

At the Baseline

For my Student Devised Assessment, I chose to write an interactive story called “At the Baseline”, which can be found on the mobile application “Episode: Choose Your Story”. The story features two alternative storylines, based on whether the reader chooses to ‘design’ a future baby or not.

The idea I wished to investigate in this project first came to my attention during the screening of *Gattaca*, in the first week of the module. *Gattaca*, like most works of fiction that deal with the concept of “Designer Babies”, presents a highly dystopian world. The class divide is larger than ever before, with the most ‘genetically perfect’ people adopting the higher positions in society, and the least ‘genetically privileged’ performing the least desirable roles. With companies having full access into perspective employees’ genetic information, a person with a ‘weaker’ DNA is left with no means to turn their life around. The entire worldview of the movie did not sit well with me. I thought to myself, “why is the concept of “Designer Babies” always synonymous with a dystopian world? What makes it so bad?”

For efficiency purposes, I will leave the Second World War outside of this question. I assume that the collective scars still left from the Holocaust are enough to prevent us from ever falling into the ‘Eugenics’ trap again. Instead, I aim to focus on logic. Why would companies be given access to a person’s full genetic information in the first place? Scandals featuring the UK Biobank and 23andMe prove just how sensitive society is over the protection of genetic information, even if it is entirely anonymous (Williams, 89). Is it possible that the future generation will lose all ethical instincts? Is mass stupefaction the destiny of the human species?

Well, I do not believe so. Rightfully or Wrongfully, I still have faith in the human species' ability to learn from its mistakes and evolve. After all, does not every new technology spark a massive overreaction in society, before we finally learn to enjoy its fruit? In my twenty years of existence, I have experienced protests against the introduction of GMOs in the market. I have also experienced protests against the consumption of cow's milk, urging its replacement with the genetically altered soya milk. It is not that many years.

In this mindset, I decided to attack the dystopian outlook on Designer Babies with logic. I started setting premises for a thought experiment: 1. The human race does not fall into mass stupefaction, 2. Designing babies, or Genetic Engineering, is legal. The purpose of the thought experiment would be to investigate the pros and cons of the society it gives birth to. The resulting story describes the conclusions I derived by completing said thought experiment.

Harris's and Chan's article "Understanding the Ethics of Genetic Enhancement", was the starting point for the formation of my argument. They present a great example in order to debunk the assumption that "enhancements that create inequality among people [are] ethically concerning": an athlete who uses drugs during a race is behaving immorally because he is disrespecting the rules of that specific race (Harris et al, 338). However, nobody would consider an athlete behaving immorally for possessing the particular set of genetic and material resources that would enable him to participate in that kind of race (Harris et al, 338). As Harris and Chan put it: "Enhancements are a benefit because they are good for the enhanced individual independently of any competitive advantage they also confer" (Harris et al, 338).

The key word in this example is “individual”. It is no secret that the contemporary Western world, where I happen to live, consists of highly individualistic, capitalist societies. That is the root of all ethical concerns about Genetic Enhancement or Reprogenetics. It is all nice and well to boast about how much choice we are given in today’s world, provided we are born with the right genetic and/or material resources to obtain access to all these choices. I always found it baffling that people seem to address the concept of an enhanced genetic material with so much anxiety, when in fact, it is the driving force that runs our society. It just so happens to be delivered at random. People are either naturally born in a privileged household, or with a unique set of talents, a high level of intelligence, physical attractiveness, or all of the above, and they go on to rule the world. Therefore, although *Gattaca* is right to draw our attention to this issue, it is by no means a novelty.

While watching the movie, I was frustrated at the movie’s choice of villains. I thought to myself, “surely the villains are the protagonist’s parents for granting their child the worst possible start in life?” In the world of *Gattaca*, not being ‘designed’ guarantees you the honour of polishing a toilet seat for the rest of your life. However, as I previously argued, the world of my story would not be a Dystopia. Thus, the question remains: Given the option, do we have the obligation to provide our children with the best possible start in life?

In his work “Procreative Beneficence: Why We Should Select the Best Children”, Julian Savulescu argues that it is a matter of opting for the accumulation of characteristics that increase the probability of a child’s “well-being” (Savulescu, 414-416). Since his argument generally revolves around embryo selection and not design, it has been defied by countless perfectly content, disabled individuals. For instance, as

Stern et al point out in their study, many deaf people refuse cochlear implants, as deafness is part of their identity (Stern et al, 450). Nevertheless, this debate mostly concerns the implications of being born disabled in today's world, where most disabilities come hand in hand with a relevant community, ready to welcome the disabled individual. However, in a future society where designing children is a standard procedure, it is unquestionable that less people would be born disabled in the first place. In this case, does refusing to design one's child increase the danger of depriving said child of a community?

This is where class divide comes into play. My story is set in a world where Genetic Engineering is still a relatively new technology. Like all relatively new technologies, it comes at a high cost. This follows that only the middle and upper classes would afford it. The result is an increase in the already existing class divide: the rich are now also genetically perfect and thus, all the more privileged, while the poor rely on the flip of a coin. Nevertheless, class divide is an already existing problem in society. Possessing the perfect DNA is hardly a privilege when you cannot afford food. In other words, technology is not the problem. Capitalism is.

The community issue, however, is a genuine problem in my opinion, which is reflected through Cam's struggles in the story. Still, Cam is much more confident and overall happier than the perfectly 'able' protagonist in the "No Genetic Engineering" condition. I made that choice in order to demonstrate that happiness is highly relative. You can have the perfect DNA and still be perfectly miserable.

However, disability is only one aspect of the issue. After all, most people are born fully 'able'. Genetic Engineering offers something more than that: your children can now be as physically attractive as their DNA allows, while predispositions for

various disorders can be removed. The documentary series *Year Million* warns about the danger of “uniformity” (*Year Million*, episode 2). However, provided that race and skin tone cannot be altered, giving parents the opportunity to design their babies would simply test the “beauty is in the eye of the beholder” theory. My prediction is that diversity would still exist, as every DNA is different. If “uniformity” refers to a world inhabited by beautiful people, then, frankly, I do not really see anything wrong with that. Contemporary literature draws our attention to the fact that today’s society celebrates “diversity” only as far as the individual in question is conventionally attractive. This is cleverly illustrated in the novel *Private Citizens*, where paraplegic, conventionally attractive Vanya, is treated with admiration and respect, unlike her fully-abled, short, chubby, Asian boyfriend. I attempted to highlight this tension by drawing the reader’s attention to the differences between conventionally attractive Cam and the not-so-conventionally attractive protagonist in the “No Genetic Engineering” condition.

Seeing that my thought experiment kept leading me towards already existing issues in society, I decided to write an interactive story, so as to leave the question of whether we should design our children or not to the reader. The main themes of the story are quite conventional, maybe even cliché. This is because presenting a familiar, easy-to-follow plot serves to expand my target audience. The multiple repetitions present in the story are not accidental. Like pretty much everything else in the story, they intend to showcase that the implementation of this new technology would not change much, besides accentuating already existing issues to a small degree. My view is that the world will not go crazy: diversity will still exist, disabled people will exist, problems will exist, opportunities will exist. A new tension would be the pressure to design one’s child, as illustrated in the beginning of the story. Still, not all parents

would opt for the service, while pressure can go both ways, as shown in the beginning of the story. The key message I wished to convey is that we should focus on working on the issues we currently face (bullying, class divide, discrimination), rather than lose our minds over some technology that is not even in use yet. More importantly, to quote Terry, “perfect genes don’t make perfect lives”.

Works Cited

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Link to the story: <http://episodeinteractive.com/s/6284947728236544>