

Philosophical paper: gattaca essay



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

What will it be like in a not-so-distant future society where your life started with your parents designing your genes? After screening for unwanted genetic diseases, they select your sex, height, eye color, hair color, skin tone, and select from a menu of temperament, intelligence and occupational categories, all designed to place you in a clearly defined social class according to your degree of genetic enhancement. (Epstein)

The film *Gattaca*, a 1997 science-fiction prediction directed by Andrew M. Niccol, serves as a pictorial essay of the struggles and conflicts that befall two opposite characters, one “superior” genetically engineered valid and one “inferior” natural born invalid. From the opening quote (a text from the bible, Ecclesiastes 7: 13) “Consider what God has done: Who can straighten what he has made crooked?” Niccol makes the inference that mankind, self-consumed in its own infinite wisdom, should not be tinkering with redesigning human organisms and serves as an early warning of unintended consequences of genetic engineering on society in the not too distant future.

The director’s position on germ line engineering, the changing of genes in eggs, sperm, or very early embryos (organicconsumers.org) manifests itself in the physical, mental, and social challenges of the main character Vincent Freeman, who was born naturally into a society of genetically-altered “perfect” human beings. Scenes that depict the seeming never-ending struggles include Vincent constantly compared to his perfectly engineered brother Anton.

The erasing (by Vincent) evidences the rivalry of height measurements on a yardstick as the siblings growth is charted by their parents. Another poignant

element of this struggle between “ good vs. evil” is played out in a swimming gamed called “ chicken” in which the two brothers test each other’s stamina by swimming out into the ocean, the goal being to outlast the opponent.

Vincent routinely loses in this game until one day, through dogged determination and an unwillingness to give up, Vincent outlast his brother and actually saves is life in the process. The significance of this is that Niccol is championing the indomitable spirit of man, for which there is no gene. It is this struggle to overcome all odds, and persistence inherits in our own natural makeup that is superior to anything that may be produced artificially or is some “ advanced” technological means. As the film progresses, Vincent is determined to compete for positions in society reserved strictly for valids.

Refusing to accept his fate, he buys the genes of a superior being from a black marketer, undergoes a transformation, and assumes the identity of Jerome, who is a genetically engineered athlete plagued by feelings of self-destructions because he cannot be the best at what he was “ programmed” for. Jerome, because of his own inadequacies, agrees to help Vincent in his quest, but as we are later to find out in the final scene of the film, it comes at a very high price: his own suicide. Irene” is a third character introduced by Niccol as an “ almost perfect” worker with a small heart murmur who is passed over for selection on a space missions. Her association with Vincent makes her realize that her own imperfections are of no consequence to success, and that self-realization and determination are the real ingredients in making your dreams come true. She represents the gray area between black and white; she is an entity that slipped through the cracks of man’s thorough investigation and exhaustive research into this emerging science.

Her presence in the story represents Niccol's view that you cannot create some implausible, sanitized, "Third Reich" society with super computers and five-star sperm without the risk of not knowing all the consequences of your actions. (www. ivenus. com) Niccol raises important ethical concerns, not only dealing Jerome's decision to self-destruct, but of other unforeseen issues that lie ahead in this arena of science. Where is the line of acceptability between preventing severe birth defects or diseases on the one hand and genetically engineering a homogenous race of "perfect" humans on the other?

The sale of superior genomes that guarantee living longer, growing taller, and jumping higher will be the supermarket of tomorrow. The sale of germ line engineering will certainly not be free. Will it create a new genetic gap between the "haves" and the "have-nots"? (Designer Babies-Ethics) The suicide of Jerome is Niccol's way of saying that even "perfect" humans have flaws and that despite all the advancements in technology, we may eradicate unwanted diseases and undesirable human traits, but we still might not be any happier.

After view this film and presented with the inherent dangers of genetically engineering a "perfect" human being, I believe it is morally wrong to pursue this uncharted territory of medical science and technology. The final scene in which Vincent, the imperfect child, blasts off to attain his dream and Jerome, the perfect genetic specimen, self-destructs in one last pitiful act of failure, is the author's poignant way of telling us there is no such thing as a perfect human being, and a pursuit to this end will be futile.

Given the chance, I would probably allow myself to be retrofitted, but the procedure would be in conflict with my personal beliefs and based more on the aspects of prevailing societal acceptance and the necessity to survive. This will be a world influenced and dominated by the wealthy few, whose quest for power will not only amplify the disparity among social classes but will also increasingly erode our moral and ethical responsibilities inherent in preserving our precious human race and life as we know it.