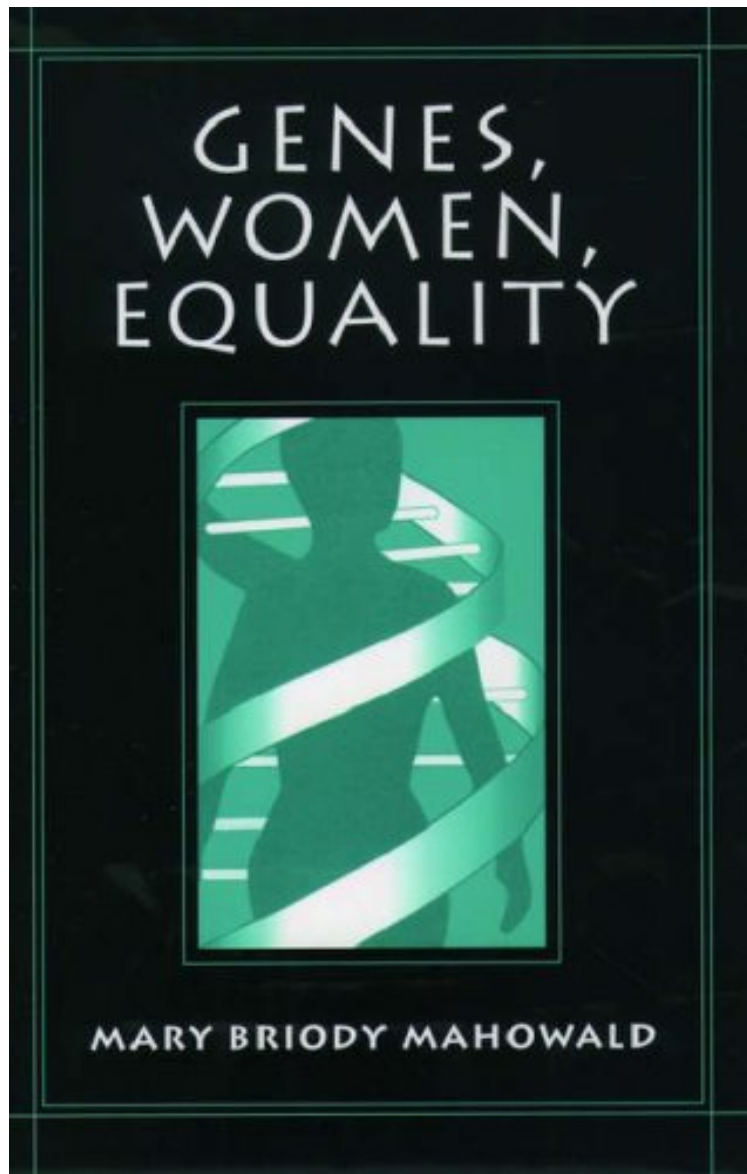


Genes, Women, Equality

Mary Briody Mahowald

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Mary Briody Mahowald : Genes, Women, Equality before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Genes, Women, Equality:

Genetics is not gender neutral in its impact. Mahowald cites a wide range of biological and psychosocial examples that

reveal its different impact on men and women, especially with regard to reproduction and caregiving. She examines the extent to which these differences are associated with gender injustice, arguing for positions that reduce inequality between the sexes. The critical perspective Mahowald brings to this analysis is an egalitarian interpretation of feminism that demands attention to inequalities arising from racism, ethnocentrism, ableism, and classism as well as sexism. Eschewing a notion of equality as sameness, Mahowald defines equality as attribution of the same value to different objects. Gender justice, she claims, imputes the same value to men and women, despite their differences. It can only be maximized by practical efforts to equalize the burdens and benefits associated with genetics. The topics considered include participation in research, allocation of genetic services, cultural difference, sex selection, misattributed paternity, prenatal and preimplantation diagnosis, carrier testing, genetic interventions, genetic disabilities, preferences for genetic ties to offspring, genetic susceptibility to late onset disorders, behavioral genetics, genetic discrimination in employment and insurance, and human cloning. Cases, both real and concocted, are used to illustrate the questions addressed.

