

# Genomic emancipation contra eugenics

Tsvi Benson-Tilsen

18 February 2026

## Contents

Introduction	1
Synopsis	2
Terminology	4
What is eugenics?	4
<b>The variegation of eugenic ideology</b>	<b>4</b>
Politics . . . . .	5
Scientific understandings . . . . .	5
Implementation policies . . . . .	5
Justifications, motives, and goals . . . . .	6
<b>The goals of eugenics</b>	<b>6</b>
Some basic moral elements of eugenic ideologies	6
The Eugenical Maxim as the shared moral core of eugenics?	7
<b>Euphemics</b>	<b>9</b>
Avoiding the ideological engines of eugenics	9
The mindsets that underlie eugenic ideologies	10
How eugenic mindsets flow from the Eugenical Maxim	14
Aside: When people have different discourse goals	16
<b>Comparison of eugenics vs. genomic emancipation</b>	<b>17</b>
Overlaps . . . . .	17
Disoverlaps that border the overlaps . . . . .	18
Disoverlaps of core ideology . . . . .	19
Disoverlaps of concrete aims . . . . .	19
Disoverlaps of mindset . . . . .	20
<b>Some practical norms for good development of reprogenetics</b>	<b>21</b>

## Introduction

*Reprogenetics* refers to biotechnological tools used to affect the genes of a future child. How can society develop and use reprogenetic technologies in a way that ends up going well?

This essay investigates the history and nature of historical eugenic ideologies. I'll extract some lessons about how society can think about reprogenetics differently from the eugenicists, so that we don't trend towards the sort of abuses that were historically justified by eugenics.

(This essay is written largely as I thought and investigated, except that I wrote the synopsis last. So the ideas are presented approximately in order of development, rather than logically. If you'd like a short thing to read, read the synopsis.)

## Synopsis

Some technologies are being developed that will make it possible to affect what genes a future child receives. These technologies include polygenic embryo selection, embryo editing, and other more advanced technologies<sup>1</sup>. Regarding these technologies, we ask:

*Can we decide to not abuse these tools?*

And:

*How can we decide to not abuse these tools?*

In other words, there is an open problem: What ideology should we have around the development and use of reprogenetics?

An ideology called “eugenics” arose in the late 19th century, ascended to power in much of the developed world in the first half of the 20th century, and then slid into ignominy after the Second World War and the genocidal horrors of Nazi Germany. Eugenic ideology motivated cruel state policies such as pressured or forced sterilization, euthanasia, and racial discrimination, as well as invasive social pressures on people’s private reproductive choices.

Eugenics was the closest thing that has existed to a pervasive ideology based around somehow intervening on human reproduction. Since eugenics went almost maximally poorly for society, it raises the question of how to avoid outcomes like that. The strategy I take here is, coarsely speaking:

- Understand the core wrong ideological engines of eugenics—especially the ones that led to abusive policies.
- Negate those ideological engines.
- Incorporate those negations into a positive alternative ideology.

A bit more precisely, the goal is to construct an ideology that can structure how society relates to reprogenetics, so that the benefits of reprogenetics are realized without risking the abuses of historical eugenics. To do so, I try to construct bulwarks, within an alternative ideology, against each of the wrong ideological engines that would take society in the direction of enacting eugenic abuses. (This is probably not actually something that can be accomplished with perfect confidence and coverage; how much it can be accomplished, quantitatively, remains to be seen.)

It’s tempting to make a shallow analysis of historical eugenics and what was wrong with it, and be done with the issue. For example, we could simply say that historical eugenics was coercive, and coercion is what made it bad. To negate this, we will instead subscribe to *non-coercive* eugenics. Problem solved? As another example, historical eugenics was often *negative*, i.e. it involved suppressing some people’s reproduction; we could instead subscribe to only *positive* eugenics, which only promotes reproduction (perhaps selectively) and which therefore involves less hostility.

However, neither of these could be called a moral or ideological core of eugenics. For the most part, eugenicists did not *specifically set out* to be coercive or to suppress reproduction (though some of them probably *did*, in some sense, set out with that goal). Rather, they set out with various other goals, such as purifying the gene pool of disease, reducing the burden on society of caring for the ill, or bringing about a racial utopia. The strength of their various justifications *proved in the end* to be enough to enact abusive policies. Furthermore, there were eugenic policies that were non-coercive, positive, or both, while still being abusive and still being an integral part of an ideology producing other abusive policies. (See the section “Some basic moral elements of eugenic ideologies”.)

In fact, I’ve found eugenics to be difficult to characterize in a simple and comprehensive way. Eugenic ideologies were quite pervasive, showing up in the Anglosphere, in Europe, in South America, and in some places in Asia. As a correlate of their pervasiveness, eugenic ideologies were highly variegated. They came in many forms: different goals, different implementations, different associated politics (from reactionary

<sup>1</sup>Benson-Tilsen, Tsvi. “Methods for Strong Human Germline Engineering.” Preprint, Figshare, February 6, 2026. <https://doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.31286311.v1>.

to progressive), and based on different scientific understandings (from Weismann vs. Lamarck, to Pearson vs. Mendel). (See the sections “[The variegation of eugenic ideology](#)” and “[The goals of eugenics](#)”.)

That said, I think there is something like an ideological core of eugenics. Roughly speaking, the core idea can be stated like this:

There are Good traits and Bad traits that a child could be born with. These traits impact everyone, so they’re very important. Therefore, we should make sure that future children are born with Good traits and not with Bad traits.

(See the section “[The Eugenical Maxim as the shared moral core of eugenics?](#)”.)

From this core idea of Good and Bad traits, other elements of historical eugenics logically flow. If you believe in a single notion of Good traits, you might tend to justify (over)confidently applying that criterion to everyone. You might believe, as a correlate, that there are Good and Bad people, or families, or even races (the ones who tend to have more Good or Bad traits, respectively). You’d probably view non-standard individual genomic choices as deviant, affording state-enforced prohibition; you might even view the Goodness of traits to be a state interest that’s so compelling it can even justify blunt coercion such as forced sterilization of undesirables. (See “[The mindsets that underlie eugenic ideologies](#)” and “[How eugenic mindsets flow from the Eugenical Maxim](#)” below.)

We can approximately negate this idea of Good and Bad traits. Then we can take that negation, and incorporate it into an alternative ideology around reprotogenetics. For example, we can incorporate it into my proposed alternative (which I call “[Genomic Emancipation](#)”<sup>2</sup>), as follows:

There aren’t Good and Bad traits that can be decided on by collective consensus. Instead of imposing a consensus idea of Good traits on future children, parents should be empowered to autonomously make genomic choices on behalf of their own future children.

Since genomic emancipation negates the core idea of eugenics, it is opposed to eugenics. (See the section “[Comparison of eugenics vs. genomic emancipation](#)” below.) For example:

- genomic emancipation supports [the principle of genomic liberty](#)<sup>3</sup>, contra eugenics;
- genomic emancipation abhors the centralization of genomic choice-making, contra eugenics;
- genomic emancipation respects the intensely private nature of reproduction and genomic choices, contra eugenics;
- and genomic emancipation embraces positive-sum thinking and solutionism, contra eugenics.

However, just negating the core idea isn’t enough of a bulwark against eugenic ideologies. As an ongoing project, we want to have detailed policies, ethical rules, and ideals that provide guidance for people interacting with reprotogenetics. These policies, rules, and ideals should steer society away from mindsets that contribute to eugenic abuses, and should provide legible norms that society can coordinate to enforce. Some ideas are listed below in “[Some practical norms for good development of reprotogenetics](#)”. For example:

- **Pluralism** about different visions of the good life.
- **Distrust of the state** to intervene in reproduction, on the basis that disinterested parties shouldn’t be allowed to impose reproductive choices on people.
- **Minimizing the soft eugenics of social stigma**, e.g. through **unbiased genetic counseling**, **genetic nondiscrimination** rules, and rules about **privacy of reprotogenetics services**.
- **Careful, independent genomic choice-making by parents**.
- **Maintaining recourse** so that a world with reprotogenetics doesn’t silence certain types of people or certain values; e.g. children whose parents used reprotogenetics should be heeded especially carefully.
- **Minimizing centralized control or ownership over reprotogenetics**, e.g. by making science and technology open and licensable, and through anti-trust laws.
- As a culture, generally **not being dismissive about concerns** around reprotogenetics, being **non-Teamist**, and meditating on key values such as **pluralism** and **positive-sum thinking**.

<sup>2</sup>Benson-Tilsen, Tsvi. “Genomic Emancipation.” Preprint, Figshare, February 7, 2026. <https://doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.31286647.v1>.

<sup>3</sup>Benson-Tilsen, Tsvi. “The Principle of Genomic Liberty.” Preprint, Figshare, February 7, 2026. <https://doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.31286485.v1>.

# Terminology

- Eugenics: an ideology based around controlling human reproduction in order to improve the traits of the population.
- Historical eugenics: a large-scale social movement, at its peak in the first half of the 20th century in much of the world, that led to the implementation of many policies justified by eugenics.
- Reprogenetics: any technology that can affect the genes of a future child, e.g. polygenic embryo screening or embryo editing. As a set of technologies, reprogenetics is mainly a value-neutral tool. It lends itself to relatively more humane uses compared to historical eugenics, but it could be used well or poorly, for good or bad ends.
- Genomic emancipation: an ideology based around empowering parents to make genomic choices on behalf of their own future children, in order to emancipate those children.

## What is eugenics?

The history of eugenics is well-documented, and it is large and I'm not well-informed about it, so I won't go into much detail here. To fix in our minds a picture of how eugenics has historically been applied that's hopefully clear enough for our purposes, the next two sections will describe some concrete aspects of the wide range of eugenic ideologies. Several of the subsequent sections will summarize some aspects of historical eugenics, especially focusing on its underlying ideological engines.

For a concise and informative history of eugenics, see Diane Paul's 1995 book "Controlling Human Heredity: 1865 to the Present"<sup>4</sup>. For a good overview of the debate around "liberal eugenics", see the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy article "[Eugenics](#)" (written by Sara Goering (2014) and revised by Inmaculada de Melo-Martin (2022))<sup>5</sup>.

See also Kevles (1995)<sup>6</sup> and the wikipedia articles on "[Eugenics](#)" and "[History of eugenics](#)".

