable goal of the genetic revolution—will also be a world without love. Aldous Huxley seems to think so. As he puts it in *Brave New World*: “The greatest care is taken to prevent you from loving any one too much. And if ever, by some unlucky chance, anything unpleasant should somehow happen, why, there’s always soma to give you a holiday from the facts. And there is always soma to calm your anger, to reconcile you to your enemies, to make you patient and long-suffering.”

Huxley’s point—one elaborated most clearly by Leon Kass—is that a life without suffering must also be a life without love, attachments, or commitments. It is a life without fear because there is nothing to lose; a life without anxiety because there are no responsibilities; a life without heroism because there are no crises that demand it and no causes that are worthy of it; a life without po-

etry because there is no reason to write it. It is also a life without realism, because the project of achieving perfect health—both physical and psychic—is likely to fail, but not before many people begin to believe in it. The project, in the end, deconstructs itself, since the technological power that love alone can justify supplies an image of human life where love is obsolete.

The **second** reason why this moment is important and distinct is that the use of biotechnology by illiberal regimes like China is coming into full view. Chinese eugenics and Chinese “medicine”—including mandatory abortions, state regulation of child-rearing, and the harvesting of organs from the living—are by now well known. But in our own optimism about biological and genetic progress, in our belief that the new technology is not dangerous but life-affirming, we have thought little about how our advances will be used by nations with less respect for human life than we now have, or whether the similarity between our science and theirs might suggest that something is amiss in the ethics of our own research. Two examples will suffice.

In recent months, American researchers announced advances both in the creation of artificial wombs and in the promise of cells taken from cow fetuses—not embryos, but fetuses—for curing terrible diseases. At the same time, Chinese scientists announced that they have successfully cloned embryos using rabbit eggs and human DNA. Does anyone doubt that, if and when it becomes possible, Chinese scientists will harvest cloned human fetuses for research and experiments?

In March 2002, Francis Collins, head of the Human Genome Project, said he believed that within a few years we’ll be able to isolate and test for numerous genetic disorders. Around the same time, there were numerous reports of American parents using pre-implantation genetic screening (i.e., tests of embryos in the laboratory) and preemptive abortion to select offspring with or without particular traits. Does anyone doubt that, if and when it becomes possible, the Chinese will use our knowledge of the genome and our techniques of genetic screening to produce children made to specification, a practice we still claim to find repugnant?

And so, while we might pursue such technologies for what seem to us good reasons, our capacity to condemn the evil uses of biology—to make the case for human rights against those regimes that ignore those rights—may one day be compromised if our technology makes us more like them, rather than them more like us.

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The **third** reason why this moment is distinct is that the political and moral culture of the nation has changed significantly since the late 1960s and early 1970s, when the last great debate over biogenetic technology took place. It has changed in part because of the triumph of the “pro-choice” doctrine in abortion, entailing as it does the belief that the moral status of the unborn is determined by the mother’s subjective will. This leaves us in the odd position of trying to oppose the “modification” or “improvement” of nascent human life in a society that allows its destruction for any reason at all. This dilemma has become apparent in the matter of sex-selection of embryos—including sex discrimination against females—which many feminists find troubling and yet difficult to oppose given their defense of abortion.

Such issues have been taken up most forcefully in the current debate over cloning, which reveals a series of sharp political divisions. For one thing, the same cloning researchers whom roughly half the Senate sees as medical heroes are seen by the other half as renegades whose experiments undermine our respect for human life and should be deterred with criminal penalties. This is the culture war at its sharpest.

The cloning debate also exposes deep conflicts within both liberalism and conservatism. There is the conflict between libertarians and social conservatives on the right, and between greens and quality-of-life liberals on the left. Greens and social conservatives believe that the new biotechnology can be used to corrupt nature and human nature, and that government should regulate to prevent its misuse. Libertarians and quality-of-life liberals believe the new biotechnology serves both a more perfect freedom from suffering, rules, and physical restraints, and greater equality for the sick, disabled, and dissatisfied, who would no longer have to endure the sting of their “unequal” condition.

But at a deeper level, the biotech debate will reveal the perhaps shaky foundations of late-bourgeois life itself, which, for all its rejection of utopianism on a grand scale, may have opened the door to utopianism on a small one. Indeed, the moral defense of capitalism once rested firmly on a belief in the limited wisdom and virtue of human beings, a belief that man is unequipped to make heaven on earth. Now bio-capitalists seem to be promising just that. And where liberalism once rested its moral argument on an unflinching commitment to the principle that “all men are created equal,” our leading liberals now defend (or seem willing to tolerate) picking and choosing future human beings according to their superior traits.

