GATTACA (1997)

PHILOSOPHICAL ISSUES: Free will, genetic engineering

CHARACTERS: Vincent/Jerome (Ethan Hawke), Eugene (Jude Law, the real Jerome), Irene (Uma Thurman), Director Josef (director of Gattaca), Detective Hugo (Alan Arkin, investigator), Anton (Vincent’s brother, investigator)

SYNOPSIS: In a future time when people are born genetically engineered, Vincent is the product of natural reproduction and is genetically predicted to die at age 30. Vincent defies his fate and under false identity enters Gattaca, an astronaut training program for a manned mission to a moon of Saturn. Vincent borrows the genetic identity of a paralyzed athlete named Jerome, in the form of blood samples, hair clippings, and skin scrapings. When one of Gattaca’s supervisors is murdered, investigators are brought in and they soon discover the presence of Vincent’s real DNA. He thus becomes a suspect and attempts to dodge efforts that link his real DNA to his new identity. The real murder is eventually caught, and Vincent successfully makes the Saturn voyage. “Gattaca” deals with two distinct PHILOSOPHICAL ISSUES: The morality of creating genetically engineered humans, and the ability to act contrary to our biological predispositions. Both of these points are encapsulated in an advertising line for the movie: “There’s no gene for the human spirit.”
DISCUSSION QUESTIONS FOR GATTACA:

Choose two discussion questions from below and think about how YOU feel about the issue being highlighted. Then answer both questions to the best of your ability. Feel free to use examples from your life, current events, the GATTACA movie, or any other popular media you have seen that deals with this topic. Answers must be at least 200 words each and either typed or written NEATLY (sloppy work will not be graded and returned to the student). These will be due when you return on Monday after Spring Break. I suggest you complete this assignment as soon as you can when the movie and ideas are fresh in your head. This is not a difficult assignment because it is your opinion, but please put some thought into your answers. Be ready to discuss your answers in class when you return.

1. When Jerome’s parents went to a genetics center for a second child, the geneticist stated “I have taken the liberty of eradicating any potentially prejudicial conditions - premature baldness, myopia, alcoholism and addictive susceptibility, propensity for violence and obesity.” The father then asks “We were wondering if we should leave some things to chance.” To this the geneticist responds, “You want to give your child the best possible start. Believe me, we have enough imperfection built-in already. Your child doesn't need any additional burdens.” Would it be irresponsible for the father to want to leave something to chance?

2. In an outtake to the movie, the geneticist states that for an extra $5,000 he could give the embryo enhanced musical or mathematical skills – essentially splicing in a gene that was not present on the parents’ original DNA. Would musical or mathematical skill be more like physical abilities, which are pretty rigid, or more like moral qualities (proneness to pity or violence) which are less rigid?

3. Vincent states in the movie that “it's illegal to discriminate – ‘genoism’ it's called – but no one takes the laws seriously.” This is in fact one of the standard criticisms of genetic profiling: if we have genetic data on people, then employers or insurance companies will use that data to minimize financial risk. Assuming that this will be true, would the benefits of genetic profiling still outweigh the disbenefits?
4. Consider this dialogue regarding the rigorous testing of Gattaca personnel. Director Josef: “we have to ensure that people are meeting their potential.” Investigator: “Not exceeding it?” Director Josef: “No one exceeds his potential.” Investigator: “If he did?” Director Josef: “It means that we did not accurately gage his potential in the first place.” This dialog exhibits a common criticism that determinism (all events, including human action, are ultimately determined by causes external to the will) is unfalsifiable – that is, an advocate of determinism would not admit that any test could even theoretically count against determinism. Is this a valid criticism of Director Josef’s specific position?

5. The moral message of the movie is that we can rise above our genetic predispositions, with specific emphasis on our pre-determined physical abilities. The movie’s message also applies to our ability to overcome pre-determined behavioral traits – an issue more typically involved in the philosophical debate about determinism (all events, including human action, are ultimately determined by causes external to the will). The prime example of this in the movie was the revelation that the Director Josef committed the murder, even though his genetic profile indicated that he was completely non-violent. Which is a better “refutation” of determinism: Vincent living past 30, or Director Josef committing a murder?

6. The original screenplay concludes with the following coda: “In a few short years, scientists will have completed the Human Genome Project, the mapping of all the genes that make up a human being. After 4 billion years of evolution by the slow and clumsy method of natural selection, we have now evolved to the point where we can direct our own evolution. If only we had acquired this knowledge sooner, the following people would never have been born:” It continues listing famous people and their illnesses, such as Hawking who has Lou Gerhig's Disease. A version of this coda was in fact filmed, but deleted from the final movie. How would this argument differ from the following: couples should have as many children as physically possible since limiting births would mean that we wouldn’t bring into existence valuable people?