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The Price of Perfection: Individualism and Society in the Era of Biomedical Enhancement

Maxwell J. Mehlman

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Few would question the necessity of artificial limbs for amputees. But what of surgery to lengthen the legs of children who are merely shorter than average? Hardly anyone would challenge the decision to prescribe Aricept to people with dementia. But is it acceptable to give the same medication to airline pilots seeking sharper mental focus on long-haul flights?

Humans have engaged in biological self-improvement since long before recorded history, from the impotence-curing wild lotus brew of the ancient Egyptians to the herbal energy drink favored by early Olympians. Now biomedical enhancements are pushing the boundaries of possibility and acceptability. Where do we draw the line? How do we know the true ramifications of pioneering medicine? What price are we willing to pay for perfection?

Maxwell J. Mehlman's provocative examination of these issues speaks to fundamental questions of what it means to be human. He finds public officials ill-equipped to handle the ethical, scientific, and public policy quandaries of biomedical enhancement. Instead of engaging difficult questions of morality, access, fairness, and freedom, elected officials have crafted toothless and counterproductive laws and regulations.

Mehlman outlines policy options to boost the societal benefits and minimize the risks from these technologies. In the process, he urges the public to face the ethical issues surrounding biomedical enhancement, lest our quest for perfection compromise our very humanity.

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