## The variegation of eugenic ideology

Eugenic ideology was pervasive in the first half of the 20th century. It had strong support in the societies of much of the Anglophone and European world, and has been seen in some form in countries ranging from China and Russia to Canada, Brazil, and India<sup>7</sup>. It enjoyed wide uptake among most sectors of society: among the subscribers to some form of eugenic ideology could be found many scientists, other academics, professionals, elites, workers, peasants, Protestant clergy, and judges. Hundreds of universities offered courses on eugenics, and social organizers ran programs aimed at promoting or suppressing reproduction within and between various groups of people. Many actual and proposed state policies carried eugenic justifications, including racist immigration restrictions as well as hundreds of thousands of forced or pressured sterilizations. These aggressive eugenic policies culminated in the horrors of Nazi Germany, but did not at all start or end there.

While there were practical objections to specific eugenic policies, e.g. disputes about the scientific basis for their effectiveness, there was little pushback against the *morality* of eugenic ideology. A few exceptions: The Catholic Church objected to sterilization due to the sanctity of procreation, Britain's Labour Party objected to eugenics because it would target the working class, and liberal individualists objected to eugenic infringements on autonomy<sup>8</sup>.

A correlate of the pervasiveness of eugenic ideology was the extreme variegation of the ideologies held by eugenicists. As described in the following subsections, eugenicists had a wide range of political views, scientific understandings, implementation policies, and eugenic goals.

<sup>4</sup>Paul, Diane B. *Controlling Human Heredity: 1865 to the Present. Control of Nature*. Humanities Press, 1995. <http://www.h-net.org/review/hrev-a0a3o2-aa>.

<sup>5</sup>Melo-Martin, Inmaculada de, and Sara Goering. "Eugenics." In *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Summer 2022, edited by Edward N. Zalta. Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2022. <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2022/entries/eugenics/>.

<sup>6</sup>Kevles, Daniel J. *In the Name of Eugenics: Genetics and the Uses of Human Heredity*. First Harvard University Press paperback edition. Harvard University Press, 1995. <https://search.worldcat.org/title/32430452>.

<sup>7</sup>Dikötter, Frank. "Race Culture: Recent Perspectives on the History of Eugenics." *The American Historical Review* 103, no. 2 (1998): 467–78. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2649776>.

<sup>8</sup>Paul, Diane B. *Controlling Human Heredity: 1865 to the Present. Control of Nature*. Humanities Press, 1995. <http://www.h-net.org/review/hrev-a0a3o2-aa>.

## Politics

There were eugenicists who were reactionary, conservative, progressive, socialist, technocratic, aristocratic, populist, or utopian. Opinions on eugenic policy changed not just with scientific understanding, but also with political and economic shifts.

## Scientific understandings

- There was popular support for and participation in eugenics, as well as scientifically literate support.
- The scientific understanding of heredity evolved greatly over the course of the second half of the 19th century and first half of the 20th century. Darwin opened up the field; Lamarckian environmental inheritance opposed Weismann's insight into the germ plasm; and Pearson's quantitative biometrics, stemming from Galton's investigations into heredity, butted against Mendelian patterns of discrete inheritance. Throughout that whole course of investigation, there were eugenicists, including ones who were scientifically literate and up-to-date.
- Sometimes eugenicists updated their beliefs and policy recommendations. Sometimes they clung to old or renewed illusions (e.g. as in the case of neo-Lamarckian eugenics in France and other places<sup>9</sup>).
- Sometimes, they apparently updated their beliefs but not their policies. A eugenicist might, for example, advocate for forced sterilization. At first that policy was justified by the need to protect the gene pool. Later, when Mendelian heredity and the prevalence of hidden recessive genes showed that such policies would have negligible effects on the overall gene pool, that same policy was instead justified in terms of the societal burden of undesirable offspring.
- Race science and mythology took a greater or lesser place in eugenic ideologies. Madison Grant wrote detailed and fanciful racial breakdowns of European peoples, and pushed “Nordic” supremacy<sup>10</sup>; on the other hand, for example the eugenics of J.B.S. Haldane (a Communist), at least later in his career, was not focused on racial differences<sup>11</sup>.

## Implementation policies

- These concrete social and governmental policies were implemented in the first half of the 1900s, to different degrees in different places:
  - social pressure against reproduction of undesirables, and social reward for “better babies”
  - racist, classist, or ableist pressure towards birth control, restriction of marriage, and segregation into institutions
  - racist immigration restrictions
  - anti-race-mixing laws
  - voluntary, pressured, or coerced castration or sterilization (hundreds of thousands), for many conditions (sickness, crime, mental illness, feebleness, long-term unemployment)
  - pressure and government resources for breeding of desirables
  - abortion bans for desirables
  - infanticide / euthanasia / murder
  - deportation
  - genocide (cultural destruction and reservations in colonized lands; concentration camps, labor camps, death camps, mass murder, killing squads in Nazi Germany)
- These policies were sometimes proposed, but as far as I know not widely implemented (outside of Nazi Germany):
  - class maintenance by anti-mixing laws
  - execution of undesirable children
  - restricting welfare and medical care for undesirables (maybe in Sweden too)
  - forced or pressured insemination
  - breeding for different traits for different social classes
  - encouraging citizens to report to the state any undesirables having children

<sup>9</sup>Dikötter, Frank. “Race Culture: Recent Perspectives on the History of Eugenics.” *The American Historical Review* 103, no. 2 (1998): 467–78. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2649776>.

<sup>10</sup>Grant, Madison. *The Passing of the Great Race, or: The Racial Basis of European History*. Charles Scribner's Sons, 1916. <http://uproxy.library.dcu.ie/login?url=http://books.scholarsportal.info/viewdoc.html?id=/ebooks/oca10/28/passingofgreatr00gran>.

<sup>11</sup>Charlesworth, Brian. “A Dominant Character: The Radical Science and Restless Politics of J. B. S. Haldane Samanth Subramanian New York, NY: W. W. Norton, 2019.” *The FASEB Journal* 35, no. 11 (2021): e21984. <https://doi.org/10.1096/fj.202101533>.

- There were even, in some cases, policies that could (broadly speaking) be construed as eugenics, that were directly contradictory to other such policies. For example, Canada might have tried to prevent race-mixing between Aboriginals and Europeans. Instead, it instituted various policies generally aimed at destroying Aboriginal life, *including via assimilation*. Assimilation would be dysgenic and undesirable from the more central racist eugenicist point of view of a Grant or a Stoddard. But still, it is a government forcibly implementing racially discriminatory policies, including segregation and coercive sterilization, aimed at controlling the reproduction of its subjects<sup>12</sup>.

## Justifications, motives, and goals

See the next subsection.

## The goals of eugenics

In trying to understand what eugenics is, and how to avoid bad outcomes related to genetics and reproduction, we want to understand what the underlying driving forces behind eugenics are. Eugenics, as it actually played out, is presumably the result of some mixture of different social attitudes, socioeconomic and political conditions, scientific knowledge and tools, and other conditions; and this mixture varies in different places and times; so a full causal fault analysis would be difficult and complicated.

But as one step, we can at least aim to understand the *goals* behind eugenics, and maybe hope to thus find a fulcrum of eugenic ideologies and policies. However, at least at first blush, the goals for eugenics (both implicit and explicit) are quite variegated as well. They include:

- Preventing the deterioration of society, humanity, or a specific “superior” race (e.g. Nordic, Aryan, Anglo-Saxon).
- Preventing race-mixing.
- Preventing “inferior” (e.g. foreign, indigenous, visibly distinct, culturally distinct) races from swamping the higher races through higher fertility or immigration.
- Perfecting humanity or a race.
- Suppressing or eliminating specific “inferior” races (e.g. Jewish, Black, Asian, Native American) or lower classes of people (workers, the poor, nomads).
- Creating a beautiful future founded on a good, perfected, purified gene pool.
- Sparing the immediate unborn of undesirable traits such as illness, mental illness, weakness, feeble-mindedness, poverty, immorality, addiction, sexual promiscuity, laziness, or criminality.
- Sparing the immediate unborn of being raised by people with those undesirable traits.
- Avoiding the societal burden of dealing with people with those undesirable traits, e.g. damage they cause or the financial burden of giving them medical care or shelter.
- Avoiding being swamped by people or races who have those undesirable traits and low social value, but who have high fertility.
- Avoiding the societal burden of genes for those undesirable traits spreading through the gene pool.
- Gaining the societal benefit of people with desirable traits, e.g. work output, leadership, or enjoyable beauty.
- Gaining the societal benefit of genes for those desirable traits spreading.
- Having a stronger population for international competition or conflict.
- Restoring the purifying effect of the natural selection that would happen in the absence of peace, medicine, and social welfare.
- Creating or maintaining social classes, each with heritable traits appropriate to that class’s role in society.
- Suppressing or eliminating certain cultures living in a country (e.g. destroying an indigenous People as a People).

## Some basic moral elements of eugenic ideologies

One wonders: What even is eugenics, if eugenic ideologies can have this variety of political associations, scientific bases, implementations, and motives? Is eugenics one thing, or just a family resemblance of different ideologies having something to do with genetics and reproduction, held by a variety of people from

<sup>12</sup>Stote, Karen. “Assimilation • Encyclopedia • Eugenics Archive.” Accessed February 2, 2026. <https://www.eugenicsarchive.ca/encyclopedia?id=535eea727095aa000000020e&view=reader>.

different countries, ethnicities, and sectors of society? Is there a core element of how eugenics is justified that is morally objectionable, so that other practices that avoid that core are morally acceptable?

Historical eugenics was very often coercive, implementing policies using force. Does this define eugenics, so that a policy that is non-coercive is not objectionable as eugenics? Or is eugenics defined as negative, so that a policy could be acceptable as long as it does not involve *suppressing* specific people's reproduction, but only *encouraging*? Imagine the government started paying specifically light-skinned people to have children. This would be non-coercive (as usually understood, leaving aside that it involves taxation), and it would be strictly positive (incentivizing specific people to reproduce more). But it would also be wrong and eugenicsy.

Is it eugenics exactly when the government does anything involved with influencing reproduction? But if there were a huge social movement to socially pressure poor people or dark-skinned people into not having kids, that would also be wrong and eugenicsy. Is eugenics about Social Darwinism, racism, or race wars? These orientations played a central role in many eugenic abuses, but supremacism in some form is not the least bit unusual, and people made plenty of progressive and race-neutral arguments for eugenic policies.

Of course, these elements, such as coercion and racism, are important to understanding eugenics. They are central drivers of the worst historical abuses. And, although they don't offer an exact comprehensive definition of eugenics, they do show some of the main moral structure of eugenics. For example:

- **Negative eugenics** (suppressing reproduction) will tend to be coercive, as it more acutely infringes on personal liberties.
- **Population-level goals** (such as changing the average or prevailing traits) will tend to justify negative as well as positive eugenics, and justify heavier-handed policies, because to affect a whole population takes a large and broad force.
- **Social benefits** (removing burden and increasing benefit gained from future people) will tend to apparently justify state coercion and override liberal principles, since the large benefit accrued to all of society is held up against the ethical cost of infringement on a single person's autonomy.
- **Paternalistic or authoritarian attitudes** tend to justify state-enforced coercive eugenics and strong social stigmas.
- **Extreme racial or progressive motives** will tend to involve utopian visions.
- **Utopian visions** can motivate aggressive state-enacted violence and coercive eugenics.

