The Future of Human Nature

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polity

of a suffered socialization fate would see his "self" slip away in the stream of constellations, relations, and relevancies imposed upon the formation process. We can achieve continuity in the vicissitudes of a life history only because we may refer, for establishing the difference between what *we* are and what happens *to us*, to a bodily existence which is itself the continuation of a natural fate going back beyond the socialization process. The fact that this natural fate, this past before our past, so to speak, is not at our human disposal seems to be essential for our awareness of freedom – but is it also essential for the capacity, as such, of being oneself?

From Hannah Arendt's suggestive description, it does not actually follow that the anonymous chains of action cutting across the genetically manipulated body will necessarily lead to this body losing its worth, the basis on which to ascribe the feeling of being oneself. Are we to suppose, once a discernable intrusion of the intentions of third persons upon a genetic program has occurred, that birth no longer constitutes a beginning that could give the acting subject an awareness of being able to make a new beginning, any time? Of course, being confronted with the sedimented intention of a third person in one's hereditary factors requires the subject concerned to come to terms with this fact. The programmed person cannot see the programmer's intention, reaching through the genome, as a contingent circumstance restricting her scope of action. With his intention, the programmer rather intervenes as a co-player in an interaction without turning up as an opponent *within* the field of action of the programmed person. But what, in this peculiar unassailability of another *peer's* intention is questionable in a moral sense?

VI The moral limits of eugenics

In liberal societies, every citizen has an equal right to pursue his individual life projects "as best he can." This

ethical scope of the freedom to make the best of a life which may go wrong is *also* determined by genetically conditioned abilities, dispositions, and properties. With regard to the ethical freedom to lead a life of one's own while being subject to organic conditions not of our own choice, the situation of the programmed person does not initially differ from that of a person naturally begotten. Eugenic programming of desirable traits and dispositions, however, gives rise to moral misgivings as soon as it commits the person concerned to a specific life-project or, in any case, puts specific restrictions on his freedom to choose a life of his own. Of course, the adolescent may assimilate the "alien" intention which caring parents long before his birth associated with the disposition to certain skills much in the same way as might be the case, for instance, for certain vocational traditions running in a family. For the adolescent confronted with the expectations of ambitious parents to make something out of, for instance, his mathematical or musical talents, it makes no fundamental difference whether this confrontation takes place in terms of the dense fabric of domestic socialization, or in dealing with a genetic program, provided he appropriates these expectations as aspirations of his own and sees the indicated talents as an opportunity as well as an obligation to engage in efforts of his own.

If an intention is "appropriated" in this way, no effect of alienation from one's own existence as a body and a soul will occur, nor will the corresponding restrictions of the ethical freedom to live a life of one's own be felt. On the other hand, as long as we cannot be sure that this harmony between one's own intentions and those of a third party will inevitably be produced, we cannot rule out the possibility of *dissonant* cases. Cases of dissonant intentions illuminate the fact that natural fate and socialization fate differ in a morally relevant aspect.[52] Socialization processes proceed only by communicative action, wielding their formative power in the medium of propositional attitudes and decisions which, for the adult persons to

whom the child relates, are connected with internal reasons even if, at a given stage of its cognitive development, the "space of reasons" is not yet widely open to the child itself. Due to the interactive structure of the formation processes in which the child always has the role of a second person, expectations underlying the parents' efforts at character building are essentially "contestable." Since even a psychically binding "delegation" of children can only be brought about in the medium of reasons, the adolescents in principle still have the opportunity to respond to and retroactively break away from it.[53] They can retrospectively compensate for the asymmetry of filial dependency by liberating themselves through a critical reappraisal of the genesis of such restrictive socialization processes. Even neurotic fixations may be resolved analytically, through an elaboration of self-reflexive insights.

