

## ***What do Sci-Fi, Literature, and Art have to do with Bioethics?: On Bioethics and Art***

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### INTRODUCTION

Last May, 200 delegates from thirty countries gathered in Atlanta, Georgia, for “BEINGS 2015: Biotechnology and the Ethical Imagination Global Summit,” a three-day conference aimed at cultivating global consensus on the future of biotechnology. Dr. Paul Wolpe, the Director of the Center for Ethics at Emory University and the Summit’s Founder, had been dreaming of this idea for years. The last time such a gathering of experts happened was in Asilomar, California, in 1975, on occasion of the emergence of recombinant DNA technology and its unknown implications regarding the future of society. By bringing together some of the “greatest minds in science, policy, philosophy, ethics, religion, and the arts and humanities,” Wolpe recognizes that biotechnology is a profoundly cross-disciplinary inquiry, and cannot be relegated to strictly science or philosophy as such.<sup>1</sup>

In the Summit’s opening session on the aspirations and goals of biotechnology, psychologist Steven Pinker presented the view that the goal of biomedical research is (or should be) to promote human flourishing and to reduce suffering, disability, and premature death. He advocates that the aspirations of *bioethics* should be the same, and thus should “focus on *real* harms, not nebulous mission statements or speculative futurology.”<sup>2</sup> Pinker argues that when considering the potential harms of biotechnology, bioethicists should not base their thoughts on speculative fears about harms occurring in the distant future—such as those displayed in bioethical dystopias:

*A truly ethical bioethics should not bog down research in red tape, moratoria, or threats of prosecution based on nebulous but sweeping principles such as “dignity,” “sacredness,” or “social justice.” Nor should it thwart research that has likely benefits now or in the near future by sowing panic about speculative harms in the distant future. These include perverse analogies with nuclear weapons and Nazi atrocities, science-fiction dystopias like “Brave New World” and “Gattaca,” and freak-show scenarios like armies of cloned Hitlers, people selling their eyeballs on eBay, or warehouses of zombies to supply people with spare organs.*<sup>3</sup>

## ANALYSIS

Although he raises much to discuss about the meaning and purpose of human flourishing and suffering, I wish to focus on an interesting line of thought that emerges from his mentality: that of dismissing and calling for an end to the comparisons made with science fiction and dystopian literature and film.

This idea maintains that the advancement of biotechnology is hindered by fears that have been instilled in the public mind specifically through futuristic and dystopian sci-fi themes in literature, such as in *Frankenstein* or *Brave New World*. One such “tired trope” is *Gattaca*, a 1997 film set in a genetically engineered future that is almost guaranteed to come up in any conversation about technological interventions in human genetics. Case in point: science writer Carl Zimmer blogged: “If we’re going to talk about international bans, I’d like an international ban on invoking *Gattaca* in these discussions.”<sup>4</sup> Recurring is the idea that “the public has been ‘conditioned by a pop culture filled with dystopian fiction—not to mention many a Hollywood blockbuster—that has instilled a common wariness for the unintended outcomes that can accompany scientific progress.’”<sup>5</sup>

Pinker is not the only scientist to hold this view. Upon its foundation in 2001, the President’s Council on Bioethics devoted one of its first sessions to a discussion of Nathaniel Hawthorne’s short story “The Birthmark,” about a scientist who possessively tries to concoct a cure that will rid his beautiful wife of the one blemish on her body: a tiny birthmark on her cheek. Medical doctor Jerome Groopman critiqued this as beginning “not with facts but with fiction,” writing somewhat in disdain for Chairman Leon Kass’s approach of “using literature to warn against the scientific search for perfection.”<sup>6</sup> Like Pinker, Groopman is a strong advocate for continued research on the advancement of biotechnology, as it contains the promise of future treatments and cures waiting to be discovered. And like Pinker, Groopman scoffs at the prevention of these treatments from being discovered through guidelines shaped by *speculative fears* over harm rooted in science fiction, as opposed to the “real harms” of scientific fact. Thus Groopman writes that “while Kass conjures a world of lab-bred James Bonds, two hundred thousand Americans live with spinal-cord injuries, a million and a half have Parkinson’s, and four million have Alzheimer’s,” suggesting that they are waiting to be cured by the work going on in the nation’s laboratories on cloned stem cells, that “may one day provide treatments for scores of currently incurable diseases, including juvenile diabetes, Parkinson’s, Alzheimer’s, and spinal-cord paralysis.”<sup>7</sup> This view maintains that medical guidelines should be shaped always on “fact, not on literature or aesthetics—one that distinguishes real science from science fiction.”<sup>8</sup>

This view holds an aversion to the use of literature (both dystopian or otherwise) as a tool for discussing the uses, aims, and advances of biotechnology. As Gilbert Meilaender of the original President’s Council describes, it is a view that holds that “there is no bioethical wisdom to be gained through the study of literature.”<sup>9</sup> But what is contained within this mindset? Is it something deeper than a worry about instilling unnecessary and unrealistic fear in the public mindset? What is at the root of this view against exploring works of literature when it comes to questions of biotechnology? And furthermore, what is at stake in exploring science fiction and other forms of art when it comes to thinking about biotechnology?

