

Lecture by Joan Rothschild, 1 June 2005: The dream of the perfect child

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Joan Rothschild, educator and author, is best known for her work in the field of "gender and technology." She is author-editor of *Machina Ex Dea: Feminist Perspectives on Technology* published in 1983; guest editor of *Technology and Feminism*, special issue of *Research in Philosophy and Technology* (1993); author of *Teaching Technology from a Feminist Perspective* (1988); and author-editor of *Design and Feminism: Re-Visioning Spaces, Places, and Everyday Things* (1999).

Her new book, *The Dream of the Perfect Child*, published in spring 2005 by Indiana University Press, is the focus of her lectureship at Graz. The culmination of over 15 years of research, the book places the contemporary quest for the perfect child into historical perspective, tracing the intersection of science, technology, and medicine with the ideology of human perfectibility from the Enlightenment to the present, as genetics, reproductive technologies, and perfectibility ideology meet in today's medical practice.

Dr. Rothschild is professor emerita, the University of Massachusetts Lowell, and research associate, Center for Human Environments, Graduate Center of the City University of New York (CUNY). She received her B.A. degree from Cornell University, and M.A. and Ph.D. degrees from New York University.

Abstract

The dream of the perfect child

The revolution in genetics and the development of sophisticated technologies to select out the imperfect child have rekindled the dream of the perfect child. But the dream hides a nightmare and is an illusion. Meeting in the privacy of the doctor's office, decisions made by parents and medical professionals reflect deep-seated fears of bearing a child with birth defects. "Healthy" is conflated with "perfect," and the discourse of the perfect child is born. Having effects far beyond the patient-doctor setting, individual decisions aggregate to certify the acceptable fetuses who are wanted, and to label and reject the unwanted. The decisions become collective judgments against the imperfect.

Mainstream bioethics has ignored or has been ineffective in addressing the social and ethical implications of prenatal diagnosis practices. Counter-voices to the discourse of the perfect child arise, rather, among medical professionals, pregnant women, people with disabilities and their advocates, and among feminists. Through redefining the nature of human relationships, the work of feminist philosophers may provide a framework to articulate alternative approaches to reproductive medical care that serve the interests of the actors involved and place prenatal screening and testing in a broader social context. Reexamining cultural and ideological mindsets, such frameworks can enlist technology and science to transform the dream—the dream that every child be born healthy and wanted in all its uniqueness and diversity.