But in the case of a genetic determination carried out according to the parents' own preferences, there is no such opportunity. With genetic enhancement, there is no communicative scope for the projected child to be addressed as a second person and to be involved in a communication process. From the adolescent's perspective, an instrumental determination cannot, like a pathogenic socialization process, be revised by "critical reappraisal." It does not permit the adolescent looking back on the prenatal intervention to engage in a *revisionary* learning process. *Being at odds with* the genetically fixed intention of a third person is hopeless. The genetic program is a mute and, in a sense, unanswerable fact; for unlike persons born naturally, someone who is at odds with genetically fixed intentions is barred from developing, in the course of a reflectively appropriated and deliberately continued life history, an attitude toward her talents (and handicaps) which implies a revised self-understanding and allows for a *productive* response to the initial situation. This situation, by the way, is not unlike that of a clone who, by being modeled on the person and the life history of a "twin"

chronologically out of phase, is deprived of an unobstructed future of his own.[54]

Eugenic interventions aiming at enhancement reduce ethical freedom insofar as they tie down the person concerned to rejected, but irreversible intentions of third parties, barring him from the spontaneous self-perception of being the undivided author of his own life. Abilities and skills may be easier to identify with than dispositions, let alone properties, but the only thing that counts for the psychical resonance of the person concerned is the intention associated with the programming enterprise. Only in the negative case of the prevention of extreme and highly generalized evils may we have good reasons to assume that the person concerned would consent to the eugenic goal.

Liberal eugenics would not only affect the capacity of "being oneself." It would at the same time create an interpersonal relationship for which there is no precedent. The irreversible choice a person makes for the desired makeup of the genome of another person initiates a type of relationship between these two which jeopardizes a precondition for the moral self-understanding of autonomous actors. A universalistic understanding of law and morality rests on the assumption that there is no definite obstacle to egalitarian interpersonal relations. Of course, our societies are marked by manifest as well as structural violence. They are impregnated by the micropower of silent repression, disfigured by despotic suppression, deprivation of political rights, social disempowerment, and economic exploitation. However, we could not be scandalized by this if we did not know that these shameful conditions might *also* be *different*. The conviction that all actors, as persons, obtain the same normative status and are held to deal with one another in mutual and symmetrical recognition rests on the assumption that there is, in principle, a reversibility to interpersonal relationships. No dependence on another person must be irreversible. With genetic programming, however, a relationship emerges that is

asymmetrical in more than one respect – a specific type of paternalism.

Unlike the social dependence inherent in the parent–child relationship, which will, as the generations succeed one another, be resolved with the children growing up, the children's *genealogical* dependence on their parents is, of course, also irreversible. Parents beget their children, children do not beget their parents. But this dependence only engages the children's existence, which as such lends itself only to a curiously abstract form of reproach, not their essence – no qualitative determination of any kind of their future life. In contrast to social dependence, genetic dependence of the person programmed on her designer is concentrated, it is true, in a single attributable act. But in the context of eugenic practice, acts of this type – by omission as well as by execution – lay the grounds for a social relationship in which the usual "reciprocity between persons of equal birth" is revoked.[55] The program designer carries out a one-sided act for which there can be no well-founded assumption of consent, disposing over the genetic factors of another in the paternalistic intention of setting the course, in relevant respects, of the life history of the dependent person. The latter may interpret, but not revise or undo this intention. The consequences are irreversible because the paternalistic intention is laid down in a disarming genetic program instead of being communicatively mediated by a socializing practice which can be subjected to reappraisal by the person "raised."

The irreversible nature of the consequences arising from one-sided acts of genetic manipulation saddles the person who thinks himself capable of making this choice with a problematical responsibility. But must it *per se* act as a restriction on the moral autonomy of the person concerned? All persons, including those born naturally, are in one way or another dependent on their genetic program. There must be a different reason for dependence on a

deliberately fixed genetic program to be relevant for the programmed person. He is principally barred from exchanging roles with his designer. The product cannot, to put it bluntly, draw up a design for its designer. Our concern with programming here is not whether it will restrict another person's ethical freedom and capacity of being himself, but whether, and how, it might eventually preclude a symmetrical relationship between the programmer and the product thus "designed". Eugenic programming establishes a permanent dependence between persons who know that one of them is principally barred from changing *social* places with the other. But this kind of social dependence, which is irreversible because it was established by ascription, is foreign to the reciprocal and symmetrical relations of mutual recognition proper to a moral and legal community of free and equal persons.

