

BOOK REVIEW

# The Future of Human Nature

JÜRGEN HABERMAS. Translated by W. Rehg, M. Pensky & H. Beister

Cambridge: Polity Press, 2003, ISBN 0 7456 2987 3

Famous living philosophers rarely take a stand on the kind of moral dilemmas that arise from the current boom in developments in the biosciences. Jürgen Habermas's book *The Future of Human Nature* does not offer a formula for rules that ought to govern biotechnological manipulation of the human genome that are already feasible or that may become so in the future. Rather than putting forward definitive answers to urgent problems, Habermas is engaged in a reflective search for the general principles that could guide the way we deal with particular problems.

Habermas starts from the idea that not all types of manipulation of human nature ought to be allowed, and looks for the general ethical reasons as to why certain manipulations ought to be out of the question. He thus takes a clear stand in the ongoing debate over whether the manipulation of human nature should be ethically regulated or whether we can proceed "arbitrarily according to subjective preferences whose satisfaction depends on the market" (p. 12).

While Habermas refers to specific issues, for example the procedure of pre-implantation genetic diagnosis (PGD), which provides a diagnosis of genetic defects in embryos brought about by artificial fertilization, before they are implanted in the womb; and research on human embryonic stem cells which are thus "consumed" ("*verbrauchende Embryonenforschung*"), it soon becomes clear that Habermas does not isolate such cases in order to evaluate them alone. Instead, he considers them as steps in a more general, gradual process of "auto-transformation of the species" (p. 21), because they are techniques that pave the way to "positive eugenics", in other words to our being able to choose our children's desired genetic characteristics (p. 19).

It is vital to note that Habermas does not rule out the possibility of "negative eugenics", despite the fact that he regards the boundaries between positive and negative eugenics to be fluid, and seeks their normative regulation. Thus, the use of genetics should not be forbidden *a priori* in cases where it might prevent considerable harm (e.g. incurable or especially serious diseases), as long as a "clinical attitude" is adopted in such interventions, and we can reasonably presuppose the consent of the person the embryo will

become, thereby having a communicative, not an instrumental relationship with him or her (pp. 43, 52, 63). Thus, the criterion Habermas introduces in order to distinguish positive and negative eugenics is essentially the “attitude” under which the particular intervention is carried out.

The correct application of this criterion is of utmost importance for the success of Habermas’s theoretical project in the book, since the difficulties we face when trying to distinguish “therapeutic” biotechnology from techniques which aim at “improvement”, “strengthening” or even “aesthetic enhancement” of a patient, encourage liberal supporters of eugenics to seek the greatest possible freedom in their implementation. Applying this criterion, Habermas claims that in the case of PGD the “conditional” creation of embryos betrays a tendency to objectify them for the sake of their parents’ “preferences”, since there is no clear criterion for what a “problematic life” might mean (i.e. a life which deserves to be destroyed before it is born). Besides such criteria being absent, there is the question as to who has the right to make such a decision – granted that it has to be taken by a person other than the would-be person whose life might be cut short? How serious, how incapacitating, how painful, how demanding on the human environment (e.g. parents, caregivers), should the pre-natally detected defects to be in order to justify – not only to the parents and those immediately affected, but to the wider society – destroying such a life, by judging it “unfit to live”? The fact that Habermas is a German, belonging to the generation socialized during the Nazi regime, and so having witnessed “at home” the practice of eugenics pursued by this ideology, of course contributes to making this thorny issue a particularly ethically sensitive and decisive one in Habermas’s view. In addition, the case of research on embryonic stem cells promotes a clearly unacceptable instrumentalization of human life, since it makes the idea of their exploitation at will less and less problematic – and possibly, in the future, increasingly available and practised.

We may now appreciate the crux of Habermas’s argument, an argument that opposes the prospect of positive eugenics: that the universal morality of human rights and the principles of freedom and equality are “embedded” in the wider context of a “species ethics” (“*Gattungsethik*”) (p. 40). Habermas now undertakes to clarify theoretically our moral intuitions, which he claims are offended by the prospect of (positive) “liberal eugenics”, that is, the consumerist custom-building of human offspring according to their parents’ wishes, enabling the latter to see their favoured genetic characteristics fulfilled in the thus eugenically manipulated (some would say “improved”) child. For one thing, this liberal practice would presuppose a sort of hierarchy, or ranking, imposed by adults – and especially, of course, prospective parents – in a population, to the effect that some character traits, abilities, or dispositions, are more desirable, more worthy of the status of life, of being affirmed and reproduced, than others. Now, it is one thing to go around entertaining such ideas; perhaps doing so is quite natural for a large number of people. It is quite another, however, to legalize a type of policy where such ranking is put into actual practice, is bluntly realized, as it were, in the form of positive eugenics.