It would be silly to deny the value of health, well-being, and “greater natural assets.” Health is a blessing, not to be trivialized by the healthy. And excellence is a gift, perhaps even more than it is an achievement. But it

is at least worth noting that the more biologically improved we become, the less willing we may be to accept imperfection—or the imperfect. And the more we come to believe that life can be fixed, mastered, and ordered to our liking, the less prepared we may be for the disorder and disaster inherent in our mortal condition.

If this is correct, then liberal “compassion,” which seeks to solve the problems of man by technologically overcoming (or weeding out) his “birthmarks,” may be well on its way to deconstructing itself. And bourgeois realism about the limited aims of human striving—health, self-improvement, commerce—may lead to a failure of realism about what man is: both the evils he is capable of, and the vulnerability and need for courage that ultimately define him.

And yet, the fact that we are now engaged in a great debate about these questions—about the meaning of human procreation and healing, the meaning of experiments using nascent human life, the meaning of personal makeovers and custom-made descendants, the meaning of self-government in the realm of biotechnology—is encouraging. Nothing has been finally decided. We will continue to make arguments and cast votes on such matters as whether to ban human cloning, and as long as we do, there is every reason to remain at least moderately optimistic. It is, after all, the American way.

Hillel Fradkin: Thank you, Eric. Next we’ll hear from one of the nation’s leading political analysts: William Kristol, editor of *The Weekly Standard* and chairman of The Bioethics Project. Bill served as chief of staff both to Vice President Dan Quayle in the first Bush administration and to Secretary of Education William Bennett under President Reagan.

WILLIAM KRISTOL

Our book gives, I think, a good and reasonably balanced account of the philosophical and moral issues surrounding the advance of biotechnology—from Aldous Huxley and C. S. Lewis, to James D. Watson and Paul Ramsey, to Gilbert Meilaender and Leon Kass. It also captures some of the political debate over the past few years, especially the current controversies over human cloning and embryonic stem cells. That’s what I want to focus on now: the politics of the cloning and stem cell debate and why I think the political debate is deeply important.

Before the cloning vote in the House in 2001, Congressman Ted Strickland of Ohio said that “we should not allow theology, philosophy, or politics to interfere with the decision we make on this issue.” He has gotten ridiculed, as he should, for this comment, but mostly on the grounds that it’s ludicrous to pretend we can resolve the

moral problems connected with cloning and stem cells without doing theology or philosophy. I want to make the case for why you actually have to do politics as well.

Let me first briefly recap the political situation and how we got here. Dolly, the first cloned mammal, came to national attention in 1997. This gave rise to a debate on human cloning—in the citizenry, on the op-ed pages, and in Congress. The issue made it to the floor of the Senate in 1998, but those who favored a ban on all human cloning weren't able to get enough votes to close debate, and over time the cloning issue faded from public view. It came back in 2001 for two reasons: first, because human cloning seemed much more imminent, and second, because many researchers now want to experiment on cloned human embryos. In July 2001, the House passed a ban on all human cloning, including the creation of cloned embryos, by more than a hundred votes, 265 to 162. Virtually all conservatives and most Republicans voted for the total ban, but so did a number of liberals and Democrats. It was supported by some leading environmentalist groups and some leading feminists. There was, in short, something of a left-right coalition in favor of the ban. [In February 2003 the House passed virtually the same comprehensive ban on human cloning, by a similar vote of 241 to 155.]

It is also interesting to note that nearly every member of the House voted for at least *some* kind of ban on human cloning, though not all bans are equal. The central issue in the debate is whether the production of cloned embryos solely for research and destruction should be allowed, or whether cloning should be stopped entirely at the initial act. Those who defend cloned embryo research would ban only “reproductive cloning.” Specifically, they would ban the implantation of a cloned embryo into a woman's uterus, believing this is sufficient to stop any such embryos from coming to term. In other words: no cloned human beings walking around the earth, but *carte blanche* for the production and exploitation of cloned human embryos. This pro-research approach requires, by law, that all cloned embryos be destroyed, and its defenders explicitly endorse the activity of creating, using, and ultimately destroying them.

At this stage in the debate, virtually everyone in politics claims to be against reproductive cloning, though when you really push hard it's often not clear exactly why they're against it. Some people honestly oppose reproductive cloning—often because they believe it is unsafe, not intrinsically wrong—while supporting the use and destruction of cloned embryos. But in reality, I think that many people who claim to be against reproductive cloning see this position as a safe harbor. It is an opportunity to seem morally responsible without sacrificing much or thinking much. There is very little demand—

among scientists or the general public—for pursuing reproductive cloning, at least for now. But there is a growing desire to pursue so-called “therapeutic cloning” or “research cloning.”

