Sex Selection via "Sperm-Sorting": A Morally Acceptable Option?

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Editor's note: The following commentary is based on articles originally appearing in The Seattle Times, the BBC, and The Times. These articles were posted on the Center's web site on October 17, 2002 under the news heading "New Technique Lets Parents Pick Baby's Gender."

Sex selection by means of infanticide is condemned as outrageously immoral by the Western world. But what about sex selection by means of "sperm sorting"? Is this an acceptable option? It does not involve killing as do sex selection and infanticide by means of pre-implantation diagnosis and selective abortion. While this aspect of the technology is commendable, its morality depends on the purpose for which it is employed.

The sperm-sorting technique pioneered at the Genetics & IVF Institute in Fairfax, Virginia involves no loss of human life at any stage. What is involved, rather, is the separation of male sperm from female sperm. This, then, is a technique for separating sperm carrying a Y chromosome (which would create a male embryo) from sperm carrying an X chromosome (which would create a female embryo). The process involves adding a fluorescent dye to the sperm which enables sperm-sorting, since "girl sperm" carry more DNA than "boy sperm." When the sperm is sent through a "flow cytometer" in which a laser beam causes the dyed DNA to glow, sperm that would create a girl should produce a brighter glow than sperm that would result in a boy. The approach has proven to be 91% successful for couples seeking a girl and 73% successful for couples desiring a boy, which makes it much more successful than earlier techniques.

Initially developed to sort bull sperm, the technique also seems to be safe, though there is some worry that the fluorescent dye added to the sperm (which attaches itself to the sperm's DNA)
might cause damage. However, according to Dr Susan Black from the Fairfax Institute, the percentage of defects among children produced by the procedure is not in excess of the normal. She is no doubt referring to children created by in vitro fertilization, since IVF involves risks of its own.

But are accuracy and safety the only relevant issues at stake? Certainly not! It must be stated here that there is an important difference between sex selection for so-called "social reasons" and sex selection in order to avoid a serious sex-linked disease, such as Duchenne muscular dystrophy. In the case of sex selection by sperm-sorting to avoid a serious disease, the couple avoids the creation of an abnormal embryo and they do so in a manner that does not involve the loss of human life (unlike sex selection by pre-implantation diagnosis). With regard to such a situation, we are not speaking about an arbitrary choice made merely to satisfy a subjective preference for a boy or a girl. For this reason, sex selection by sperm-sorting followed by IVF or artificial insemination by husband (AIH) would be morally acceptable from the point of view of most Christians (although the Roman Catholic Church would still object to it inasmuch as it objects to AIH and IVF, and Evangelical Christians would likely require that the IVF not result in the destruction of "surplus" embryos).

Sex selection for "social reasons," however, involves eugenic discrimination (even if it involves no loss of human life). It involves a failure to accept the child-to-be as a gift. For, seen as a gift--a gift from God--the child will be unconditionally welcomed and accepted as a member of the human family, possessing the same inherent dignity as the rest of us. But when the child is not so seen and treated, but is treated as a product to be manufactured according to human design and desire, its human dignity is denied and its welcome less certain.

This is the most important objection to sex selection, even if there are other more consequentialist considerations as well (such as the fear that sex selection would lead to an imbalance between the sexes and possibly to increased gender stereotyping). Unless they are seeking to circumvent the threat of a sex-linked disease, those who go down the path of sex selection will embark upon a slippery slope towards ever more parental demands for a child of a particular type. Such a slippery slope will render one generation the masters of the next.