But, although these elements help parse eugenic ideologies, they don't give a single, clear, underlying core ideology that generates the whole eugenic perspective and policy set.

## The Eugenical Maxim as the shared moral core of eugenics?

In trying to find a moral core of eugenics, one tack we could take is to focus on the state. Most of the worst actual actions taken under the banner of eugenics were taken by a state. However, going one level deeper to find the motivations for state eugenics, we find a variety of motivations, which mainly only look the same in that they are pursued through state eugenics.

Abstracting away from a concrete state, we can look more generally at the collectivity of society. Historical eugenics is motivated by some kind of collectivity—in a few different flavors, such as:

- goals *about* the collective (e.g. a small cadre esoterically scheming to “purify” the gene pool),
- goals *from* the collective (e.g. society collectively being unwilling to allow certain undesirables to procreate and add to social burden),
- goals *on behalf of* the collective (e.g. a domineering technocrat wielding state power to control reproduction, with justifications in terms of social benefit).

The general idea of collectivity is important, and I think it's correct to draw from the above description a conclusion, *inter alia*, that goals specifically about reproduction should not be pooled into collective goals unless absolutely necessary. But ultimately “something to do with collectivity and intention” is a bit of a conceptual grab-bag. It's vague, and in particular it doesn't explain what, if anything, would be wrong with eugenics; in general, we rightly invest in collectivity all the time.

An idea I've entertained is that, in the end, it all comes back to the name: “eu-genics”, good-birth / well-born. According to this proposal, eugenics essentially means something like the belief that there is a single universal notion of Good traits that should be passed on to future children. In other words, a eugenicsist is someone who subscribes to the following “Eugenical Maxim”:

For each future child, there are traits that are Good for that child to be born with, and traits that are Bad for that child to be born with. Since there are so many future children, the Goodness and Badness of the traits of future children is multiplied many-fold, and therefore in aggregate those traits are extremely important. **THEREFORE**, we should as much as possible use available tools to give future children Good traits and not Bad traits.

The variables in the Eugenical Maxim have differed between different eugenicists: which particular traits are considered Good or Bad, for whom exactly the traits are supposed to be Good or Bad, who is “we”, what tools are available, and what “as much as possible” means (e.g. what other ethics to override). But I think that:

1. All eugenicists would subscribe to the Eugenical Maxim (with some setting of those variables).
2. All centrally eugenic activity flows from (is motivated, justified, and designed by) the Eugenical Maxim.
3. A central poison of historical eugenic ideologies is subtly contained in the notion of “Good” and “Bad” traits, as they are applied in the “Therefore”. If it is “we” who are giving children “Good” and not “Bad” traits, then it is “we” (whoever we are) who are deciding what traits to give to future children. Whoever subscribes to the Eugenical Maxim is implicitly saying “When it comes to judgements of which traits are Good and Bad, the judgements that will be made by me or my group (my social class, my scientific community, my state, my government department, my political faction, my ideological strain) will be the right judgements, and they should be implemented (for everyone)”. This is an incorrect proposition and leads to the evils of historical eugenics.

This may be a bit confusing because, while I claim to not be a eugenicist, of course I do have plenty of opinions about what traits are good and bad. Let the children be at least reasonably capable in most or all normal physical and mental ways, and as free from disease and aging as possible, and of high intelligence and moral goodness and wisdom and kindness and diligence and creativity. In fact my position is indeed a bit strange. I would say “Yes, there are good and bad traits; and I would even say that these traits are even objectively good or objectively bad (with plenty of caveats); but the fact that there are objectively good and objectively bad traits *is not what justifies the use of reprogenetics*. Instead, what justifies the use of reprogenetics is emancipation—empowering future children in absentia, and empowering parents on behalf of their future children, to make genomic choices autonomously for themselves.” (See [“Genomic Emancipation”<sup>13</sup>](#).)

To put it another way: Often, when the question of reprogenetic technology comes up, people will ask: “But who decides what ‘good’ means?”. A eugenicist says “Someone”, and a genomic emancipationist says “No one”—which is to say, “No *one* person or body would decide; instead each person decides for themselves, or as in the case of future children who cannot decide for themselves, the next best steward—the parents—decide on behalf of their future children as best they can.”

Why can’t we make this definition of eugenics simpler, and just say that eugenics means any belief of the form “Someone’s notion of good and bad traits should be imposed on someone”? This is conceptually simpler. And indeed, some people do use this as a definition of eugenics, and on that basis they critique even liberal, pluralistic, autonomous, personal, emancipatory uses of reprogenetics, saying: “Even if it’s just two parents imposing their notion of good and bad traits on their own future child, that’s too much imposition, too much control, and it’s immoral.”

The reason that the narrower definition is interesting to me is that it seems to more cleanly divide bad policy about reproduction in genetics (as demonstrated in historical eugenics) from good policy (as hopefully demonstrated in genomic emancipation and good reprogenetics). It could therefore offer a more clear guide to getting good societal outcomes from reprogenetics and avoiding the repetition of historical eugenic abuses.

In other words, the Eugenical Maxim is based on the idea that there’s such a thing as Good and Bad genes or traits, where Good and Bad means “what we should implement”. From the inside, it feels like just believing that there’s such a thing as Good traits, because of course if there are Good traits then children should be given Good traits. Historical eugenicists set out to figure out which traits Are Good, and set out to make future children (as many as possible) have Good traits. They seemed to expect to find wide enough consensus about which traits Are Good and that those traits should be given to future children. In doing so, the eugenicists acted on the Eugenical Maxim.

To instead think in terms of genomic emancipation, I still want to know what traits are Good and Bad (with various caveats). But I don’t identify that with “what traits people should have”. As a moral question,

---

<sup>13</sup>Benson-Tilsen, Tsvi. “Genomic Emancipation.” Preprint, Figshare, February 7, 2026. <https://doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.31286647.v1>.

reprogenetic choices should be imposed upon a person *as little as possible*; and only imposed by those who are as close as possible to that person and who are as intrinsically concerned as possible with that person's flourishing; but *no less than necessary* to accrue the clear benefits to that person by humane genomic choices made in accordance with their will or their best steward's will. The state can't be trusted with any say in reprogenetic choices beyond the most extreme cases (see exceptions listed in "[The principle of genomic liberty](#)"<sup>14</sup>); clinics should follow their own ethics around the edge, but should mainly aim to neutrally and honestly inform and empower parents; and parents should try to do what's best for their future child according to what that future child would want.

## Euphemics

To explain with an analogy, we can imagine an ideology called "euphemics". A Euphemicist believes that there are Good things to say and Bad things to say. Since there are Good things to say and Bad things to say, and so many people say so many things, it's very important that people say Good things. For that reason, we should as much as possible use available tools to make people say Good things and not Bad things.

It's strange—it sounds so reasonable and logical, but then you've just derived the urgent need for a Ministry of Truth, funded and legislated and enforced by the state. How would you argue against this?

It's not that there *aren't* Good and Bad things to say. It's just that it's not *that kind* of Good and Bad. It's not the kind of Good and Bad that justifies centralized imposition on everyone. You haven't investigated enough to justify thinking that you've reached objectively correct answers; even if you investigated more, there isn't an entirely objective answer (e.g. because it's value-laden and context-dependent); and even when you knowably have the objectively correct answer, that doesn't mean you should coercively impose it on others because that could be defecting in an [epistemic Prisoner's Dilemma](#).

We can give more specific, concrete reasons that Euphemics is harmful in practice. Diversity of opinion and the marketplace of ideas would produce better ideas in the long run; suppressing speech often doesn't get rid of harmful thinking and leaves it unaddressed and festering; no centralized authority will be competent enough to cybernetically control the sphere of speech in a net-beneficial way; a central authority is way too much power to wield and would be corrupted and biased; apparently contradictory propositions are sometimes actually just spoken in different languages; some propositions are ambiguous or actually context-dependent (e.g. "It's raining."); etc. But we can also compress this into a simpler message: "There's no such thing as Rightthink and Wrongthink."

An argument is sometimes made like "Eugenics just means good birth; how can you be against good birth?". To go further with the theme of etymology, we can look at "good" ([en.wiktionary.org/wiki/good](https://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/good)). "Good" comes from Proto-Indo-European *\*g<sub>ed</sub>-*, meaning "to unite, to join"; from that root come also the words "gather" and "together". So "good" is conceptually related to uniting. "Goodness", in this etymological sense, is related to the collectivity—it's about consensus, and about the Good of the many. We could say that, etymologically, good-birth is about *collective* decisions about birth. Genomic emancipation negates collective decision-making about birth, and negates the "good" in "eugenics".

## Avoiding the ideological engines of eugenics

I'm partially satisfied by the above analysis of eugenics as stemming from a belief in objectively Good and Bad traits. I think the analysis at least strongly pushes against a total Wittgensteinian retreat to understanding eugenics as a mere family resemblance. The analysis instead gives a reasonable conjecture about a single central throughline to eugenical ideologies, suggesting that eugenics is a [Thing](#).

However, we have to admit that, whether or not the Eugenical Maxim can be truly said to be the moral core of eugenics, the Maxim doesn't explain *enough* about the nature of eugenics. It doesn't clearly give society enough understanding to succeed in the ongoing task of steering clear of eugenic abuses. One of the key questions in analyzing historical motives is to understand what constitutes an engine of ideology which would tend to drive us towards bad places. That understanding would empower us to not drive in that direction.

---

<sup>14</sup>Benson-Tilsen, Tsvi. "The Principle of Genomic Liberty." Preprint, Figshare, February 7, 2026. <https://doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.31286485.v1>

We especially need the ability to avoid driving towards bad places if we're going to develop reprogenetic technologies: If we're doing reprogenetics, then several tools, individual interests, political momenta, and background beliefs, any of which could incite and support eugenic motives, would become much more available. For example:

- If reprogenetic technology grows more effective at influencing traits, then there would be more incentive in general to use reprogenetics. In particular, an authoritarian regime would have more incentive to impose reprogenetics on its subjects. So it might do so, and it might do so with a larger impact.
- Widespread interest in reprogenetic technology would affirm that somehow influencing the genome of one's future child is good and important. Once that becomes a shared social value, the old eugenic logic would by default have more support, motivating historical eugenic policies.
- In order to understand that reprogenetics works, people will have to understand that differences in inherited genes do substantively influence many important traits. If a given person or sector of society implements a general logic of "if genetic heredity matters, then we should implement racist policies", then this new shared understanding of genetic heritability would create more support for racist policies. (Indeed, sometimes racists seem to think that they just have to win some argument about heredity and/or genetics of race, and then people will get on board with implementing racist and/or eugenicist government policies; and some anti-racists and anti-eugenicists *also* seem to think that.)

