PREDICTIONS

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As science and technology eliminate the barriers and friction that have heretofore constrained our human powers and thereby limited the scope of our moral choice, mankind’s need for a reasoned, consensual, and open-minded ethics will become ever more pressing.

When we confront the fact that now we can choose many of the characteristics of our unborn children, can expose the contradictions and injustices in all our traditional religious views, can keep people alive for decades in conditions of slow deterioration—to take only three of the most difficult cases—we will have to decide what we ought to do, and this will require us to design and adopt a less tumultuous, more orderly process of determining our political will.

Being an optimist, I think we will succeed, but there is no denying the dangers. Fanaticism of every sort, on every issue, is bound to compete for our attention. H. L. Mencken once noted that for every difficult question there is a simple answer—and it’s wrong. Unfortunately, many people cling to the simple wrong answers, and are even prepared to die—and kill—for them.

Creating and maintaining the democratic environment in which these momentous decisions are made will be one of the great challenges of the twenty-first century.

As communications technology makes it harder and harder for leaders to shield their people from outside information, and as the economic realities of the twenty-first century make it clearer and clearer that education is the most important investment any parent can make in a child, the floodgates will open all over the world, with tumultuous effects.

All the flotsam and jetsam of popular culture, all the trash and scum that accumulates in the corners of a free society, will inundate
these relatively pristine regions along with the treasures of modern education, equal rights for women, better health care, workers' rights, democratic ideals, and openness to the cultures of others.

As the experience in the former Soviet Union shows only too clearly, the worst features of capitalism and high-tech wizardry are among the most robust replicators in this population explosion of memes, and there will be plenty of grounds for xenophobia, Luddism, and the tempting 'hygiene' of backwards-looking fundamentalism.

As Jared Diamond shows so eloquently, in *Guns, Germs and Steel*, it was European germs that brought Western hemisphere populations to the brink of extinction, since those people had had no history in which to develop tolerance for them. In the next century it will be our memes, both tonic and toxic, that will wreak havoc on the unprepared world. Our capacity to tolerate the toxic excesses of freedom cannot be assumed in others, or simply exported as one more commodity. The practically unlimited educability of any human being gives us hope of success, but designing and implementing the cultural innoculations necessary to fend off disaster, while respecting the rights of those in need of innoculation, will be an urgent task of great complexity, requiring not just better social science but also sensitivity, imagination, and courage. The field of 'public health', expanded to include cultural health, will be the greatest challenge of the next century.

Further Reading