As often happens in political debates, the language in the cloning debate has changed in ways that would make Orwell proud. The pro-experimentation forces, led by the Coalition for the Advancement of Medical Research, developed a radio ad that said: “Some people call it ‘therapeutic cloning,’ although it has nothing to do with copying human beings.” But it was they, the defenders of such research, who invented the term “therapeutic cloning” in the first place. They did this to shift people's attention away from cloning and toward therapy, but apparently with insufficient success. So they have changed tactics. Now they describe research on cloned embryos by naming the technique (“somatic cell nuclear transfer”) by which such cloning is done; or by saying that cloned embryos are not really embryos at all; or by ignoring the questionable means of such research and simply focusing attention on its scientific and medical possibilities.

I won't rehearse all the arguments for why many of us think that all human cloning should be banned. We believe this both for practical reasons—it is very hard to ban reproductive cloning without banning embryonic cloning—and because embryonic cloning is a bad idea in its own right: it *is* human cloning; it requires the destruction of a human embryo; and any effort to prohibit cloning-to-produce-children while allowing cloning-for-biomedical-research requires the government to mandate embryo destruction.

Many of the partisans of science would actually prefer to have both bills fail, so we'd be left with the status quo, which means no ban on anything and a free hand for the brave new biology to proceed without limits. The vote in the Senate on banning cloning is very close, and either of the two legislative options—or neither—could ultimately prevail. In the post-9/11 world, these issues are temporarily on the back burner. But one lesson of American politics is that issues on the back burner can sometimes move to the front burner very quickly. An issue like this is unpredictable, both because the science is always changing and because it is the kind of moral question that most political leaders try to avoid. It forces a choice between apparently competing goods—scientific and medical progress versus respect for human dignity—and people like to avoid making tough choices.

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But to get a sense of how this issue could take off, think back to before September 11. Embryonic stem cell research suddenly became the dominant political issue in the country for about two months. As Hillel Fradkin mentioned earlier, the President's first primetime televised speech was on embryonic stem cell research, something that no political analyst could have predicted six or eight months before. I think this was, in a way, a harbinger of things to come.

These issues, which are genuinely important both morally and scientifically, are on the verge of becoming politically important and indeed central to our debates in the months, years, and decades ahead. The future really is now, as our book claims, in the sense that the issue is joined politically as well as theoretically and intellectually. Political debate is how we resolve our differences in a democracy. As long as the issues remain purely theoretical or prospective, we aren't forced to decide what really matters, or what governing on these issues really requires. Because we have such debate,

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serious people think these issues through in a serious way. The maelstrom and pressure of political disagreement force much needed reflection. Over the last year, a lot of writing has been done that might not have been done otherwise:

writing about modernity, about the meaning of the brave new world, about what Francis Bacon wrote or did not write. When congressmen and senators have to vote, and interest groups have to take a position, there is urgency to argument and there are consequences to thought.

I also think that passing a ban on all human cloning would establish an important principle—namely, that we don't simply defer to scientific progress at every point as we skate down the path toward a brave new world. There have been delaying actions. There have been denials of federal funding. There have been cautions and yellow lights. But to have an actual legislative ban would be a very salutary thing.

Now it might be that after the ban was in place for a few years, people would decide they were willing to pay the price of medical progress. The ban could get reversed. But the burden of proof would have shifted to those who want to overturn the law. The burden would be on the forces of "progress," not the forces of restraint.

More to the point, passing such a ban would force people to take seriously the notion that we have to make real decisions, and that real decisions are not just hortatory. Such decisions force a kind of seriousness. We've seen this in the abortion debate: once the Court ruled out actually banning abortions, we ended up with attempts to ban certain abortion procedures, or to require a twenty-four-hour waiting period, or to require parental consent. These are all fine political efforts as far as they go, but they don't force a confrontation of the issue in a way that an actual ban would.

In this vein, a total ban on human cloning would be very helpful for the country, whether or not it could be sustained over time. It would be a dramatic moment when society says "no" to the progress of science, and it might lead to a more fundamental rethinking of other things as well. We have established restrictions on liberal grounds—for example, that you can't experiment on people without their consent. But we haven't restrained science on the larger moral grounds of the intrinsic dignity of human beings, or out of a sense that the future being offered to us through technology is one that we should choose not to embrace.

