Woodward takes a dip in gene pool as Mackey asks ethical questions

By RAY BROWN
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"Should the geneticist attempt to augment the human gene pool?"

With that question Rice professors Val Woodward and Louis Mackey, biologist and philosopher, respectively, opened a debate entitled "The Ethics of Human Genetic Control." The discussion was the second of Brown College's speaker programs.

Approximately one-hundred persons were on hand in the Brown Commons only to be disappointed by the remarkable amount of agreement between the two principals. The debate deteriorated further when Mackey left for a seminar and Woodward fielded all of the audience's questions.

Woodward began the discussion with the premises that (1) the human gene pool lacks certain genes, (2) the scientist has the obligation to explore and make known facts about genetic structure, and (3) the gene pool can be augmented. From these premises, Woodward stated that heterogeniety is the human race's greatest asset and any changes of genetic make-up should preserve this balance.

As to the means of augmenting the gene pool, Woodward said that methods for such have been known for two or three thousand years. The method would be either cross-breeding, such as in plants and lower animals, or the development of a clone. A clone is an off-spring produced asexually.

Woodward's only reservation in the process was that mistakes or mutants would be present. The treatment of these mutants is the main problem. In closing out his argument, Woodward related that he would not be surprised in the least if the theoretical knowledge needed for such a project becomes available in the next five to ten years.

Irreversible

Mackey based his stand on the reservation that such genetic work could be irreversible and if the results were not the desired ones, no changes would be possible.

Mackey also questioned who would have the ultimate decision as to whether such work should be done on the population. He argued that if the change were permanent, the decision would be of greatest importance and impossible to make fairly.

Mackey aired one other reservation during the session. The philosophy professor wondered at the consequences of having genetically alike persons.