

Bioethics Book Club

Flowers for Algernon

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Mariner Books, First Harvest Edition 2004, first published 1959

Summary¹

Charlie Gordon is 32 years old and born with an unusually low I.Q. He has been chosen to participate in a scientific experiment which has as its purpose to increase his I.Q. through surgical intervention. The procedure has been tested with success in a lab mouse, named Algernon. Charlie is excited to participate in the experiment and is highly motivated to learn. After undergoing the experimental surgery, Charlie's I.Q. increases rapidly and soon surpasses that of the doctors, Dr. Strauss and Dr. Nemur, who have engineered the experiment. Everything points towards a scientific breakthrough, but then Algernon starts to deteriorate. The question is now, what will happen to Charlie?

Ethical Issues

Informed consent	Respects for Human research subjects
Autonomy	Authenticity
Identity	Animal experimentation

Discussion questions:

- Imagine you are a member of a Research Ethics Board at Dr. Nemur's institution and were to review the application for ethics approval for this experiment. What would your primary ethical concerns be with this type of experiment?
- Charlie assents to his participation in the experiment, but informed consent to his participation is provided by his sister, Norma. In progress report 5 Charlie describes the consent process. Discuss Charlie's understanding of the experiment, its purpose, and what it might do to him, focusing on ethical concerns that might arise.
- What are the wider moral implications of Dr. Nemur's experiment?
- What is the difference between referring to someone as 'mentally retarded' versus 'having developmental disability'?²

¹ Partly adapted from publishers summary.

² Nash C, Hawkins A, Kawchuk J, Shea S. (2012) What's in a name? Attitudes surrounding the use of the term "mental retardation". *Paediatrics & Child Health* 17(2): 71-74.
<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3299349/>

- How does Charlie's mother's dementia compare to Charlie's experience as he begins to revert to his previous condition?
- What role does Algernon play in Charlie's life?
- Compare Charlie as he is at the beginning of the novel and at the end. How does the experiment change him? How does that affect your assessment of the ethics of the experiment?
- In your opinion, what statement does the author make about the role of intelligence in human life?
- How does intelligence affect quality of life assessments in health care?

Discuss the following passages from the book:

- (p.68) And then Nemur: "We've predicted the pattern correctly so far. We're justified in making an interim report. I tell you, Jay, there's nothing to be afraid of. We've succeeded. It's all positive. Nothing can go wrong now." Strauss: "This is too important to all of us to bring it out into the open prematurely. You're taking the authority on yourself".
- (p.240) "What eludes me is the reason for his regression – is it a special case? An isolated reaction? Or is there some general principle of failure basic to the whole procedure? I've got to work out the rule. If I can find that out, and if it adds even one jot of information to whatever else has been discovered about mental retardation and the possibility of helping others like myself, I will be satisfied. Whatever happens to me, I will have lived a thousand normal lives by what I might add to others, not yet born. That's enough."
- (p.217) "We freeze our specimens before we dispose of them in the incinerator. It helps cut down the odours if we control decomposition." He turned to leave, but I stood there for a moment. "Not Algernon", I said. "Look...if, and...when...I mean, I don't want him dumped in there. Give him to me. I'll take care of him myself."
- (p.309) "Then all of a sudden I remembered some things about the operashun and me getting smart and I said holy smoke I reely pulled a Charlie Gordon that time. I went away before she came back to the room. That's why Im going away from here for good to the Warren Home school."
- (p.248) "I'm an individual now, and so was Charlie before he ever walked into that lab. You look shocked! Yes, suddenly we discover that I was always a person – even before – and that challenges your belief that someone with an I.Q. of less than 100 doesn't deserve consideration. Professor Nemur, I think when you look at me your conscience bothers you."