So, to avoid leading to eugenic abuses, we'd have to avoid whatever ideological engines would, within that new context created by reprogenetics, drive us towards bad outcomes. To avoid those engines, we'd want to clearly have an alternative ideological engine that is opposed to eugenic ideologies, and that can beneficially structure how we implement reprogenetics. That's a main reason to understand what those ideological engines are. (Another main reason is to track them as they grow, and to cut off their connection with the context created by reprogenetics. For example, we'd want to make the case that the logic of "if heredity matters, then we should do racist/eugenic policies" is a bad logic, separately from the question of whether or not heredity is real and matters.)

## The mindsets that underlie eugenic ideologies

Can we go deeper? Can we see the ideological engines of eugenics more clearly?

We can list some mindsets that, in some forms, when held by single people or by groups of people, could lead to eugenic abuses. (Note that this list emphasizes the downsides of these mindsets because we're analyzing how they contribute to eugenic abuses, but some of them in some forms have important upsides. E.g. collectivism can motivate beneficial social welfare policies, high modernism produced efficient housing and utilities, and a healthy skepticism of doomsaying about sacredness makes way for technological innovation.)

Here are some of these mindsets:

- Non-liberalism, non-contractualism, not respecting consent, authoritarianism.
  - Not being enough of a principled liberal. It's easy to say "live and let live" when you're wanting more freedom, or when there's not much that other people are doing that you find very objectionable. There's some additional principledness that you'd need, in order to continue not pushing for restrictions of freedom even when you're in power and even when it seems like there's a good moral argument (but no truly compelling state or inter-citizen interest).
  - Not thinking about when the boot is on the other foot.
  - Not respecting autonomy and consent.
  - Not seeking mutually agreeable terms. I.e. not seeking or negotiating a government policy that avoids giving many people strong reason to strongly object.
  - Discounting the harm of disenfranchising or disinvesting people in the collective project. Eugenics that excludes types of people, or even types of genes, would tend to exclude some people from the collective construction of valuations. That exclusion gives the excluded members strong reason to strongly object and might take away much of their motive to participate prosocially.
  - Not being legally egalitarian, and therefore being willing to mistreat or disinvest some groups, and being willing to judge some types of people as not worthy of life, support, or autonomy.
  - Not being willing enough to put limits on state power.
- Power-seeking.
  - Wanting to control people; wanting to impose your vision.
  - Wanting to pass judgement on people; contempt.
  - Wanting to control collective intentions.

- Wanting to wield collective power, i.e. use collective intentions or collective benefits to justify your actions.
- Overconfidence in judgements. For example:
  - Overconfidence in judgements about what reproto genetic interventions have what effects.
  - Overconfidence in judgements about which effects on traits would be good for different people with different contexts.
  - Overconfidence in judgements about which traits are strictly good (i.e. have no downsides).
    - \* For example, is a strong fear of socializing bad? Maybe. Is it bad *on net, in expectation*, for everyone? Maybe. Is it strictly bad? No; social phobia can sometimes lead to a more intellectual, artistic, contemplative, or independent way of being.
    - \* For example, is being deaf bad for a child? Yeah, of course. Is there something good and special about being deaf? Also yes. Quoting a parent: “We celebrated when we found out about Molly’s deafness. [...] Being deaf is not about being disabled, or medically incomplete—it’s about being part of a linguistic minority. We’re proud, not of the medical aspect of deafness, but of the language we use and the community we live in.”<sup>15</sup>.
    - \* (See “[The vision of Bill Thurston](#)”<sup>16</sup>.)
  - Overconfidence in judgements about which tradeoffs between traits are good, even for traits that are agreed to be good.
- High modernism.
  - [High modernism](#), and related ideas like cybernetic governance, central planning, and naive utilitarianism, are mindsets related to governance of society.
    - \* Example: evaluating people or children solely according to their net economic output or other contribution to the state.
    - \* Example: treating genes for disease as a public health issue, to be dealt with by the state like a virus, via quarantine, travel restrictions, and sacrifice if necessary.
  - These governance ideas tend to involve centrally coordinated policies. They tend to be myopically calculative, meaning that they ignore unmeasurable / intangible / long-term consequences. They therefore tend to ignore important consequences of policies, tend to be overconfident, tend to ignore important illegible human values, and tend to justify destructive imposition of policies. For example, a eugenicist might try to “calculate a person’s utility to society”, which of course they cannot actually do well, and which wouldn’t be the right calculation morally speaking.
  - These governance ideas can motivate and/or be motivated by eugenic ideologies. They tend, to some extent, to be non-liberal, non-pluralistic, context-insensitive, and to disregard human nature and the sacredness of procreation.
- Collectivism.
  - I define collectivism very broadly, to include any form of somehow overly privileging the collective when making governance decisions.
  - The Collective might for example be a race, a nation, a region, a social class, or all of humanity; it might include both present and future people.
  - Conceptually, the throughline is any form of strongly collectively pooling intentionality, whether real or imagined. (Like many items in this list, this can of course be truly desirable in many of its forms.)
  - This can mean:
    - \* Prioritizing *judgements* held by the collective (either stated explicitly, or enacted implicitly, by many / most members) over irregular judgements held by individuals or small groups. For example, if most people *judge* that it’s better *for the child* if a future child is given genes for a higher IQ, then a collectivist view might say that this prevalent preference justifies forcing all individuals to give their own future child those genes.
    - \* Prioritizing *goals* held by the collective over more personal goals. For example, if most people think that it’s better *for society* if future children are harder working, that would be imposed on everyone.
    - \* Prioritizing goals allegedly good for the collective (as judged by the collective, or some individual, or a small group). For example, justifying suppressing reproduction of persons judged to be of a race whose genes would poison the gene pool.
    - \* Prioritizing goals *about* the collective (e.g., somehow influencing the gene pool; not necessarily

<sup>15</sup>Hinsliff, Gaby, and Robin McKie. “This Couple Want a Deaf Child. Should We Try to Stop Them?” *Science*. The Guardian, March 9, 2008. <https://www.theguardian.com/science/2008/mar/09/genetics.medicalresearch>.

<sup>16</sup>Benson-Tilsen, Tsvi. “The Vision of Bill Thurston.” Preprint, Figshare, February 7, 2026. <https://doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.31286515.v1>.

in a way that's intended to be *good for* the collective or all its members, e.g. racist goals). In particular, visions of a Good collective (e.g. a gene pool that's a specific race, whether real or imagined, or having specific traits or a specific distribution of traits).

- \* Giving the collective a lot of power to execute choices, including in a way that overrides individual or small-group values. E.g. writing laws that give a state a lot of power to enforce specific genomic choices or to influence reproduction.
- \* Abusing the priority given to the collective (in order to achieve non-collective goals).
- Collectivism is especially prone to trample individual values. Partly the reason is obvious—by definition, it privileges collective values. But further, Collectivism is, in one way or another, about motives or justifications that carry the full weight of the Collective. Since the Collective is very big, these justifications naively would carry a huge amount of weight, and would therefore override individual values. It's a kind of conceptual-political defeat in detail.
- For example, egregious violations of personal autonomy, such as forced sterilization or murder, have been justified in terms of social burden. As the argument goes, if someone is weak or ill, then they and perhaps their descendants will be a burden to society, requiring food and shelter and medical care, without giving much back to society.
- Not respecting the sacredness of procreation and of life.
  - In other words, procreation and life are sectors of the world that usually shouldn't be messed with even, if it seems like they should be messed with; or should only be messed with by taking a lot of extra care. Some specific reasons:
    - \* Reproduction is intensely private and personal;
    - \* people often care about their own reproduction much more than they are aware of;
    - \* messing with reproduction tends to have more bad consequences than expected;
    - \* and compared to most things, it's harder to explicitly understand, explain, and negotiate about one's values around one's reproduction.
  - Some mindsets, e.g. high modernist, collectivist, technocratic, authoritarian, or naive-consequentialist, tend to discount these aspects of reproduction. They therefore tend to trample those values.
- Intuition.
  - Contempt, disgust.
    - \* E.g. being “impatient of frailty and contemptuous of weakness”<sup>17</sup> may be a basic personal orientation that is not responsive to other principles, ideologies, or facts. That orientation may drive one to support aggression towards and degradation of the vulnerable.
    - \* E.g. wanting to get rid of people who are distasteful or deviant, whether or not they're actually harmful.
  - Aggression, dominance.
    - \* Some people want to hurt people regardless of facts, numbers, etc. They may use various scientific or prosocial sounding justifications for aggressive policies. Thus, the conclusion of “we should do aggressive policies” would survive changes in scientific understanding or social values, finding new justifications in the new justificatory context.
    - \* For example:
      - some people are aggressively racist, wanting to hurt various kinds of people;
      - some people engage in scapegoating;
      - some people align with whatever social faction promises violence.
- Non-pluralism, over-universalizing.
  - Not being enough of a pluralist. Pluralism is when you accept the existence of multiple large-scale overarching social structures (multiple genetic / ethnic clusters, states, religions, cultures, ideologies, societies, epistemic communities, social or economic niches, moral views, or systems of norms).
  - In particular, being pluralist about reproduction and inheritance means accepting that different people or groups have different values about inherited traits for their children. Generators of these different values about traits would include:
    - \* epistemic disagreements about the nature and consequences of various traits;
    - \* temporary local differences, such as fads, or societies that haven't yet processed these questions;
    - \* within one society, the value of social and economic specialization, e.g. having some people who are good at science and some who are good at political organization;

<sup>17</sup>Hart, David Bentley. “The Anti-Theology of the Body.” The New Atlantis, Summer 2005. <https://www.thenewatlantis.com/publications/the-anti-theology-of-the-body>.