Passover is ending now, and Passover, which marks the liberation of the Jewish people from Egypt, makes me think of the Ten Commandments. The Commandments are the *spiritual* liberation, you might say, from Egypt. When God gave the Israelites the Ten Commandments, the Israelites famously responded, "We will do and we will listen." We will do them and then, one could interpret, we will also seek to understand them. I think this suggests that you can't simply figure everything out ahead of time and then decide whether it is the right thing to do. You learn by doing. You act first and understand later.

I think this is true in the political fight over cloning. It may or may not be that cloning is *the* bioethical issue of greatest significance: maybe germ-line engineering is more important, maybe genetic screening and selective abortion raise more interesting issues. If we were deciding simply theoretically, we might not choose cloning as the issue for a national discussion about bioethics. But we don't always have that luxury. We know there is a pressing need to draw moral lines that restrict the abuses of biotechnology, and so acting now makes sense, even if the full meaning of acting now isn't yet entirely clear. Doing so will force the debate to continue, and will educate us and our fellow Americans about the much broader questions of biological progress, the biotechnology revolution, and the relationship of democratic politics and science.

DISCUSSION

Hillel Fradkin: Thank you, Bill. These are subjects about which many in this room have written eloquently, and we now invite you all to join the conversation. [All participants will be identified at the end.]

Irving Kristol: If we're talking about a public debate on this issue, then I think it would be a mistake to make it a debate between the religious and the secular. The religious have no problem with restraining human action in this area. There is no religion that is not in favor of setting limits to scientific investigation, though religions will differ on just where the limits ought to be set. The interesting debate takes place within secular humanism, because it is in favor of *no* limits on human investigation, no limits on science.

You can't debate with the Catholic Church on whether embryos are really human or not. You can't debate with the Muslims, or the Jews, or the Hindus. These theological arguments go on endlessly. But the debate within secular humanism, which has not accepted the idea of limits, is a real debate. The whole point of secular humanism, as the quotation from Congressman Strickland suggests, is that there are no limits except the limits of science itself! But if there *are* limits, then secular humanists will really have to do a lot of rethinking. What do we do about genetic engineering—what do we engineer, what do we allow to be engineered? That sort of thing creates real problems for people whose answers to these questions are not shaped by their religion.

William Kristol: But one aspect of politics is that no one gets to decide what gets brought in and what doesn't. Religious people have views, and I could say that our religion—

Judaism—is particularly bad on these issues. Orthodox Jews have decided they love science. They have decided that God intended us to overcome all our disabilities and limitations. Obviously they observe certain other limitations. But in the area of genetic engineering, there's nothing so far that they seem particularly upset about.

Of course, one reason why this is a very interesting issue is that it forces people who aren't religious to think through the Baconian project and then decide whether there are limits that are intelligible on Baconian grounds or Kantian grounds or Aristotelian grounds or some other grounds. There have been intellectual efforts to lay this out by environmentalists and others who are skeptical about modern science or worried about the extent to which the new biotechnology is a commodification of human life. The other question is: To what degree do these issues lead secular humanists to rethink their humanism? But everyone's going to jump into the debate based on his own premises, and we'll see how it sorts out.

Hillel Fradkin: Even if the debate is within secular humanism, it seems to me that the religious participants in the debate will be performing a public service by elaborating those moral concerns that go beyond their own specific religious teaching. If one doesn't think certain forms of biotechnology are a good idea, there will be some grounds that seem more compelling than others within a democratic context. It seems to me that as the secular or humanistic underpinning of democracy has gotten thinner and thinner over the past two centuries, one of the things it has tended to rely on—without being willing to acknowledge it—is that the

religious teaching of this country has a certain democratic character. When the question comes up of who is going to decide these things—Are parents going to decide for children? Are children going to decide for parents? Are scientists going to decide for everyone?—it's going to run up against a democratic society in which religious principles now seem to play a bigger role rather than a smaller one.

Eric Cohen: A quick point about the role of religion in this debate, especially the contradictions of those who wish to keep democracy completely out of the laboratory. In the recent House debate on human cloning, Congressman James Greenwood of Pennsylvania, who sponsored the pro-research-cloning bill that ultimately failed, gave two speeches. In the first he declared that we can't ban all human cloning, that it's a separation-of-church-and-state issue, that exacting such a ban would bring the house of cardinals into science. In the second speech, he declared that God's dying wish was that we use our God-given intelligence to cure all human beings of their miseries.

Biotech leaders want everyone to believe that nothing they do infringes on religion—or religious principles—at all, that the two approaches to life are either totally separate or fully compatible. The speech I quoted earlier by Carl Feldbaum, chief lobbyist for the biotech industry, is actually called "Keeping the Faith," and it claims that the genetic revolution is "a method, not a faith." This was the first part of the speech. The gist of the second part was: "But I went and met with all these evangelical leaders who said that health is great and that we should plunge forward with our revolution." So the uses of reli-

gion in this debate—on all sides—are very interesting.