From *The New England Journal of Medicine* Since the advent of the Human Genome Project in 1990, ethicists, geneticists, physicians, and commentators have explored the implications of this government-sponsored effort to map and sequence the human genome. The past decade has also witnessed an increase in explorations of science and scientific methods by feminist theorists. Mary Briody Mahowald, a well-known contributor to the literature of feminist bioethics, bridges these two fields in *Genes, Women, Equality*, a study of "gender equality in genetics." The result should be of interest to bioethicists, feminist theorists, and practitioners in the field of medical genetics. The book covers a broad range of issues, including genetic testing, behavioral genetics, cloning, fertility treatments, and the availability of genetic counseling services and health insurance. The broad net Mahowald casts is both a strength and a weakness: though she raises numerous provocative questions, readers might find that the book's 16 chapters, each with its own numerous subheadings, often resemble a series of short essays rather than a coherent text. Several sections of the book stand out. Mahowald's examination of the vagaries of gene therapy, particularly the ethical implications of the use of these techniques to enhance a feature, as opposed to curing or preventing a problem, are engaging and informative. Her discussion of approaches such as preimplantation genetic diagnosis during fertility treatments offers the reader an entree into the ethical territory opened by new methods of reproductive technology. Throughout the book, Mahowald's ethical compass points to an "egalitarian feminist standpoint theory." She constantly invokes and places great value on the perspectives of "nondominant" groups -- here defined as women, the poor, racial and ethnic minorities, and the disabled. White men, it is assumed, have a discrete worldview that, according to feminist theory, is often inimical to the well-being of women. Drawing on the work of feminist theorists such as Nancy Hartsock and Donna Haraway, Mahowald rejects objectivity in bioethics as a pretense and chides bioethicists and geneticists for failing to recognize that their dominant position in society has fostered myopia about the experiences of nondominant groups. For Mahowald, critique and correction of this nearsightedness are the first steps on the path to "gender justice" in genetics. But Mahowald's egalitarian feminist standpoint rests on several questionable assumptions. For example, the notion that nondominant groups in society have a superior perspective simply because of their nondominant position -- and thus that geneticists and bioethicists should ascribe to them a "privileged status" -- is presented uncritically, as is her claim that biologic differences between the sexes are necessarily disadvantageous to women and thus require social policies to reduce their harmful effect. Weaknesses in the feminist-standpoint theory also emerge when Mahowald tackles difficult questions about women's autonomy with regard to forms of genetic technology. Mahowald suggests, for example, that genetic enhancement in utero -- that is, strategies to improve a child's ultimate physical and intellectual endowments -- could create a new form of discrimination against women, as they face "overt and covert" pressure to alter potential children genetically. Although it is worthwhile to question what influence social expectations might have on a person's decision to seek genetic therapy, Mahowald feels that the pressure is solely on women. In the process she misses far more provocative questions, such as how feminist-standpoint theorists reconcile the fact that there are many women who, if given the opportunity, would eagerly engage in genetic manipulation to engineer perfect children for themselves. The conclusions Mahowald draws from some of her case studies are also less than compelling, such as the story of Julia, a pregnant 27-year-old woman with the metabolic disorder phenylketonuria who refused to follow dietary restrictions during her pregnancy and who gave birth to a severely retarded child as a result. Invoking feminist-standpoint theory, Mahowald defends Julia's behavior by arguing that her interests -- as the person "most affected" -- were paramount. Though the story is rife with possibilities for further examination, particularly the ethical implications of the interests of the potential child, Mahowald relegates these issues to a footnote, where she avers that the interests of the child, as a nonautonomous being, are not at issue. Mahowald's feminist orientation sometimes leads her to accept claims uncritically. For example, she states that women have been underrepresented in clinical trials. This is a myth that is entrenched in the women's health literature. Her outlook prompts her to see potential victims around every corner. For example, she worries that genetic researchers may try to "coopt" poor or uninsured women as unpaid test subjects in clinical studies of no demonstrable benefit to the women. Mahowald's use of feminist-standpoint theory is not without its strengths. Her dedication to "collaborative inquiry" in

genetics is surely worthy, and questions about the public's access to and understanding of genetic technology are issues of which all medical geneticists should be aware. Mahowald's argument for a more inclusive bioethics is fully in keeping with the emphasis feminist bioethicists place on marginalized social groups, and when it serves as a reminder to medical geneticists to consider the different experiences of their patients, it is useful. But in looking constantly at the margins, Mahowald often misses the solid center -- the questions about moral agency and ethics that apply to all persons, regardless of group identification. Despite the difficulties with Mahowald's use of feminist-standpoint theory, the book offers readers a good introduction to the range of questions feminist bioethicists are posing. Although we may not reach a state of complete ethical certainty on many of these issues, Mahowald's work serves as an excellent reminder that genetics requires of its practitioners a continuing commitment to their exploration. Christine Stolba, Ph.D. Copyright 2000 Massachusetts Medical Society. All rights reserved. The New England Journal of Medicine is a registered trademark of the MMS. "...an important perspective on current and future genetic practices and policies. This book is an essential read for feminists and nonfeminists alike who are scholars and practitioners of genetic technologies."--Hypatia

About the Author
Mary Briody Mahowald is at University of Chicago.