- \* fundamentally different individual values, e.g. valuing artistic creativity vs. diligence;
- \* and fundamentally different autonomous groups, e.g. different cultures with different long-term values even after reflection and growth.
- Universalizing is when you want one vision or criterion to be applied to everyone. Wanting, or assuming, that there's a single global notion of Good traits for future children to be born with, would tend to be an overly universalizing stance.
- For example, even advocates of “liberal eugenics” tend to set out to figure out which traits support all life plans for the future child, or avoid suppressing any reasonable life plans, or similar<sup>18</sup><sup>19</sup>. I can agree that criteria like this are good to investigate in order to gain moral understanding about genomic choices, and that criteria aimed at generally empowering the future child are better criteria than “Good” or “fit” or similar. But, this is still seemingly an investigation aimed at figuring out a criterion for genomic choices that makes object-level judgements, and that is somewhat comprehensively prescriptive (rather than just prohibiting some small set of choices). Such a criterion would tend to exclude other ways of making genomic choices, and one can easily imagine it being enforced formally (even by the state, perhaps).
- Not being morally egalitarian.
  - That is, not holding that everyone is morally equal. Specifically, not holding that each person is equally:
    - \* a moral *patient*, so that their interests (desires, suffering, pleasures) are given equal weight a priori.
    - \* a moral *agent*, so that their decisions (preferences, negotiations, agreements) are given equal weight a priori.
  - Some eugenicists would not view it as very costly, or at all costly, to harm undesirables. Because they're undesirable (i.e. have traits that are vicious, inferior, diseased, weak, etc.), they are less of a person or not a person.
- Judging people and groups of people.
  - Historically, the only tools available to eugenicists were suppressing or promoting the reproduction of people or groups of people (families, clans, races, regions, classes). So they did that.
    - \* (This gives an incomplete picture. There were eugenicists with a Lamarckian viewpoint, e.g. in France<sup>20</sup>. These would target specific practices in the hopes of preventing those practices from causing the acquisition of undesirable characteristics that are then passed on through inheritance. This would, at least narrowly in the respect of not targeting whole people or groups for reproductive control, tend to be more humane than Weismannian eugenics (focused solely on inheritance through the germ cells).)
  - Eugenics involves a stance of inclusion / exclusion; some people are good, and should get resources and should reproduce more, and others are the opposite.
  - Judgy orientations: essentializing, biodeterminism, fixed mindset.
    - \* These orientations push towards passing judgement on someone.
    - \* Essentializing a person means treating them as though they “are” their traits, race, genes, or pedigree.
      - Essentializing someone pushes away from considering illegible value that they might provide.
      - Essentializing someone pushes toward comparing them to the median essence of other citizens (thus potentially finding them overall unworthy, rather than considering the totality of their life).
      - Essentializing someone pushes away from considering more granular interventions (e.g. editing a single gene rather than sterilizing the person).
    - \* Biodeterminism means thinking that life outcomes are strongly or completely determined by inheritance.
    - \* Fixed mindset (the opposite of growth mindset) means thinking that skills, knowledge, and personality are fixed and can't be self-modified and self-improved.
  - Judging people tends to pull away from social welfare and other methods of supporting someone to improve their behavior and health.
  - Judging people tends to justify taking irreversible action—judgements are taken to be final, au-

<sup>18</sup>Agar, Nicholas. “Liberal Eugenics.” *Public Affairs Quarterly* 12, no. 2 (1998): <137–55>.

<sup>19</sup>Agar, Nicholas. *Liberal Eugenics: In Defence of Human Enhancement*. Blackwell Pub., 2005. <https://search.worldcat.org/title/54907017>.

<sup>20</sup>Dikötter, Frank. “Race Culture: Recent Perspectives on the History of Eugenics.” *The American Historical Review* 103, no. 2 (1998): 467–78. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2649776>.

thoritative, and decisive for further action.

- Judging people or larger units tends to pull towards trampling individual rights, since that is a more blunt realm of intervention (in other words, you can't sterilize specifically someone's disease-bearing DNA; you either sterilize the person or you don't).
- Since there weren't more precise tools for controlling reproduction, there was a ready justification for controlling at the level of persons or larger units. Motives for controlling persons or larger units other than actual eugenic motives could take refuge in eugenic justifications. Some advocates of "eugenic" policies continued advocating for some of those policies even after the original eugenic justification was shown scientifically unsound, which shows that the original justification was at least not their entire reason to advocate for that policy.
- Social Darwinism, zero-sum thinking, Malthusianism.
  - Historical eugenicists often thought in zero-sum (constant-sum, perfectly adversarial) terms. These orientations don't sufficiently countenance the possibility and desirability of "growing the pie", e.g. just having more of every type of person and making everyone richer while supporting those in need.
  - For example, some thought in terms of conflicts between races, where inevitably eventually one race would win over the others (dominating or exterminating them). That leads to conflictual stances towards other groups. Obviously.
  - Some thought in terms of tradeoffs between different people, where someone born with a disease is "taking up a spot" so that a more capable person is excluded from existing. This leads to thinking of birth as a shared resource to be distributed or denied by the collective.
  - These orientations can contribute to paranoia and insecurity, e.g. fears of being replaced or outcompeted; fears of disappearing as a race or class; thinking the whole future of the country or world is at stake with the issue of demographic or population-genetic trends. If the wrong sort of people are reproducing, then the right sort aren't, and the ratio of good to bad dwindles.
  - These orientations can also contribute to urgency and panic around eugenic policies. Urgency can further circumvent any liberal principles or compassionate feelings that might backstop the collective decision to impose abuses on some members of the population.
- Non-Solutionism, techno-pessimism.
  - The only tools for population control available to historical eugenicists were tools for intervening at the level of people or groups of people. Those tools are intrinsically blunt-force and therefore require large tradeoffs between more control over traits and more coercion, vs. less control and less coercion. The common response to those tradeoffs was to accept the costs (generally imposed on someone else). I'm not aware of anyone saying something to the effect of "Maybe we should avoid a bunch of harmful coercion, and instead look for technical solutions that more precisely alter heredity without coercively controlling people's reproduction."
  - If they had been more Solutionist or techno-optimistic, they might have been more inclined to wait.
  - (Of course, more precise reprotogetic tools can also be applied with authoritarian coercion, so Solutionism isn't a full moral answer by itself. But, non-Solutionism does indicate something about the sociopolitical decision-making procedure involved in eugenics: There wasn't that strong a care for the harms done or commitment to avoiding it by finding another way.)

## How eugenic mindsets flow from the Eugenical Maxim

To illuminate the structure of eugenic ideologies a bit more, this section lists some ways that the eugenic mindsets listed in the previous section are given support by the Eugenical Maxim from the above section "The Eugenical Maxim as the shared moral core of eugenics?".

I would presume that these connections cannot even come close to fully explaining how and why any given instance of eugenics happened (any specific advocacy, state policy, or social attitude). Take, for example, the behavior of Nazi Germany. That behavior was of course heavily influenced by eugenic ideologies in multiple ways—think for example about ideas of racial purity and racial conflict; ideas of the population as a single body with contamination, purity, cleansing, and weak elements; subordination of the individual to the nation and the state; and utopian visions of the gene pool. However, there was ample ideological kindling from other sources, such as mystical ideas of the Volk, as well as anti-Semitism as a method of scapegoating (perhaps for fears of modernity)<sup>21</sup>. That kindling was added to by Germany's military defeat

<sup>21</sup>Mosse, George L. *The Crisis of German Ideology: Intellectual Origins of the Third Reich*. First Edition. Grosset & Dunlap, <1964>.

and humiliation, and by severe economic strain, before being ignited.

So, the support from the Eugenical Maxim given to eugenic mindsets is only partial. Furthermore, the direction of support is ambiguous (perhaps depending on particular cases, or depending on what question we're really trying to answer). Which comes first, authoritarianism or eugenics? Which comes first, high modernism or disrespecting the sacredness of procreation? We can note that the causality can go in both directions (surely high modernism promotes believing that there are objectively Good and Bad traits which can be measured well enough for any practical purpose, and that belief promotes high modernist policies), and also allow these relationships to be open questions.

Still, I think these (vague, conjectured) connections show some important elements of how eugenic ideologies work. In the following, “promotes” means “would tend to often, though not necessarily, promote”. A belief in objective Good and Bad traits promotes:

- Universalism / totalitarianism / non-pluralism (i.e. applying the same criteria to everyone). Universalism promotes:
  - High modernism. (If the same criteria for traits applies to everyone, then it makes sense to design and impose regular systems on everyone, disregarding local context.) High modernism promotes:
    - \* Essentialism.
    - \* Disrespect for the sacredness of procreation.
    - \* Non-Solutionism. (It may sound paradoxical to say that high modernism is not solutionist, but what I mean is this: If you think in terms of imposing policies in a systematic, widespread way, then you are impressed with the power of such policies. You tend to be more attracted to the impact of those policies, rather than being attracted to developing technology that would enable more precise interventions—the sort of interventions that get the benefits of the blunt-force policy, without the noble sacrifices (of someone else's wellbeing).)
  - Non-liberalism / authoritarianism / centralized power over reproduction. (If you discount the existence of multiple legitimate perspectives on traits, there's less reason to maintain liberal power structures that enforce room for pluralistic autonomy.) Non-liberalism promotes:
    - \* Power-seeking. (If there's going to be one centralized power to wield over everyone's reproduction, you want to be the one wielding that power.)
    - \* Coercion. (Authoritarianism inherently involves some people controlling some other people in a harmful and unjust manner, thus provoking resistance and thus requiring coercion to enforce.)
- Overconfidence. (If someone argues to you that *they* should be allowed to reproduce despite having Bad traits, they might argue in terms of autonomy or pluralism, rather than by presenting reasons that their trait is actually Good. If you believe there are objectively Good and Bad traits, then you may discount such arguments and falsely believe there aren't good counterarguments to your eugenic policies, and therefore be overconfident in specific trait judgements or general eugenic policies.) Overconfidence promotes:
  - Power-seeking. (If you're confident and everyone else is obviously wrong and won't listen, what's left is to seize power and do the good thing yourself.)
  - High modernism. (If you're confident about judgements of Good and Bad traits, it seems fine to impose regular systems on everyone.)
- Essentialism. (If you think there are objective universal Good traits, then it makes more sense to score people on a single axis and to view people as well-summarized by that score.) Essentialism promotes:
  - Not being morally egalitarian. (If someone is Bad, it's easy to think of them as also having less moral weight in general, i.e. being less of a moral patient.)
    - \* Not being *morally* egalitarian promotes not being *legally* egalitarian. Why treat everyone equally before the law if they are not equal as moral patients or agents?
  - Fixed mindset.
  - Judging whole people.
  - Overconfidence in judgements about which traits are strictly good and what are good tradeoffs between traits.
  - Contempt, disgust, domination. (If there is a simple good / bad distinction, the Bad people are easy targets for intuitions, e.g. intuitions for scapegoating or wanting to dominate.)
  - Racism and racist policies.
  - Non-pluralism.
  - Non-Solutionism. (If people “are” Good or Bad, it seems less important to avoid infringing on a whole person's body and autonomy, so you don't seek out technology that would enable that.)