Nigel Cameron: It seems to me that the debate over embryonic stem cells and human cloning has been a kind of surrogate for a lot of other issues that are rarely raised but that underlie the whole question of biotechnology and what it means to be human. A number of broader political conflicts are being raised *in absentia*. I'd love to hear Bill Kristol and others reflect a little on how the political landscape will be reshaped by these issues that are lurking in the background of the current debate.

William Kristol: It's hard to say. Obviously there is some potential for political realignment as the biotech issues become weightier in our debates. I would say that the arguments between social conservatives and libertarians, both of whom have been mostly in the Republican Party, have often been more vehement than the debates between the right and the left. And in some ways parts of the right have more in common with parts of the left; for instance, the commercial-business right might have more in common with the somewhat libertarian-permissive left. Whether this could lead to a real realignment, a party realignment, or simply a realignment on certain sets of issues, is impossible to say.

This is a very unusual moment in American politics in a couple of respects. One had the feeling in 2000 that it was the end of a political era, and the events of September 11 only made this fact more clear. Bush v. Gore seemed to be a replay of the elections of 1996 and 1998, with mostly the same issues and virtually the same vote count in the congressional races. The country seemed evenly divided. One had the feeling that it was a very stale debate, and historically, when you get that moment of staleness combined with

apparent solidity, everything is about to break up. That is the classic end of a cycle, ready for a realigning election moment. The other thing that convinced me we were ready for a realignment is that everyone agreed there would never *be* a realignment, that "Red America, Blue America" was never going to change, that it would be 50/50 for the foreseeable future. Whenever there's that consensus, you know everything is about to blow up.

Perhaps the best comparison is 1960, when there was an incredibly boring election, very much like 2000, predicting none of the social and political upheavals that would shortly follow. An incumbent vice president, who wasn't a very attractive candidate, was trying to succeed a two-term president; his opponent was a young, callow challenger, who was more personally attractive but very inexperienced. The country was evenly divided, and the election was largely issueless—conventional issues, yes, but no big debates. If you had tried to predict what the 1960s would look like based on the 1960 election, you would have been unimaginably wrong. It was a contrary indicator. It marked the end of an era, not the beginning. I had the same feeling about the 2000 election, though of course one can never predict what issues might break things open and cause political, social, or cultural realignments.

We now have two sets of issues that are candidates for delivering such a jolt to the political system. One is obviously the war on terror, broadly construed. Here, I think, the divisions between the Reagan wing of the Republican Party and the cautious, pragmatic, don't-rock-the-boat wing of the Republican Party are perhaps more significant than the conventional distinctions between conservatives and liberals about how to fight this war. The real opponent of the Bush doctrine is likely to be Brent

Scowcroft, his father's National Security Advisor, not left-wingers on campus. When it comes to the Arab world and reform in the Arab world, there could be more commonality between liberals and certain conservatives than among traditional conservatives.

The other area that could fundamentally change the political landscape, I would argue, is the biogenetic revolution. These issues have the potential to really shake things up. On cloning in particular, there has been a fair amount of intelligent and interesting intellectual activity on the left. It hasn't yet manifested itself in real political support. Very few elected officials on the left have decided to go over on this issue. But such things often manifest themselves suddenly, and it could happen more suddenly than people think.

Hillel Fradkin: One connection between these two sets of issues is that the terrorist attacks have given people a sense, which they perhaps lacked during the 1990s, that there is in fact such a thing as human evil. They've come to see that not everything is benign down the road. This changes the climate of reflection on national issues. And there is an obvious connection when the questions before us—the biotech questions—have to do with what we might do to ourselves and to others, what kinds of control we might have over human life, even if our motives are good. When people start flying planes into our buildings, we realize that there's a tremendous amount about the human heart that we don't really know or understand. For at least a period of time, the focus in the country was on the frailty of human things, which had certainly not been a theme before September 11.

William Galston: This is, I think, the right debate at the right time, and I'm sure the Kristol-Cohen book is going

to contribute to it. I think it's important to frame the bioethics issues in a way that is fair to both sides and that doesn't make the argument too easy. I'm the son of a biologist. I grew up surrounded by scientists, and, as a matter of sociological observation, I hardly ever met a scientist who took the position that because truth is the ultimate good, anything and everything is permitted in the pursuit of truth. Today, virtually no scientist that I know or read takes that position. So the real debate is not over whether there should be limits on what scientists may do or what the scientific method permits in the pursuit of truth. The question is what those limits should be. If the opposition is characterized as advocating what might be called the utilitarianism of truth—namely, that the end of truth justifies any and all means in the pursuit of truth—then I think the fine intellectual texture of the debate may get lost. I don't think that's the way the debate is going to be structured, certainly not by the scientific community. It's not what they believe, and it would be politically ruinous to frame it that way, because the counterexamples are obvious.

