

Gattaca: A Film that Explores the Ethical Implications of Genetic Engineering

Genetic engineering, via cloning, eugenics, or manipulation of DNA, presents important and often chilling possibilities for the future of mankind. Of course, we can be comforted by the hope of Jesus Christ's appearing before humankind is able to completely ensnare itself in its misapplication of knowledge. But we should still give some thought to where the future could be heading, and how scientists who believe in random evolution will contradict their convictions and attempt to direct the evolution of the human species.

An excellent film made in 1997 describing a future world where genetic engineering is the norm, *Gattaca* dramatically argues that human beings are more than their "genetic potential" and ought to be free to pursue their dreams without being discriminated against because they are thought to be genetically inferior. Neither should they be granted "elite status" without demonstrating character and integrity. In the end, character wins out over genetic programming, and sacrificially giving one's all to discover his or her potential is ethically superior to passively believing that one's potential can be determined by his or her genetic programming. Human beings are "made of the stuff of stars" (i.e., in the image of God), and should be treated with respect because of their amazing ability to exceed their "potential."

The film explores this issue of human freedom by juxtaposing the engineered with the "accidental." Victor is a "God-child," conceived by accident in the back of a car and has various genetic "abnormalities" in his health profile as a result. His roommate Jerome Morrow began life as a perfectly engineered "superior" but was injured in a car accident. How the two young men choose to deal with their circumstances reveals a life-and-death struggle between two competing philosophies. Morrow's life is marked by pathetic attempts to assert his genetic superiority over Victor, and bitterness about his cruel fate. Even if he were weightless on Titan, and did not need his legs, he would still be handicapped because he was afraid of heights. Victor, however, chose against all odds to pursue his dream of going to Titan (an interesting mythological symbol) and never gave up hope. He refused his society's judgment that he was an inferior being, an "invalid."

A trash motif was employed to symbolize the "invalids." The Ernest Borgnine character was collecting trash in the immaculate and sanitized building while the murder investigation was going on. When asked what he had in the bag, he replied "Just trash, Sir." The symbolic reference to the "invalids" was palpable, and hearkened back to when Victor was a trash collector instead of an astronaut. The "trash-people" collecting trash—the no longer useful artifacts of a society that only uses well-packaged articles—and Morrow, in the end, disposes of himself in the trash incinerator, a victim of the judgment of his utilitarian society. He had no purpose and no joy, not even vicariously or in self-sacrifice. The perfectly engineered wonder-boy was ultimately just expendable trash.

Another interesting juxtaposition in the film is between Victor, the "weak" one, and his brother Anton, the "strong" one. In the final swimming scene, they once again compete with each other to see who would chicken out and start back. Victor wins, and reveals his secret of success: "I never saved anything for the trip back." He spent it all, yet found more. He discovered that the world was full of untapped potential, even for good. When his dream was crashing down around him and he could do no more for himself, he found his fellow humans were there to help him. The man who had earlier given him a job interview by taking a urine sample, reveals that he knew about Victor's scam all along and took pleasure in helping him fulfill his dream. What a concept—That the meaning of human life is not found in our genes, but in our character and our dreams, and in the way we help each other fulfill them. And love is only possible when we are

free to look beneath the genetic test of a hair strand into the unfathomed depths of the human heart and its potential for godliness. These are ethical ideals worth preserving. 🕊