- Disrespect for the sacredness of procreation. (If something is viewed as objective, it makes less sense to view it as intensely personal or to have surprising aspects or consequences;  $2 + 3 = 5$  is simple, canonical, and infinitely solid, and therefore doesn't need to be treated as cryptic, personal, and provisional.) Disrespect for sacredness promotes:
  - Non-pluralism.
  - High modernism.
- Collectivism. (If you think there's objective Good and Bad traits, then you tend to happily multiply the impact of traits by the size of the collective, and therefore tend to take the collective perspective.) Collectivism promotes:
  - Authoritarianism.
  - Universalism.
  - Aggression. (If you think that the weight of the Collective is behind your judgements, then you may feel more justified in and/or have more "righteous zeal" for violence in service of the Collective will. In particular, respect for life can be overridden.)

## Aside: When people have different discourse goals

Discussions about big social and state policy questions often get tense. One source of tension is discourse goals that differ between two interlocutors. For example, one person might try to think through a domain by sharing factual information; but another person might be focused on promoting and demoting various policy proposals, and might interpret the first person's factual statements as supporting or attacking some policy proposal, and then object to that support or attack. Neither person is necessarily in the wrong; it could be that both people are doing good and useful computations, even if the result is misunderstanding and apparent conflict. (Of course, there can also be actual conflict.)

This kind of talking past each other comes up a lot in the case of reprogenetics. Questions like "Is this eugenics?" tend to come up, and then interlocutors somehow fail to engage with each other. Here are some categories of discourse goals around reprogenetics, and in particular around questions like "Is this eugenics?":

- **Object level investigation and debate.**
  - I.e., sharing and comparing ideas, facts, and arguments about what to do with reprogenetics.
- **Procedural affirmation.**
  - Someone focused on procedural affirmation is asking the question "By engaging with the topic in the way we are right now, what overall procedure are we implicitly endorsing for making decisions on this topic in general?".
  - For example, suppose that Alice starts talking about reprogenetics on the object level, e.g. talking about technical safety standards for some assisted reproductive technology. Then Bob, who is interested in procedural affirmation, makes an objection that's strange to Alice's ears. Bob tells Alice that she has to *bring in more voices*. Alice might respond that, sure, it would be helpful to get more information and perspectives from various people, but at the moment she's just trying to think about what makes sense technically, directly. Bob is uncomfortable because Alice seems to be affirming a broad policy along the lines of "I (Alice) will think on my own and figure out What Should Be Done with reprogenetics [and then I will unilaterally technocratically impose this on society without consulting society]..". Alice is uncomfortable because from her perspective, Bob's policy seems to be "No one should try to actually figure out what to actually do with reprogenetics [unless perhaps they are a Bob-approved person]..".
  - Bob and Alice might agree that such a policy would be bad; and they might not have a disagreement about technical safety standards. But they are putting very different weights on procedural affirmation vs. concrete modular progress.
- **Deference to consensus.**
  - Bob might in general want to defer to the moral consensus of society, while Alice wants to reevaluate some questions.
  - For example, Bob wants to generally take a stance against affecting genes of future children, even if he has to resort to motivated reasoning. On the other hand, Alice wants to think explicitly about which uses of reprogenetics are moral or immoral, or should be legal or illegal. From Alice's point of view, Bob is being a conformist and potentially abdicating a responsibility to make ethical progress on novel difficult questions. From Bob's point of view, Alice is being hubristic / unilateralist and is selfishly and/or recklessly asserting her own values without sufficient regard to what society thinks, as well as potentially harboring evil intentions and possibly inviting social

punishment for her behavior (and for anyone who doesn't distance themselves).

- Deference is both necessary and problematic, and it's far from trivial to defer gracefully. So neither Bob nor Alice are clearly in the right.

- **Underlying motivations.**

- Bob might be trying to suss out what Alice's motivations are.
- For example, Bob might be trying to enforce norms about acceptable vs. unacceptable motivations around reproto genetics.
- It could be difficult for Bob to figure out Alice's motivations, especially if there are multiple different motivations that recommend similar actions, and especially if Alice has an incentive to hide her motivations. For example, Alice might be a genomic emancipationist, hoping to empower individuals directly with reproto genetic technology; or Alice might be a eugenicist, hoping to use reproto genetics to gradually shift the Overton window around heritability until she can push for coercive state policies to control the population for racial or eugenic-utopia purposes. These are very different long-term goals, but they could recommend some overlapping short-term actions.
- From Alice's point of view, it can seem like there's not much to do besides state her goals and then work towards them honorably; but there's no guarantee that such a plan would, or should, assuage Bob's worries.

- **Value affirmation.**

- Even if Alice doesn't actually hold some specific objectionable motivation, she might recommend some actions that are ambiguously motivated. Then, Bob might worry that other people who *do* hold the objectionable motivation would be rallied or emboldened by Alice's recommended actions.

- **Introspection on worries.**

- Sometimes, Bob doesn't have a clear worry, but does have an intuitive worry, and is trying to figure out what that worry is. This can be confusing for Alice because Bob's worries would seem inconsistent, rather than just inchoate.
- The problem is compounded by the fact that eugenics is such a sprawling and variegated ideology, and it's hard to understand what exactly to worry about. You can tell that eugenics ended up very horribly in the 20th century, but it's hard to tell what exactly went wrong. So it makes sense to be vaguely worried without being able to immediately clearly explain what you're worried about.

In my view, all of these ways of engaging in discourse are reasonable and have their place. I think it's worth keeping in mind that there are different legitimate discourse goals. Without keeping discourse goals in mind, people might repeatedly exchange statements with each other that seem, to the other person, to be statements made in bad faith (e.g. off-topic, evasive, or willfully misunderstanding). Hopefully, with goals in mind, people's statements would seem at least not adversarial when they really aren't adversarial; and ideally, people could decide together to work together towards whatever shared goals they might have. I would also suggest that someone who puts a lot of weight on one mode of discourse might benefit from being open to other modes (ideally in a mutual exchange).

## Comparison of eugenics vs. genomic emancipation

This section compares the ideology of eugenics against the ideology of genomic emancipation. One goal of explaining the differences between those ideologies is as part of a defense of genomic emancipation. Another goal is to more fully construct an ideology of genomic emancipation that would lead to desirable futures. (See "Appendix: Why envision genomic emancipation?"<sup>22</sup>.)

## Overlaps

Here are claims that a eugenicist and a genomic emancipationist would agree on:

- Many important traits are somewhat heritable in the colloquial sense, i.e. the child will somewhat resemble the parent. Much of this is genetic, meaning that the difference between individuals is determined by differences in genes (as opposed to environment that's shared or transmitted from parent to child). Such traits include physiological, mental, and behavioral traits, as well as life outcomes.
- It's technically possible to affect genetic inheritance.
- There's no strong moral or ethical reason to avoid all possible ways of affecting genetic inheritance.

---

<sup>22</sup>Benson-Tilsen, Tsvi. "Genomic Emancipation." Preprint, Figshare, February 7, 2026. <https://doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.31286647.v1>

- Morally speaking, it benefits the child and society if the future child is given genes that tend to lead to health and capability. The world where such choices are taken is a vision of a good world.
- It's good to develop reprotohnics (technology that enables individuals to affect genetic inheritance).
- It's acceptable and in some contexts desirable for someone to make genomic choices on behalf of a future child.

## Disoverlaps that border the overlaps

Those overlaps are only partial. Here are some delimitations of these overlaps, showing some of where eugenics and genomic emancipation come apart:

- Heritability.
  - A eugenicist tends to argue for higher heritability, and in particular for average genetic differences between races. One reason is the motive to justify imposition of policies based on genes and/or race; another reason is general attitudes about people and races actually distorting the eugenicist's perceptions. This leads to a distorted picture of heritability. For example, a eugenicist might tend to presume that a behavioral trait is greatly determined by genes. Many behavioral traits are in fact significantly influenced by genes, but it's complicated and hard to disentangle social/environmental effects from genetic effects, so there's plenty of ambiguity to serve as grist for an ideologically biased mill.
  - A genomic emancipationist wants an accurate understanding of the genetics of traits, in order to empower parents with reprotohnics.
  - A eugenicist would tend to essentialize people as overall Good and Bad (undesirable, unfit, degenerate, lower, inferior), and would tend to tie that judgement to genes.
  - A genomic emancipationist views traits as small, separable elements of a person, more like equipment rather than who the person really is.
- Affecting inheritance.
  - A eugenicist would tend to underestimate the technical costs involved in affecting genes at the population level.
- Moral prohibitions on affecting genes.
  - A eugenicist views the interest of the collective (the state, the race, humanity as a whole) as being paramount, generally overriding individual autonomy, so that there should be little restriction on the state's ability to control the genomic choices of its population.
  - A genomic emancipationist views it as paramount to have the decision-maker about a person's genes be as close to that person as possible, such that it's plausibly bad in expectation to have, say, a state, or a scientific committee, or even a reprotohnics clinic, be the primary decision-maker about a future child's genes. They would therefore oppose pressure or coercion about genomic choices. (And furthermore they would restrict the state's power to restrict genomic choices; see "[The principle of genomic liberty](#)"<sup>23</sup>.)
  - A eugenicist tends to view there as being few or no restrictions whatsoever on what *means* are acceptable to use for affecting genes, since the collective interest in a future child's genes is so large.
  - A genomic emancipationist values autonomy, and therefore would oppose any individually harmful means of affecting reproduction (such as forced sterilization).
- Beneficial genes.
  - A eugenicist argues that the societal benefit of some genes is enough to justify using collective force to make future children have those genes.
  - A genomic emancipationist argues that, almost regardless of how much benefit some genes might give to society, that benefit doesn't justify making anyone have those genes. In other words, the moral question of which genes are beneficial to society is largely separated away from policies about genomic decision-making. The vision is a hope which can be pursued indirectly through reprotohnics and genomic emancipation, but not directly by affecting genomic choices in "the right direction".
- Genomic choice-making.
  - A eugenicist argues that it's good for society, the state, or scientific committees to make genomic choices on behalf of future children.
  - A genomic emancipationist mostly rejects that, and instead argues that it's good for a future child's parents to make genomic choices on behalf of that child.

<sup>23</sup>Benson-Tilsen, Tsvi. "The Principle of Genomic Liberty." Preprint, Figshare, February 7, 2026. <https://doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.31286485.v1>

## Disoverlaps of core ideology

The Eugenical Maxim described above in “[The Eugenical Maxim as the shared moral core of eugenics?](#)” summarizes eugenics as believing in Good and Bad traits that strongly affect society and that therefore should be strongly promoted in the population.

