

'Genetic Manipulation'

To the Editor:

Professor Amitai Etzioni's Sept. 5 "Topics" column "Genetic Manipulation and Morality" is another contribution to the demonology of genetic engineering that obscures the important dilemmas of health policy requiring open-ended public discussion and participation.

The Congressional committee testimony to which he alludes gives no justification for "ordering supermen" by the task force which I advocated. It is a plea for establishing the relative urgency of various categories of human misery, like mental retardation, cystic fibrosis, heart disease, dia-

betes and many other conditions which have an important genetic component.

"Shopping for genes" is a phrase of his own invention; perhaps he means nothing more than the aspiration for healthy life to which most of us plead guilty. I also stressed that it would be both technically and socially advantageous to concentrate on ways of modulating the untoward effects of deleterious genes whenever possible for therapeutic purposes in preference to strenuous efforts at modifying the genes themselves.

His point that we ought to explore the aggregate social effects of individual decisions is an excellent one. This of course is important in the therapy of genetic disease, but also in the assessment of every other claim on precious resources like scientific talent and medical service. It is especially needed when humanitarian motives lead us out of the conventional marketplace, where each consumer makes his own allocation of limited resources for the most valued aims.

Such an exploration is, however, confused rather than advanced by phrases like "genetic engineering," which are as prejudicial as it would be to call surgery "anatomical manipulation," education "psychological control," or scientific nutrition "molding a superbaby." JOSHUA LEDERBERG

Stanford, Calif., Sept. 10, 1970

The writer, Professor of Genetics at Stanford School of Medicine, won the Nobel Prize in Physiology and Medicine, 1958.