The implementation of this kind of eugenics would lead, according to Habermas, to a transformation of the “ethical self-understanding of the species”, which, until now, allowed the formation of the appropriate “framework” for the constitution of moral agency. In other words, the danger in putting positive eugenics into practice highlights the fact that humans have a self-understanding that is characteristic of moral persons. This self-understanding is based on the idea that there is a discernible distinction between the made and the grown (“*das Hergestellte versus das von Natur aus Gewordene; das Gemachte versus das Gewachsene*”). In other words, the well-established self-understanding is based on the, until now, unquestioned presupposition that all moral agents possess the bodies they are “given” by chance or nature, so that neither they, nor their parents, nor anybody else can be held morally responsible for these bodies: they are simply beyond the reach (i.e. the will, control, or manipulation) of human intention and intervention. According to Habermas’s characteristic twist of the argument, with this “given” (by nature itself) physical nature, human individuals enter the realm of culture, of interaction, and of moral responsibility, which is also – and crucially so to Habermas – the realm of (potential) symmetry among free and equal subjects. Both these components of the “ethical self-understanding of the species” are violated in cases of intervention into the genetic material of an embryo that will later become a moral person.

In Habermas’s view, it is impossible to give a universally binding definition of when an embryo is considered to become a member of a community of persons who have human rights, and thus from what point we owe respect to its dignity. For Habermas, the realm of rights and respect for moral persons comes into play at the point at which there is (at least potential) mutuality and communication, and therefore – still according to Habermas – a human being enters this realm at the point of birth.

However, the criterion “birth” that Habermas uses, based on the idea that ethical life begins at the moment when communicative interaction becomes possible, and relations based on symmetrical rights and duties are set up, is just as problematic as any other – since a more “lenient” theorist might point out that “interaction” (especially with the mother) begins well before birth, and a paradox also ensues since premature babies will be “privileged” in their being recognized as persons who have moral rights. Moreover, as we know from the debate over abortion, many people insist on the necessity of recognizing the absolute value of pre-natal life.

Clearly Habermas is not interested in entering – or reopening – the latter debate. When he puts forward the book’s central claim that intervention into the genetic material of an embryo is ethically problematic, his reasons point in a quite specific direction. What is at stake here is the “self-understanding” of the individual, indeed of nothing less than the human species. Why is there in this case a violation of this self-understanding?

First, because the knowledge that someone else has “programmed” my body will most likely affect my self-understanding as an autonomous subject who deserves respect, impeding my identification with my body as a stable point of my identity against its social definition (p. 59 ff). Therefore pre-natal

intervention into my physical nature will probably overturn a fundamental anthropological precondition of my moral freedom, since “we experience our freedom with reference to something which, by its very nature, is not at our disposal” (p. 58) – that is to say, with something that is grown (“*gewachsen*”) as opposed to made (“*gemacht*”, “*hergestellt*”) by someone else, be it my parents. The point is that, once my physical nature is like it is as the direct result of a piece of genetic manipulation (intervention) performed by an outside will, an irreversible paternalism occurs, such that an element of heteronomy (“*Fremdbestimmung*”) violates my very identity as a person, that is, as the centre from which initiative, deliberation and action freely and spontaneously originate. Secondly, Habermas argues that, as someone acted upon (pre-natally) by others – without my possible consent, without my participation at all – I would lose the prospect of ever establishing a relationship of moral equality and symmetry with these others – be it my own parents. As against this claim on Habermas’s part, many commentators have pointed out that, in a basic sense, even under “normal” circumstances a child will never enjoy a fully “symmetric” and reciprocal relationship with his or her biological parents. Though this poses many complex questions, I for one agree with Habermas’s argument that putting biotechnological manipulation on an equal footing with the communicative processes and experiences of socialization (as do advocates of positive eugenics), is to create a deeply flawed analogy: the latter essentially allows for a practice of give-and-take, of resistance, subversion and co-influence on the outcome of the process that the former does not.

In sum, Habermas has written a truly important slim book on a profoundly important topic. He may strain, or even at times contradict, his earlier work on “discourse ethics”; he may in some places come forward as more suggestive than argumentative; and he may challenge currently popular notions about the “obvious freedom” to “improve” human life – provided new biotechnologies make it possible – that squares only too well with the never-resting expansion of options, of individual choice in all areas of human existence that is characteristic of a society which perceives even moral issues in terms set by the market: by supply and demand. In challenging the ubiquitous tendency toward commodification and marketization, now reaching the very “making” or “designing” of human nature, Habermas in this book succeeds in a provocation that is political as well as ethical and philosophical.

### Acknowledgements

This review is based partly on some points made by Konstantinos Kavoulakos in his article “Ruptured formalism”, *Radical philosophy* 125, 2004: pp. 37–46, and on my Introduction to the Norwegian translation of Habermas’s book (Oslo: Damm, 2003).

*Arne Johan Vetlesen*  
*Professor of Philosophy*  
*University of Oslo, Norway*  
*E-mail: a.j.vetlesen@ifikk.uio.no*