

Beyond Perfectionism

by Michael J. Sleasman, PhD

With the Olympics soundly behind us and the rhythms of the fall launch of new television episodes well established, several reflections come to mind. An interesting thread below all of the accomplishments of the elite athletes during the Beijing Olympics were concerns over doping of various sorts. Artificial enhancements, steroids, hormones. These are not new issues surrounding the elite athletic competitions of our day, but they increasingly are becoming difficult to evaluate. For the first time during these Olympic events the world was introduced to the next generation of the pursuit of perfection through gene doping and stem cell injections. The irony to the events surrounding the Olympics were the artificial enhancements discovered by the news media of the various proceedings from digitally enhanced fireworks displays to lip-syncing children. In the age of Photoshopping we have become obsessed with perfection of the whole package. Or, to put it in the words of one Chicago Tribune author “we live in the Age of Fake.” In the realm of biology, our obsession with perfection has led us to an unprecedented desire to pursue making things bigger, better, and faster.

It really is no wonder that the pursuit of perfection has become an obsession of humanity. Whether it be for the sake of national pride or for personal gain, the average and the normal have been tossed to the wayside as humanity seeks to push the limits on achievement and advancement. We see this in the rising demand for neuroenhancements brokered by psychopharmacological stimulants to give the struggling academic or physician the necessary competitive edge to excel in their demanding professional environment. We see our national heroes in baseball and other professional sports falling prey to the allure of the shortcut to achievement and greatness through artificial stimulants and muscle building hormones.

As a new father, I feel this siren calling to me as well. The song is simple enough, seemingly innocuous. What parent does not want the best for his/her child? Indeed, the pursuit of perfection comes in many forms, some of which we have chosen to ignore. The most radical of these are the sorts of emerging biotechnologies that the Center engages on a daily basis. It is, however, the subtle forms of perfectionism that demonstrate how pervasive this desire has become to our everyday frame of reference. As I play with my son, I drift toward thoughts of how to stimulate his growing mind, how to make the most of each opportunity to teach him and create opportunities for knowledge and awareness of the world. What early parent does not find himself/herself dreaming of their children with idealized terms like prodigy, genius, gifted? And then it hits me, I have already begun to accept the allure of perfectionism.

This realization was brought home to me as I read through a book entitled *Hothouse Kids* by Alissa Quart. The connection to

perfectionism may not be readily apparent. In her volume Quart unpacks the experiences of various hothouse kids and their parents’ desires to help them achieve their full potential. She speaks of the rise of the edutainment industry and extreme parenting, all of which seek to squeeze out a few additional IQ points from our children in the pursuit of giving them options. In short, a category once withheld for a very small segment of all youthful humanity is now marketed as the unrealized potential of every child if only a parent would purchase this product or enroll his/her child in that particular program. The edutainment movement and the cottage industry of activities, programs, and products surrounding it are all a part of the pursuit of perfection for our children. In her lament over the threat to childhood, Quart decries the loss of unscripted imaginative play and its replacement with a curriculum that she describes in overtures to Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World* assembly-line approach to spawning designer progeny.



And this is where the second realization sinks in for me. The pursuit of perfection is most obvious when we begin altering the nature of what it means to be human from a biological standpoint. For anyone reading *Brave New World* for the first time they likely are horrified by the genetic engineering of humanity into various classes (from the Alphas to the Epsilons). But, in Huxley’s dystopia, the nature vs. nurture debate is put to an end. Both are fully exploited for utilitarian ends, from the utilization of “Bokanovsky’s Process” to the “Neo-Pavlovian Conditioning Rooms.” It is here that the subtle allure of perfectionism often is overlooked in the shift in perception that has made advanced and gifted

the new norm. Where children become venues of competition to secure the future wellbeing of their parents. Where we lose a notion of enjoying humanity in its everydayness of the mundane and normal. This is the delicate balancing act that we perform as we envision a truly human future. A future in which we celebrate the achievements of the elite and the marginal. Where we value the person for his and her given personhood apart from any functionalist reductionism that quantifies the value of a human person purely in terms of their physical or intellectual prowess, or their awards and accomplishments. Where we celebrate the testing of physical human limitations through sport and realize that it is those very limitations that demonstrate our common humanity. It is about coming to terms with our embodiment in finite human bodies that we realize what it means to be truly human. Where we recapture a common sense notion of normal that is not captive to some slippery slope of society’s changing mores, and where therapeutic and enhancement are clearly differentiated and have currency. Where the motivations that may one day lead us to the dilemma of designer babies are exposed in their now seemingly innocuous nascent states. It is here that we begin to see a way beyond perfectionism.

- 1). Keller, Julia. “Oh well, whatever, never mind,” *Chicago Tribune*. August 13, 2008.
- 2). Quart, Alissa. *Hothouse Kids: How the Pressure to Succeed Threatens Childhood*. New York: Penguin Press, 2007.