CENTER VALLEY – Last week, an article in The Morning Call reported on the practice of pre-implantation genetic diagnosis (PGD) as a high-tech means of family planning. Now available locally, this laboratory technique, when used as a means of gender selection, allows parents-to-be to stack the chromosomal deck of their offspring in their favor. Though acknowledged as still too complex and costly for widespread use, this procedure nevertheless has a tantalizing appeal. Now, it seems, family balance can be planned and executed with greater scientific certainty.

Dr. Bruce Rose, the endocrinologist who directs Infertility Solutions in Salisbury Township, put the promise of this procedure into words that lay bare the popular perspective: “We have the capability, we know it’s effective and we think it’s a choice patients should be allowed to make.” Deeper examination of this sound bite, however, reveals a flawed view of faith, freedom, and family. Rather than being a solution to life’s uncertainties, PGD used for gender selection is a sure risk to the dissolution of what is most precious in society.

Praise for PGD and related procedures – collectively what the Oxford University bioethicist Julian Savulescu qualifies as “procreative beneficence” – arises from an unbridled faith in the power of science and technology. To its credit, science has given us innumerable and incredible advances in healthcare. The ability to diagnose and treat disease at any stage of life, and now at the embryonic level, is a testament to modern medical research, the fruits of which call for intellectual appreciation. But capability can lead to culpability when science is subjected to self-interest and when the marvels of technology mask the ethics of human well-being. In short, just because we can do things, even amazing ones, doesn’t necessarily mean we should.

Hidden behind a claim to beneficence, technological approaches to procreation witness to the materialist and utilitarian values befitting belief in the proverbial god of science. PGD as a means of gender selection requires producing a batch of embryos, cellular testing that destroys the viability of some of
them, and willful selection of some as more useful than others. Even without resorting to religious objections of abortion or philosophical claims against eugenics, it should be clear that gender selection favors the vision of a child, if not also his/her valuation, in reductive terms of the material of which he/she is made.

Potential parents may wish their next child to be a girl rather than a boy. But undertaking invasive means to make that happen discloses a shift in parental perspective from wish to want, from desire to demand. And preference coupled with power is the recipe for tyranny. Far less obtrusive at the level of family planning than of political governance, the flawed mentality that justifies anyone’s domination of other persons is nonetheless a threat to everyone’s freedom.

PGD may well be an effective way to screen for gender, but, as University of Pennsylvania bioethicist Art Caplan rightly noted in the article, “Gender is not a disease.” Shifting biotechnology from the realm of therapeutic diagnosis to that of preferential selection opens the door to adducing any number of traits as desirable, or not. Though the technology may yet be too complex and costly, the mental step from desirability to design is but a short one.

The desire to have children is a powerful and natural pull on the minds and hearts of human beings. Responsible procreation remains a noble and worthy ideal. But construing gender selection as an authentic choice for forming a family confuses planning with manipulation. Seeking a scientific guarantee of gender suggests that the fulfillment of one’s instinctual drive for progeny is more about the parent than the child. Beneficence, in this case, is for the grown-ups. When self-satisfaction serves as the motivation rather than the result, the awesomeness of child-bearing loses some of its luster.

In the article on PGD, a researcher at the Johns Hopkins Genetics and Public Policy Center asks, “who is responsible for setting limits if limits are appropriate?” Given the growing acceptability of techniques portrayed as beneficial to families, we all are, at least in terms of understanding their dangerous allure for our cultural well-being.

Children are gifts, not commodities. They come with no guarantee and no warranty. Wonder, not manufacture, kindles their beauty.