Eric Cohen: There is always a danger of taking the dignity of science and medicine for granted, perhaps especially in the heat of a debate about limits. But that said, let me make a political observation about these debates. In 1994, the *Washington Post* published an editorial—in response to the NIH Human Embryo Research Panel's report—saying that using embryos in the way proposed, for research only, was an abomination. It said that abortion was one thing, but the creation of nascent human life solely for destructive research crosses a line we ought never to cross. Fast-forward to the current debate: On the day of the cloning vote in the House, the *Washington Post* published an editorial saying

that the total ban—which is really a ban on creation for destruction, the very thing pronounced abominable seven years earlier—that the ban itself is now the abomination. Now that the prospect of doing such research is here, in other words, we have to allow it to go forward.

This anecdote gets to the question of whether the limits that scientists and patient advocates embrace are limits that they really intend to respect on principle or simply bumps on the road toward doing the next thing. Surely, America is decent enough that at some point “no” will mean no and setting limits will mean actually observing them over the long term. At some point even very beneficial research will be so unsavory that we will not pursue it. And I am hopeful that even if we plunge full speed ahead with embryonic stem cell research, we will stop ourselves before we do with human beings what Advanced Cell Technology is doing with cows—developing fetuses to later stages and then killing them for spare parts. But if you really push hard, it is difficult to see the grounds upon which modern liberalism finds this or other uses of genetic control to be wrong. I think there are serious grounds—even for those who defend the right to abortion—to set real limits on biological experimentation. That said, it is difficult to argue that you can destroy something but you can't modify it, or that you can destroy it for any reason except potentially to save the lives of the diseased and afflicted.

William Kristol: One of the virtues of our book, I think, is that we capture the best arguments on both sides. My own view is that the utilitarianism of health rather than the utilitarianism of truth is what dominates the other side, and that the only limits they see as acceptable or necessary are usually liberal limits, such as the consent of human subjects in

research. There is a real shying away from those limits that are defended on larger ethical grounds and would be imposed regardless of whether the individuals involved have consented. It may well be that people would accept real moral limits, and it will be interesting to see exactly where those are. But I do believe that Eric is absolutely right historically.

There is a more recent example. Just a year ago, in making the case to President Bush for allowing funding for embryonic stem cell research, some congressmen and senators wrote a letter saying in effect, “Look, these embryos already exist in IVF clinics. They are going to be destroyed anyway. Of course we don't support creating embryos for the sake of destroying them, but how can you deny all the hopeful results of this research when these embryos are going to be destroyed anyway?” This was the most morally serious argument in defense of using so-called “spare” IVF embryos for stem cell research.

But now, just a year later, the same people are aggressively supporting the creation of embryos for the sake of destroying them. The distinctions have changed. I do think there's a certain bait-and-switch character to these pro-research arguments: the limit gets set up; the science moves ahead; and a year or five years later the original limit becomes inconvenient and is changed.

Now, there are obviously honest and honorable disagreements in this debate, and of course there is considerable resistance in the scientific community to using the force of law to govern research. Scientists don't like a bunch of know-nothing congressmen telling them what they can and cannot do in research labs, and doctors don't like know-nothing congressmen telling them what procedures they can and cannot use on their patients. Some of this resistance to government control is very

sensible. But the need for moral and legal limits on certain areas of scientific research is a serious question and a matter for real public debate.

This gets back to the point Hillel Fradkin made earlier about who governs. There are those of us who think conservatives sometimes contribute to a certain erosion of self-government in our democracy. We're very democratic in terms of freedom, but less democratic in the sense of governing ourselves as a community. And whether coming from the left or the right, one could argue that both modern liberalism and modern conservatism have been insufficiently concerned with this aspect of democracy, with what it means for citizens to govern themselves. One of the main arguments against legislative efforts will be not so much that a better legislative solution is available but that politicians should stay out of this sort of thing altogether. For this reason, too, forcing a debate will be useful for issues that are not simply or narrowly in the bioethics sphere.

