In What Way(s) is Genetic Testing Good or Bad?

In addition to the scientific and the technical, genetic testing also raises certain ethical issues visible in theoretical, political, and everyday discourse. Among various questions, there are problems such as confidentiality, decisions affecting the subject’s job career, and dilemmas whether the subject should know if she has a fatal disease such as Huntington’s chorea (Nickla, personal communication, January 21, 2004). It is easy to imagine some people arguing that genetic testing should be abandoned since it drastically disrupts certain aspects necessary for human flourishing. This paper argues the opposite, namely, that genetic testing is good. The argument consists of two parts. First, the concept of human flourishing is discussed. The emphasis is on the claim that human beings do not always know but rather learn how to flourish, and there is a wide range of possibilities within which people can be said to be flourishing. Second, genetic testing is described as conducive, or at least not interfering, with what we take to be characteristically human.

Human beings are necessarily connected to environment. There is mutual interaction between the two. Human flourishing can be thought of as a state when a human being feels an affinity between her own life history and actions on the one hand and her surroundings on the other. This definition is still intuitively vague, since one can readily come up with a counterexample of a criminal feeling good while making a crime. The definition must include an additional component specifying the limits within which human actions are acceptable. Although there is no consensus among ethical theorists
what this additional component should be, many think that it is the survival of humanity. An action is acceptable if and only if it improves, or does not diminish, the overall chances of the survival of the species. Thus on this account human flourishing is a harmony between the environment and a human being, or, more specifically, between her life history, given that the latter serves as a guide for the improvement of the overall chances of human survival.

In general, genetic testing improves overall chances of human survival. Identifying the relationship between genes and human functions is helpful for eliminating some genetically caused diseases, such as phenylketonuria (Nickla, personal communication, January 21, 2004), and might also become significant in improving human performance in various fields, for example cognition or physical fitness. However, genetic testing must be handled carefully. There is always a possibility of error, which might have undesirable consequences. A company might fire a good employee on the basis of a genetic test estimating that the employee is likely to possess certain disorders, while in reality this might not be the case.

An interesting objection to genetic testing is that it is somehow dehumanizing. In particular, some social institutions and activities, which are considered to be necessarily linked to a fully human life, might become obsolete as a result of the advances in genetics. A possible example is educational institutions as we have them today, provided that genetics succeeds in specifying the genes responsible for cognition and if it turns out that schools and universities are not optimal environment for the development of the human brain. However, in this scenario some other social practices would be developed,
replacing the obsolete ones. As long as they do not lead to self-destruction, alternative ways of human flourishing are just as, or even more, valuable as the current ones.