Up to now, only persons born, not persons made, have participated in social interaction. In the biopolitical future prophesied by liberal eugenicists, this horizontal connection would be superseded by an intergenerational stream of action and communication cutting vertically across the deliberately modified genome of future generations.

Now, one might be tempted to think that the democratic constitutional state is, after all, best equipped to provide the framework as well as the means for compensating for this lack of intergenerational reciprocity, by institutionalizing procedures to reestablish the disrupted symmetry on the level of generalized norms. Wouldn't legal norms, if they were established on the broad basis of ethical and political will formation, relieve parents from the dubious responsibility for an individual choice made solely according to their own preferences? Wouldn't legitimacy based on a generalized democratic will remove the stigma of paternalism from parents who mold the genetic fate of their child according to their own preferences, and

restore the persons concerned to their status of equal birth? Once these persons are included as democratic co-authors of a legal ruling in a transgenerational consensus by which the asymmetry, irreparable in the individual case, is redressed on a higher level of the common will, they would no longer need to see themselves as persons confined to dependence.

This thought experiment, however, shows why this attempt at reparation must fail. The political consensus required would be either too strong or too weak. Too strong, because a *binding* commitment to collective goals going beyond the prevention of evils agreed upon would be an unconstitutional intervention in the private autonomy of citizens; too weak, because the mere *permission* to make use of eugenic procedures would not be able to relieve parents of their moral responsibility for their highly personal choice of eugenic goals, since the problematic consequence of restricting ethical freedom cannot be ruled out. In the context of a democratically constituted pluralistic society where every citizen has an equal right to an autonomous conduct of life, practices of enhancing eugenics cannot be "normalized" in a legitimate way, because the selection of desirable dispositions cannot be *a priori* dissociated from the prejudgment of specific life-projects.

VII Setting the pace for a self-instrumentalization of the species?

What, then, follows from this analysis for the current debate on stem cell research and PGD? In a first step I have tried, in section II, to explain why the hope of resolving the controversy with one single, compelling argument is an illusion. From a philosophical perspective, extending the argument for human rights to cover human life "from the very beginning" is not at all conclusive. On the other hand, the legal distinction established between the human

dignity of the person, which is unconditionally valid, and the protection of the life of the embryo, which may on principle be weighed against other rights, by no means opens the way to a hopeless controversy over conflicting ethical goals. In evaluating prepersonal human life we are not dealing, as I have shown in section III, with a "good" among other goods. How we deal with human life before birth (or with human beings after death) touches on our self-understanding as members of the species. And this self-understanding as members of the species is closely interwoven with our self-understanding as moral persons. Our conceptions of – and attitude toward – prepersonal human life embed the rational morality of subjects of human rights in the stabilizing context of an ethics of the species. This context must endure if morality itself is not to start slipping.

Against the background of a potential liberal eugenics, this internal relation between the ethics of the protection of life and our self-understanding as autonomous beings having equal rights and abiding by moral reasons comes into clearer focus. The moral reasons that hypothetically speak against such a practice cast a shadow also on the practices which open the way to it. Today, we must ask ourselves whether later generations will eventually come to terms with the fact that they may no longer see themselves as the undivided authors of their life – nor will be called upon as such. Will they accept an interpersonal relationship that is no longer consistent with the egalitarian premises of morality and law? And would not, then, the grammatical form of our moral language game – the self-understanding of speakers and actors as beings for whom normative reasons count – be changed as a whole? The arguments I laid out in sections IV to VI were to make plausible the fact that we have to face these questions today, in anticipation of the further advances of genetic engineering. There is, after all, the alarming prospect of a practice of genetic interventions aiming at the modification of traits which will go beyond the boundaries of the

essentially communicative relationship between doctor and patient, parents and children, and undermine, through eugenic self-transformation, our normatively structured forms of life.

