

Basic Instructions for Barton Ethics Essay Competition

The issue:

Mandatory Genetic Testing?

Suppose a bill is introduced in the US Congress to make pre-marital genetic testing for serious genetic conditions mandatory, just as pre-marital testing for venereal disease is already mandatory in most states. It is argued that this is in the best interests of the community as well as the couples planning to marry, since otherwise many children might be born with terrible genetic diseases that could be avoided. If the tests could be administered in a way that was affordable and accurate, should the government require them?

Some important points to keep in mind:

1. The central question is whether genetic testing should be mandatory, not what should be done with the information the tests reveal.
2. A couple that receives an undesirable genetic test has many options open to them. They could decide not to marry at all or decide not to have any biological children. If they do marry and plan to have biological children, they could prevent or minimize the genetic risk through gamete screening or in vitro fertilization using donated gametes or pre-implantation screening of the fertilized eggs. or they could eliminate the risk altogether by terminating a pregnancy expected to produce a genetically diseased child.. Finally, even if they decided to take no precautions at all, they could still use the information to prepare themselves (psychologically, emotionally, financially, etc.) to deal with the health problems their child is likely to have
3. The question this year is whether the government should mandate a test, but please keep in mind that this is first and foremost an *ethical*, rather than a political or policy question. You should present *ethical reasons* for your position. (Throughout this document, we use the term “ethical” as a synonym of the term “moral.”) The issue cannot be resolved by mere reference to certain individuals—or even a large group or majority—who believe one thing or another. What matters are the reasons—*ethical reasons*—people may have for believing as they do. *Ethical reasons* may relate to (a) the consequences associated with an action (thus, one may consider whether the consequences are good or bad, or whether they count as benefits or costs); (b) whether an action respects or violates the moral rights of individuals (in this case one might focus attention on whether others would be treated as they deserve to be treated); or (c) whether an action promotes important values or contributes to the development of good character (in which case one might focus on whether an action promotes or hinders one’s efforts to be a truly admirable person or in this case, country), for example.
4. Try to imagine what an *intelligent* opponent would say and then respond appropriately. Talking with or reading articles by people who disagree with you is very helpful. This can help you identify weaknesses in your own thinking, so

that you can correct them.

5. Write more than one rough draft, put each aside and come back to it later. You will be able to see things that need to be fixed or changed that you would not otherwise see. For example, you'll be able to see whether some parts of the paper conflict with other parts, whether some passages are unclear or ambiguous (and need to be rewritten), etc.
6. The essay must be your own work (although you may discuss ideas and drafts with others). See Clemson's academic integrity policy:
<http://www.clemson.edu/ugs/integrity.htm>
7. Any sources you have consulted in writing the essay must be cited. (Citations should not be included in the word count of your essay.)
8. Be especially wary of online sources. Don't use them uncritically. Some are good, some are not. (Citations from most government sources, university sites, large newspapers, etc. may not be problematic, but citations from Joe Blow's website generally need to be supported by some reasoning as to why we should pay attention to what Joe Blow says.)