Genomic emancipation (as described in “[Genomic Emancipation](#)”<sup>24</sup>) approximately negates the Eugenical Maxim. The simple concrete meaning of genomic emancipation is:

Making biotechnology to empower parents on behalf of their future children.

The abstract ideal of genomic emancipation is:

The birthright of human spirits includes fuller self-unfolding via self-sovereignty over their own genomes.

Eugenics says that there are Good and Bad traits, selected for by society and/or nature. Genomic emancipation says that there are not Good and Bad traits in that sense; individual choice is somewhat opposed to the judgements of both society and nature, and individual choice should generally win out. Parents should make autonomous genomic choices, and these choices *should* reflect some differences between parents in ideas of what traits their future children should get. There are ethics of genomic choice under genomic emancipation, but they don't derive from a universal imposed notion of Good and Bad traits.

A eugenicist would justify developing reprogenetics because it's Good / Bad for these genes / traits / people / races to be propagated. A genomic emancipationist would justify developing reprogenetics because it's good for people to be empowered autonomously.

## Disoverlaps of concrete aims

Eugenics and genomic emancipation overlap in some concrete goals—mainly, wanting to develop reprogenetic technologies (including the scientific understanding of reproduction and of the genetics of traits). But, they diverge on most key goals:

- What genes are to be affected?
  - Eugenics: affect the gene pool, i.e. the prevalence in the population of various genes.
  - Genomic emancipation: affect individuals (including sometimes promoting some variants in some individuals and demoting those same variants in other individuals).
- How are genes to be affected?
  - Eugenics: any tool that works, including reprogenetics and also including person-level interventions (e.g. sterilization) and group-level interventions (e.g. paying smart people to have kids, or having race-based immigration restrictions).
  - Genomic emancipation: only use reprogenetic tools that empower individual parents on behalf of their own future children.
- What state policies are to be implemented?
  - Eugenics: any policies that are politically and technically feasible that will promote good genes.
  - Genomic emancipation: the state should implement a policy that restricts the state from interfering on questions of which genes to give a child. (To promote equality of access, the state could subsidize general access to reprogenetics, without punishing or rewarding specific genomic choices.)
- Who should be given power over genomic choices?
  - Eugenics: scientific consensus and/or the state, with implementation help from social pressure.
  - Genomic emancipation: parents are given the final say over genomic choices for their own future children; they can be influenced (partly, but not super much) by the willingness of clinics to provide specific services and by social pressure; and there are a few restrictions on genomic choices that can be implemented by the state (see “[Exceptions to the genomic liberty principle](#)”<sup>25</sup>).
- How should genetics of reproduction be presented?
  - Eugenics: affecting genes of children should be presented in a positive light in order to encourage more people to do it.

<sup>24</sup>Benson-Tilsen, Tsvi. “Genomic Emancipation.” Preprint, Figshare, February 7, 2026. <https://doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.31286647.v1>.

<sup>25</sup>Benson-Tilsen, Tsvi. “The Principle of Genomic Liberty.” Preprint, Figshare, February 7, 2026. <https://doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.31286485.v1>.

- Genomic emancipation: affecting genes of children should be presented in as accurate a light as possible, in order to empower parents to make informed genomic choices.

## Disoverlaps of mindset

Eugenics and genomic emancipation differ on several underlying mindsets:

- Concentration of power.
  - Eugenics: anti-liberal, authoritarian, power-seeking, non-pluralist, universalizing, collectivist.
  - Genomic emancipation: the opposite of that. Collective motives and judgements are not used, or are used only in extreme cases, to justify state infringement on procreative liberty. There's some small element of collectivism: trait-communities (e.g. the Deaf community) could be given some ability to self-regulate genomic choices (e.g. they could vote to ban making deaf children). That setup would provide a midway point between total autonomy (which potentially unnecessarily allows some future children to be harmed) and total centralization of genomic choices. (This is in significant tension with genomic liberty, of course.)
- Contractualism.
  - Eugenics: rejects pluralistic views of the good life or good traits and imposes collective judgements on individuals; individuals who have their own choices overridden would have good reason to reject a societal eugenics contract.
  - Genomic emancipation: not inherently contractualist, but I think genomic emancipation, and in particular genomic liberty, is a reasonable proposal for a social contract around reprogenetics that shouldn't be too objectionable to too many people (see “[Genomic liberty as a proposed civil compromise](#)”).
- Consent.
  - Eugenics: collective judgement should be promoted; the consent of a future child doesn't play much practical role; there is presumed consent of the child to be improved by the collective judgement about the good life.
  - Genomic emancipation: the consent of the future child is key, but of course cannot be applied directly to that child's genomic choices. Leaving the future child's genome up to nature is also a potential vector for the child to be non-consensually harmed; there's no perfect alternative. The best available alternative is to empower the future child's parents (see “[Emancipation of whom?](#)”). Consent can also be computed retrospectively, and then applied prospectively, by asking children affected by reprogenetics what they think of the genomic choices their parents made (see “[Habermas and multigenerational feedback](#)”).
- Racism.
  - Eugenics: not inherently racist, but tends toward racism because—as the logic goes—if there are Good and Bad traits, and different races have different amounts of Good traits, then some races are better than others and should be promoted.
  - Genomic emancipation: orthogonal to racism; is explicitly non-discriminatory in terms of empowering everyone with reprogenetics.
- The sacredness of procreation and of life.
  - Eugenics: sacredness is overridden by collective values. Reproduction and even life can be interfered with to protect the gene pool.
  - Genomic emancipation does not respect the sacredness of the *naturalness* of procreation; it does respect the sacredness of the *personal autonomous* aspect of procreation. It does not necessarily respect *all* life—because some reprogenetic technologies involve creating very early human embryos without an intent to implant them—but it is generally consonant with a general humanist emancipatory project, which includes healing and preventing all unwanted incapacity.
- Overconfidence in judgements, high modernism.
  - Eugenics: not inherently overconfident, but tends to be overconfident in effect, by discounting the value of information and traits that lie outside the interest of whatever centralized eugenic council controls the state's eugenic decisions.
  - Genomic emancipation: maintains freedom for diversity and hopefully maintains (and [in some ways increases](#)) actual diversity, which is a kind of way to avoid overconfidence. On the other hand, genomic emancipation gives more leeway for parents to enact overconfident views through genomic choices; this should be tempered (perhaps by clinics exercising a right to refuse service). The soft eugenics of social pressure is an open question, and even under genomic liberty social pressure might tend to somewhat overconfidently project consensus values onto individuals.
- Inclusion / exclusion.

- Eugenics: some people are desirable and should reproduce more; others are undesirable and should reproduce less.
- Genomic emancipation: everyone should reproduce as much as they want, including people with genetic diseases; all parents should be empowered to empower their future children.
- Zero-sum thinking.
  - Eugenics: tends to be Social Darwinist, zero-sum, Malthusian.
  - Genomic emancipation: has a large positive-sum component: using reprogenetics, parents can help give their future child a good life without taking anything away from anyone else, e.g. by giving them health and capability. However, zero-sum conflicts could arise due to genomic liberty, e.g. the race for tall sons.
- Non-Solutionism.
  - Eugenics: tends to not wait for technological solutions and instead rushes ahead with blunt-force, harmful tools.
  - Genomic emancipation: calls for empowerment of individuals through technology. I would say: if we could only affect genes by grievously interfering in reproduction, then *we would have to find another way*.

## Some practical norms for good development of reprogenetics

A main goal of this investigation has been to help construct an ideology for the beneficial development of reprogenetic technologies. As a subset of that goal, we want to construct a social policy platform that would avert any tendencies of society to use reprogenetics in abusive ways in the vein of historical eugenics.

That's a big project that isn't completed. But from the investigation in this essay, we can take away some ideas. Simply writing down these ideas doesn't solve anything. My hope is that stating an ideology for beneficial reprogenetics will help that ideology be socially and politically implemented: as society builds a consensus ideology, that ideology can turn into concrete norms and shared goals that protect and uphold what we care about in the domain of reprogenetics. Thus, even relatively obvious ideas are worth stating because, beyond just explaining the idea, the statement plays the additional role of putting the idea into common knowledge, or at least proposing to do so.

The following list is focused on the anti-eugenics aspect of genomic emancipation; see also “[Genomic Emancipation](#)”<sup>26</sup> for other aspects. Some takeaways:

- This domain is complex, and we'll learn more as we go—e.g. we'll learn what the technology can and can't do, we'll learn how parents choose to use reprogenetics, and we'll learn downstream consequences. So, it is an **ongoing project** to work out an ideology for a good future with reprogenetics, and in particular a future that avoids eugenic abuses.
- **Four pillars.** The distinctions listed above in “[Comparison of eugenics vs. genomic emancipation](#)” can be converted into anti-eugenics norms. In particular, beyond general liberalism (which is also key), these four ideals seem important:
  - (1) **Pluralism**—about different visions of the good life and beneficial traits or genes. (See “[The vision of Bill Thurston](#)”<sup>27</sup>.)
  - (2) **Respect for the sacredness of reproduction**—as a private familial activity.
  - (3) **Emancipation of the child**—through genomic liberty and empowerment for the parents, community self-regulation, multi-generational feedback, and encouragement of parents to empower their children.
  - (4) **Distrust of the state**—disinterested parties shouldn't be allowed to impose reproductive choices on people, and the state is among the most disinterested parties. That's not a power anyone should wield.

\* See “[The principle of genomic liberty](#)”<sup>28</sup>.

\* To elaborate, reproduction and reprogenetics have these characteristics:

- They're cutting edge science, and therefore complicated and hard to get a clear, comprehensive, accurate grasp on.

<sup>26</sup>Benson-Tilsen, Tsvi. “Genomic Emancipation.” Preprint, Figshare, February 7, 2026. <https://doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.31286647.v1>.

<sup>27</sup>Benson-Tilsen, Tsvi. “The Vision of Bill Thurston.” Preprint, Figshare, February 7, 2026. <https://doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.31286515.v1>.

<sup>28</sup>Benson-Tilsen, Tsvi. “The Principle of Genomic Liberty.” Preprint, Figshare, February 7, 2026. <https://doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.31286485.v1>.

- They're quite varied—there are many different ways to use reprogenetics, many different people using it, many different genomic choices, and many different tools and information involved.
- They involve genuine tradeoffs.
- They're intensely personal—different people have different values, different beliefs, different decision processes, and different moral stances, and people want privacy and autonomy.
- They're very high-valence—people care about reproduction a lot.
- They're sacred—reproduction tends to be *surprisingly* important and *surprisingly* bad to mess with.
- They've been messed with by the state previously in history, with bad results.
- They'd be hard to enforce laws about, without a lot of messy state intervention and judgements.
- \* For these reasons, it's best to keep the state out of reproduction, especially reproductive choices, as much as possible.