Leon Kass: Two things—one on the politics and one on the question of religion and liberalism. First, I also think that the current debate on cloning legislation is of importance far beyond what it says about cloning, because it really does symbolically indicate that this is a subject for deliberation and self-government. For the first time it tries to place the burden of proof on the proponents of research to argue why we should go forward with something that has not yet happened, rather than on those people who are trying to catch up when the train is running very far ahead. I think that for 90 percent of the country to be hostile to a proposed scientific endeavor is unique. Nobody except a few nuts is eagerly embracing cloning-to-produce-children. The industry doesn't have a great interest in cloning for repro-

duction, and the good that can be done by it is very limited.

But with those things that are coming where the good and the bad are much more intermixed, I wonder whether legislation—and banning in particular—is a reasonable option. As far as I can see, we don't now have the kind of regulatory institutions we need to address these kinds of questions. We're very good on the safety questions, we're good on the consent questions, but we're not good on questions about the degradation and dehumanization of human life.

On the theoretical side, I want to respond in part to Irving Kristol and join in with those who suggest that the religious intuitions are germane here and maybe even crucial for the education of secular humanism. It seems to me that we're very good at considering threats to liberty and equality. But the issue really is the threat to human dignity, which is not an easy thing to define. If you look philosophically at where the West's idea of human dignity has received its greatest support in modern times, it has been from Kant—which is not the doctrine one really needs here, given that Kant largely surrendered the significance of human embodiment. What we seem to get from Kant is a kind of dignity that resides in autonomy, which is part of the problem we face, even if Kant himself offered a much richer notion of autonomy than is bandied about at the moment.

But what we need is an account of the dignity of things that are not ordinarily regarded as dignified. For example: Why should we think it is more dignified for a child to come into the world through the birth canal rather than coming out of a bottle in a laboratory? The answer has to do with the dignity and even the sanctification of ordinary existence, the dignity of real life and especially those dimensions of being human

that are not mediated by technology. It also has something to do with the dignity of the human body, and more precisely, what it means to be embodied beings. The teacher of these things in the West, at least the most influential teacher, seems to be scriptural religion, with its doctrine of human beings made in the image of God. This means respecting *everything* about human beings that is made in the image of God—not just the mind, not just the reasoning, not just the will. In a certain way, the left's critique of the commodification of the body is on the right track. Yes, it is dogmatically anti-capitalist, but there is an intuition that the body is not property, an intuition closer to what is needed here than a lot of other things.

William Kristol: Just a word on the notion that this isn't entirely a legislative matter. Any regulatory scheme will have to be based on some legislation. Just as the Food and Drug Act set up the FDA and the Civil Rights Act set up a huge regulatory system, there will have to be a legislative determination that human dignity requires A, B, or C, or that some group has to decide on the basis of the following criteria that certain things should or should not be permitted. There will have to be a legislative debate, and I think legislative debates are always provoked by particular choices, which often lead to broader resolutions and reforms.

The matter of thinking of the body as property is clearly a promising avenue for debating these things. We now have a situation where a 5-to-4 Supreme Court decision in 1980—and the progress of research since then—has led us pretty far down the road toward patenting developing human life. This is something that could be revisited by the courts, I suppose, but it would be more appropriate to revisit it in a legislative debate. Patenting could become a

huge issue in the years ahead, perhaps in some ways a better issue than cloning, if you really want to get at the heart of what is wrong with certain kinds of biological experimentation. But the cloning fight is a good fight to have now, because we don't have much hope of limiting other technologies down the road if we can't ban human cloning.

Hillel Fradkin: Bill Galston, did you want to say something about this?

William Galston: Only to agree with Leon, as I usually do. A very sensible political theorist—a man of the left, Michael Walzer—wrote a book years ago called *Spheres of Justice*. One of the most important sections of this book has to do with what he calls “blocked exchanges.” It's wrong to think of different spheres of human existence as made up of convertible currencies, Walzer says. There are some things that simply cannot be converted into other things at any exchange rate. This system—a more complicated one than the Kantian system—rests on certain intuitions about what can and can't be put up for grabs in particular circumstances. I think that by thinking through those intuitions and trying to develop a more general account of what unites them, we can actually make a lot of progress.

It's also fascinating to try to think in a non-polemical way about the impact of the slavery debate and its constitutional embodiment: not only are there things that others can't do to us, but there are also things that we can't do to ourselves—for instance, we're not permitted to sell ourselves into slavery. If that applies to all of us, then what sorts of limits should there be regarding the use of *parts* of us rather than the whole of us? Some people on the British left argue against the commodification of blood. I think that's a close question. Is it morally permissible to sell one's blood? For

myself, I don't have a clear sense that this is a moral mistake, but if you go much further down that road it becomes a pretty obvious moral mistake. Then the question is: Is this simply a matter of degree?

