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24.06J / STS.006J Bioethics
Spring 2009

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Genetic Engineering
Session L15

- Michael Rogers, "The Pandora's Box Congress," *Rolling Stone* 189 (19 June 1975): 37-40, 42, 74, 77-78, 82.
- Jeremy Rifkin, "Ultimate Therapy: Commercial Eugenics in the 21st Century," *Harvard International Review* 27 (Spring 2005): 44-48.

Genetic engineering is a vast and important topic, probably getting more important every day. The readings look at two aspects. The first article describes efforts by scientists to regulate themselves at the dawn of the era of genetic engineering. The second looks at current choices and future possibilities, including the promise (or fear) of human genetic engineering.

Rogers, "The Pandora's Box Congress": Rogers, a successful journalist (Newsweek, Rolling Stone, MSNMC, etc.), attended a now famous conference in California in 1975, at which leading molecular biologists attempted to self-impose guidelines for the safe and appropriate development of recombinant DNA technology. His descriptions give a fascinating glimpse into the early days of genetic engineering, and the personalities of leading biologists (James Watson, David Baltimore, Paul Berg especially) -- the pictures themselves are worth the price of admission. What were the ethical concerns of the scientists (and journalists)? How did they balance realistic and exaggerated rhetoric (e.g. science fiction scenarios). In the end, what motivated scientists to adopt self-imposed restrictions on their work? Is Rogers's own writing realistic, or does he go over the top with the religious discussions, God-scientist, Garden of Eden metaphors? What are his obligations as a reporter?

Rifkin, "Ultimate Therapy": I apologize about the pale gray text in this article; if you zoom in enough, it is legible... Rifkin is an economist and best-selling author who studies the implications of new technology for society (for his extremely self-impressed biography, see <http://www.foet.org/JeremyRifkin.htm>). In this piece, he imagines a future of rampant gene therapy. Will the ability to correct genetic 'defects' oblige all parents to pursue gene therapy (the technological imperative)? Will it be immoral for parents to refuse technology that could optimize their offspring -- would this be a "heinous crime" (p. 46)? What will happen to people currently living with genetic disabilities? How does Rifkin use slippery slope arguments? In the end, what is his argument: does he think that germ line therapy is a good idea, a technological inevitability, or something that should be prevented?