## CONCLUSION

The question of the place or role of art, beauty, and the imagination in bioethical inquiry is a central interest of mine. How does one articulate the relevance of beauty, the aesthetic experience, and the exploration of works of art to questions of biotechnology and human dignity? I think that one of the keys lies in understanding art’s pedagogic role—whether literature, poetry, film, or science fiction—as a form of *allegory*. “To enjoy allegory,” writes Holly Ordway, a professor of English literature, “one must be able to simultaneously appreciate both the rational and the imaginative components of it: to hold together the story as a story and the message as a message, not switching between one and the other, but allowing each to enrich the other. If a reader has a highly compartmentalized mind, then all literature is difficult to read, but allegory most of all.”<sup>10</sup>

Story, allegory, and analogy contain the methodology of the parable. A parable is a fabricated story about

a reality that *could* happen—that is, it bears a resemblance to reality so much so that the listener could imagine him or herself *in* the story; the story could happen to him- or herself. A parable is told to signify a meaning or convey a message without *imposing* that message onto the interlocutor, but rather allowing the listener to come to it themselves. Instead of stating the moral as a matter-of-fact, a story is told so that the interlocutor can enter into it and experience it, allowing one to receive the truth that is hidden or veiled within the parable, which the parable itself only conceals or signifies. Consider the experience of “reading” art: in literature, film, or perhaps even an artwork, we *undergo* or experience the work, letting *it* work on *us* inasmuch as we are the ones to read or watch it. This concept of art being a symbol or sign, signifying a veiled meaning, is central to seeing the value and necessary role of art in the study of bioethics, which is what I intend to illustrate throughout this series.

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<sup>1</sup> “BEINGS Update: Where are we Now and Where are we Headed?” <http://www.beings2015.org/about.html>.

<sup>2</sup> BEINGS 2015, Topic A: *Aspirations and Goals*, July 27, 2015: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5np5UmKTIRM>.

<sup>3</sup> Pinker, Steven. “The Moral Imperative for Bioethics,” *The Boston Globe*, August 1, 2015: <https://www.bostonglobe.com/opinion/2015/07/31/the-moral-imperative-for-bioethics/JmEkoyzITAu9oQV76JrK9N/story.html>.

<sup>4</sup> “During a recent hour-long NPR program titled *Re-Engineering Human Embryos*, for example, host Tom Ashbrook played a clip from the 1997 film *GATTACA*; later that day, Carl Zimmer [blogged](#), “I’d like an international ban on invoking *GATTACA* in these discussions.” Quoted in: Darnovsky, Marcy. “Tired Tropes and New Twists in the Debate about Human Germline Modification,” *Biopolitical Times*, May 28, 2015: <http://www.biopoliticaltimes.org/article.php?id=8618>.

See Zimmer’s original post, where he says that invoking the film is like saying, “We shouldn’t genetically engineer people because we will end up with an army of flying monkeys who will enslave the rest of us.”

Zimmer, Carl. “Talking About Editing Human Embryos on the Radio,” *Phenomena: A Science Saloon*, April 28, 2015: <http://phenomena.nationalgeographic.com/2015/04/28/talking-about-editing-human-embryos-on-the-radio/>

<sup>5</sup> Darnovsky, Marcy. “Tired Tropes and New Twists in the Debate about Human Germline Modification,” *Biopolitical Times*, May 28, 2015: <http://www.biopoliticaltimes.org/article.php?id=8618>.

<sup>6</sup> Groopman, Jerome. “Science Fiction,” *The New Yorker*, February 4, 2002, <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2002/02/04/science-fiction>.

<sup>7</sup> “Cloned stem cells may one day provide treatments for scores of currently incurable diseases, including juvenile diabetes, Parkinson’s, Alzheimer’s, and spinal-cord paralysis.” See: Groopman, Jerome. “Science Fiction,” *The New Yorker*, February 4, 2002, <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2002/02/04/science-fiction>.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> Meilaender, Gilbert. “On Bioethics in Public,” *The New Atlantis*. Fall 2009/Winter 2010, 39–59.

<sup>10</sup> Ordway, Holly. “The Canary in the Coalmine? Thoughts on Allegory,” *Transpositions: Theology, Imagination, and the Arts*, accessed October 14, 2015: <http://www.transpositions.co.uk/the-canary-in-the-coal-mine-thoughts-on-allegory/>.