Hillel Fradkin: It does seem to me—with regard to cloning and perhaps more generally commodification—that the moral and political experience of this country with slavery gives these questions of human dignity a currency for Americans that they might not have in other liberal democratic societies. This experience was brought to bear in the abortion debate, but it somehow did not have a very big impact. Perhaps the impact will be greater in the biotech debate, where novel forms of control by some human beings over others might one day be possible.

Eric Cohen: Let me try to get at this in a different way. I wonder whether the biotechnology debate—especially over genetic or biological enhancements, but also over stem cells and biomedical progress—is in a fundamental way about the meaning of equality and America's idea of equality. Why do some people get sick and other people don't? Why are some born with the capacity to be Olympic athletes and others aren't? Those who oppose biological enhancement often argue, I think rightly, that the dignity of an Olympic runner would be deprived if that person were genetically or biologically enhanced. But one has to wonder about the fact that we're appealing to human *excellence* to make the case against human *enhancement*. We're looking to the best among us—the most gifted and most talented—to argue that we should not make ourselves artificially better. Then we have to remember that most people—no matter how hard they work—will never have the genetic equipment to be Olympic runners. These natural

inequalities, which seem inherent to being and staying human, are even more pointed when it's a matter not simply of *mediocrity* but of *disease*; when one thinks of sick or dying children; when one comes to believe (understandably, but perhaps falsely) that such diseases are an *injustice* that we have an obligation to correct by any means possible.

To get back to the question of religion: Perhaps the reason many Christians are so good on the biotech issues, so willing to oppose aborting “imperfects” or destroying embryos in the pursuit of health, is that their faith provides good answers to the problems of human limitation, suffering, and mortality. Christianity teaches that there is an inherent dignity that comes with creation, a dignity that all human beings possess at all stages of life, simply by virtue of existence. And while people may suffer in *this* life—with disability, disease, imperfection, and death—they will be saved in the next one. Secular humanism has a more difficult problem trying to explain why people are born in some ways profoundly unequal; or why, later in life, we'll all be unequal to the vigorous self we once were. Without such answers, the temptation to become Social Darwinists or seekers of eternal youth is very great.

The American answer to these existential questions is perhaps the greatest dilemma we will face in the years ahead. The Declaration says that “all men are created equal,” but in some ways this is clearly not so, and in some ways the American regime doesn't have a satisfying answer to the question of why it isn't. The ancients had excellence; the Jews and the Christians have God. Maybe biotechnology is our modern answer or solution. Maybe we're going to make ourselves biologically more equal—especially more equal to pursue happiness. This seems to be the guiding sentiment of humani-

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tarians who embrace morally troubling research like embryonic stem cells. They want children born with grave diseases to live full lives—like everybody else. They want justice where fate or genes or both has denied it.

But this leaves many questions unanswered—such as the meaning of pursuing equality by a kind of biological force; such as the relationship between those who hold this power and those who seek it; such as what it means to heal the sick and the needy by exploiting human embryos, which many people believe to be the weakest and neediest forms of human life. In the end, what the new biotechnology means for equality is an open question; it depends on the kind of equality we seek.

Irving Kristol: We shouldn't just limit ourselves to political philosophers in shaping how the country thinks about these things. The best argument against slavery was by Harriet Beecher Stowe. If you look at the arguments over slavery, you find that no definitive rational argument was

ever really made. The Greeks were not stupid, nor were the Romans. If there had been a really good argument against slavery that once enunciated would be utterly convincing, they would have noticed it. You do rely sometimes on intuitions, and if you are looking for a moral intuition in this debate, Aldous Huxley is on our side. If you want to make an argument for young people, you have to draw out their moral intuitions, and Aldous Huxley had a very good way of doing it. In fact, I think it's just about the only way of doing it. Dialectics gets you only so far.

William Kristol: But it's also not clear that Stowe really convinced anyone of anything. We had a huge civil war one year after she wrote the book, and Lincoln had to defeat the South. There were a lot of people in the North who didn't want to make the Civil War about morality. I agree that imaginative literature is crucial, especially in an area like this when we're talking about the future. That is why Huxley is so good and C.S. Lewis is so good. You need to paint

a picture of the future that is legitimately off-putting, one that gets people to think hard about what they want to shy away from and where they have to draw lines. Stowe could appeal directly to revulsion against a current situation; what we're facing with the Brave New World issues is something that might happen in the future.

In a democracy you move from moral intuition to a deeper understanding of public questions through political debate. That was certainly the case with Lincoln. We could of course use a Harriet Beecher Stowe, but we could also use a Lincoln, and then our problems might be solved.

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THE CENTER AND "CONVERSATIONS"

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