- **The principle of genomic liberty.**

- Undue restrictions or other influence on people's reproduction shouldn't be enacted.
- If a person or organization enacts such restrictions, then they should be punished as violating norms of genomic emancipation.

- **Minimizing soft eugenics.** In line with the principle of genomic liberty, generally, parents shouldn't have undue pressure on them about genomic choices. It's fine and often good for there to be some pressure (just like it's fine for there to be some pressure about other private choices); but the soft eugenics of societal pressure is a significant risk, in that the collective can gain too much power over future children if parents are too much a slave to consensus.

- **Genetic counseling.** Genetic counselors should aim to inform, explain, encourage reflection, and discourage rushed or unserious decision-making. But, they should usually steer clear of encouraging or discouraging specific choices too strongly.

- **Social stigma.**

- \* Specific genomic choices should be treated as very private. Nothing is absolute, but it should be perhaps similar to questions of what religion to be or who to love; you can have opinions but you generally keep them to yourself, unless speaking in the abstract, or speaking to a very close friend, or in extreme cases.
- \* If there's stigma, it should mainly be directed in a way that's more agnostic about specific genomic choices. For example, it would be more okay to stigmatize parents for not caring about the wellbeing or empowerment of their child.
- \* Most justifications about effects on the collective should be kept out of social stigma. (An exception might be that it's okay to stigmatize negative-sum choices such as super-tall sons.)

- **Neutral subsidies.** Subsidies (government or other) for reprogenetics should be broadly neutral to genomic choices. E.g. the state giving all parents vouchers for reprogenetics clinics would be fine; giving vouchers for making non-autistic children would not be fine.

- **Genetic nondiscrimination.** I haven't thought enough about this, but it's plausible that many, most, or all cases of genetic discrimination (conditioning some personal treatment on a person's genes) should be heavily discouraged or even banned. See for example the [Genetic Information Nondiscrimination Act](#). I like free markets, but *prima facie* there's not that good of a reason to discriminate based on genes (rather than just testing merit); and the "soft eugenic" effects of discrimination for insurance, healthcare, scholarship, employment, certification, licensing, and so on, seem *prima facie* fairly bad.

- **Provision of services.** Clinics can use their judgement and exercise a right to categorically refuse specific reprogenetic services. E.g. a clinic might decide to not ever affect some specific trait, or to not ever increase traits above or below some trait-value, or something. However, I would urge them to generally err on the side of providing more services rather than less.

- **Modular reprogenetic services.** Clinics should present traits that could be affected in a modular way, so that parents can pick and choose which traits to affect. If the only products available are certain comprehensive sets of genomic choices (e.g. a single "health index" or similar), then in effect the genomic choices are being made by whoever constructed that prepackaged set. This is relatively benign, but is some degree of centralized genomic choice-making, and isn't necessary. (There's nothing wrong with offering the comprehensive choice-sets; but modular

choices should also be offered, and the comprehensive choice-sets should be explained as being a combination of a bunch of genomic choices, as opposed to being “good genes” or similar.)

- **Privacy.** Clinics should keep private any information about the genomic choices that parents make. This should maybe be a law. That way, parents can make their decision in peace and privacy, without undue pressure except from the advisors who the parents trust with that information.
- **Maintaining recourse.** In general, the results of applying reprogenetics should be monitored, and the policies involved in applying reprogenetics should be open to reevaluation. In particular, any genomic choices that someone would want to make, but which are restricted (de jure or de facto), are a potential point of contention and a potential point where some degree of eugenic / collectivist pressure is being exerted. Also, the *protection against eugenics* that comes through genomic liberty has potential costs, e.g. bad outcomes for children or tragedies of the commons. For these reasons, all voices should be listened to (though of course not necessarily in a way that changes policies). For example:
  - People who keep saying “I want to make this genomic choice but society isn’t letting me.” should get a public hearing.
  - Clinics, and specifically genetic counselors, have a special responsibility here, as the main point of contact for parents who are thinking through their own genomic choices. Genetic counselors should view it as part of their role to help not only parents, but also society at large, think through whether it makes sense. More specifically:
    - \* When a genetic counselor is faced with parents who want to make a genomic choice that is considered not acceptable, the counselor should put extra effort into understanding what the parents are thinking, and to help the parents think and explain themselves more clearly.
    - \* Ideally, clinics would participate in the public conversation about various genomic choices. For example, it would be helpful to explain what their current clinic-wide policies are about whether or not to provide a given reprogenetic service, and what are the reasons for those policies.
    - \* This way the conversation can be ongoing, and parents aren’t silently left without recourse.
  - Formal rules that restrict genomic choices (international rules, state laws, professional norms) should be considered open to debate. (I’m not sure what this means concretely.)
  - Children whose parents made some genomic choices for them should especially be listened to. (See “[Habermas and multigenerational feedback](#)”.) Those children should speak out (though of course their privacy is their prerogative).
  - Communities of people with some trait should be given a lot of weight in any questions about that trait. Clinics, regulators, and scientists should listen to what the community thinks of the trait. As an example, it might be good to have it be the case that the Deaf community forms an autonomous self-regulating unit that decides whether or not reprogenetically making your child deaf should be banned. This is meant as a better compromise than either the state making centralized universal decisions, or having individual parents each make their own potentially abhorrent decision. If a given community reflects a lot and decides that some reprogenetic intervention involving the trait should or shouldn’t be banned or offered, then the reasoning behind that decision would ideally be made public, to help avoid unnecessary tension around genomic liberty.
- **Parents resisting eugenic pressures.** Parents should try to make genomic choices that aren’t just controlled by collective pressures that may not be good for this future child. For example:
  - Don’t make hasty decisions, and try to avoid having your decisions be overly unconsciously predetermined. Instead, aim to spend more time and effort reflecting on your values and intuitions, and on what’s best for your future child. Gather information. If you have some intuition that you want to make some genomic choice, that’s fine, and you can ultimately go with that intuition; but try to spend some time to question that decision, or at least wonder about why it’s there.
  - Consider being willing to take a stand. For example, many people bleach their skin in order to make it lighter so that they incur less disadvantage due to discrimination based on skin color. Consider placing the value of propagating your uniqueness to your children, and the value of avoiding giving in to prejudice, above the value of a temporary material advantage.
  - Don’t burn the commons of genomic liberty by making genomic choices that give your child mere positional advantage, at a net societal cost or neutral outcome. E.g. don’t *make* your sons be 6’8” tall. If everyone does that, then everyone is worse off; and furthermore, that would pressure

society to compromise on genomic liberty and partially roll it back, which opens up more room for state control of reproduction.

- It makes sense to take into account peer pressure, and the consequences of stigma, and to partially adopt the values of your society. But try to consider multiple angles, including genomic choices that seem to you to be good (e.g. beneficial or empowering for your future child) even if many people would disagree with those choices.

- **Minimizing centralized control.**

- In addition to restrictions on state control described by the principle of genomic liberty, professional bodies should also take a minimalist stance to self-regulation of specific reproto genetic services (in terms of what genomic choices they enable). I'm not sure how to draw these lines, since elsewhere I've said that professional self-regulation is generally good and is more acceptable than state regulation (because it carries less legal weight).
- Maybe **anti-trust** rules should be state-enforced for reproto genetics providers. If the ownership of reproto genetics providers were very centralized, then population-level control over genomic choices would be feasible by a bad actor (e.g. by the owner or by executive leadership). The ability of the free market to produce competitors that provide marginalized services might have to be protected by the state.
- Scientists and technologists should aim to support a reproto genetics sector that, in the long run, has many different providers rather than a small number of providers. That way, there's less risk of centralized control over a small number of providers. For example:
  - \* Technological roadmaps should be aimed at eventually producing inexpensive (and effective) reproto tech. That increases the market, which makes more room for different providers. (I'm not sure about this point; it could also lead to winner-takes-all dynamics.)
  - \* Scientific research should be made open whenever possible. That way, there's less unnecessary barrier to entry for new providers.
  - \* Likewise, tech should if possible be licensed rather than keeping it proprietary.

- **Don't dismiss concerns.**

- In general, people involved in developing reproto genetics should keep an open mind about various concerns around the nature and consequences of reproto genetics. That doesn't mean everyone has to become a bioethicist. It just means that workers should be open to finding out whether and how they have to course-correct in some respects. Reproto genetics is potentially very beneficial because it's potentially powerful, so it also naturally comes with perils; see "["Potential perils of germline genomic engineering"](#)<sup>29</sup>".
- In particular, don't be dismissive about concerns about eugenics. Even if you really don't harbor any desires of controlling other people's reproduction and would be horrified to see that happen, there can still be good reasons for people to be worried about eugenics specifically.
- For one thing, reproto genetics may unintentionally promote eugenic ideologies; see the previous subsection "["Avoiding the ideological engines of eugenics"](#)".
- For another thing, people may be wondering about something other than whether you specifically are secretly a eugenicist. (See the subsection "["Aside: When people have different discourse goals"](#).) For example:
  - \* Other people don't know what your motives are.
  - \* It's good for people to be checking whether people developing reproto genetics have bad motives.
  - \* Other people developing reproto genetics might have bad motives.
  - \* Other people or organizations might misuse reproto genetics.

- **No teamism.**

- As a matter of general ideological health, people supporting reproto genetics and genomic emancipation shouldn't take a partisan stance; they shouldn't support someone or something just because it's "on their side". For example:
- Don't cover up for fraud in order to make the field "seem respectable".
- Don't propagate bad explanations or arguments just because "the point that such-and-such is heritable is directionally correct" or similar.
- Don't excuse poor behavior because "they're on our team".

---

<sup>29</sup>Benson-Tilsen, Tsvi. "Potential Perils of Germline Genomic Engineering." Preprint, Figshare, February 6, 2026. <https://doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.31286098.v1>.

- Don't leave important ambiguity about what goals are acceptable and unacceptable. For example, if I talk about how genes do affect traits and reprogenetics is good, I would want to clarify that this is not some cryptic move in some ideological direction that would end up with racist policies like “remigration”; I oppose those policies, and advocating those policies is no more acceptable in some social space related to reprogenetics than it would be in any other social space in polite society.
- **Meditations.** Meditate on the goodness of pluralism, privacy, sacredness, moral egalitarianism, legal egalitarianism, and positive-sum plans; and meditate on the badness of contempt, domination, power-seeking, judginess, racism, hyper-collectivism, and zero-sum thinking. If you're advocating to exercise some control over someone else's reproduction, ask yourself, would I want the government / the average citizen / my ideological enemies to be making this kind of decision for my reproduction?