Such are the concerns which may explain the impression we have when analyzing debates on bioethics, including those in the Bundestag. Participants in this discourse whose contributions rely on standard ways of weighing competing goods (as did those of the representatives of the Liberal Democrats) seem to be out of step. It is not that unconditional existential rigor, as set against the weighing of interests, would be *a priori* superior to the balancing of interests. But many of us seem to have the intuition that we should not *weigh* human life, not even in its earliest stages, either against the freedom (and competitiveness) of research, or against the concern with safeguarding an industrial edge, or against the wish for a healthy child, or even against the prospect (assumed *arguendo*) of new treatments for severe genetic diseases. What is it that is indicated by such an intuition, if we assume that human life does not from the very beginning enjoy the same absolute protection of life that holds for the person?

Concerns as to PGD can be justified more directly than the comparatively archaic inhibition we feel toward research involving the destruction of embryos. Our unwillingness to legalize PGD is grounded in consideration of both the conditional creation of embryos and the nature of this condition itself. Bringing about a situation in which we might eventually reject an afflicted embryo is as dubious as selection according to criteria defined by one side only. Selection in this case cannot but be one-sided, and therefore instrumentalizing, because there can be no assumption of an anticipated consent which, as in cases of genetic manipulation for therapeutic ends, may at least be confirmed by later statements of the treated patients: here, no person is created in the first place. In contrast to

embryonic research, moral weighing in this case may, after all, be brought to bear against the degree of severe suffering the future person herself can be expected to face.[56] The advocates of a ruling which might eventually limit the admissibility of the procedure to a few unambiguously extreme cases of monogenetic diseases may primarily[57] argue against the protection of life by pointing out that preventing an unbearably restricted future life is in the best interest, advocationally attended to, of the future person concerned.

But even so, the fact that we make a highly momentous distinction between life worth living and life not worth living *for others* remains disconcerting. Do parents who decide to rely on embryo selection, in view of their own wish for a child, fail to adopt a clinical attitude, which is oriented toward the goal of healing? Or is their attitude toward the unborn child that of dealing with a second person, albeit uncontrollably fictitious – on the assumption that this person himself would refuse an existence subject to specific restrictions? I am not sure myself; but even so, the opponents would still have strong reasons for pointing out (as the Federal President did recently) the discriminating side-effects and the problematic normalization likely to occur as a corollary to any evaluation, restrictive as it may be, of a form of life presumed to be handicapped.

The situation will be different when the advances of genetic engineering some day allow genetic intervention to be carried out in a therapeutic perspective subsequent to a diagnosis of severe hereditary handicaps and, thus, make selection unnecessary. This would, of course, mean that we have crossed the threshold to negative eugenics. But in this case, the reasons which today, as pointed out above, are invoked in favor of lifting the ban on PGD could be brought to bear on gene-modifying interventions without compelling us to weigh an undesirable handicap against the protection of the life of a "rejected" embryo. A

genetic manipulation (carried out, preferably, on somatic cells) restricted to clearly therapeutic goals can be compared to the combat against epidemics and other widespread diseases. The depth of intervention inherent to the operative means does not justify abstention from treatment.

A more complex explanation is required for the disgust we feel at the notion that research involving the destruction of embryos is instrumentalizing human life in view of the benefits (and profits) to be derived from a scientific progress which is not even predictable with any certainty. What is expressed here is the attitude that "an embryo – even if created in vitro – [is] the future child of future parents, and nothing else. It is not available for other ends" (Margot von Renesse). This attitude, insofar as it exists independently from ontological beliefs about the beginning of personal life, does not seek justification in terms of a metaphysically conceived human dignity. It is, however, no less impervious to the moral argument which I have raised against liberal eugenics, in any case if used directly. The intuition that the embryo must not be instrumentalized for arbitrary *other* ends, it is true, leads to the claim that it be treated in anticipation as a second person who, *were* she to be born, *could* assume an attitude toward this treatment. But the purely experimental or "destructive" use in the research laboratory does not aim at birth at all. In which sense, then, can it "fail to meet" the clinical attitude proper to the dealings with a being whose later consent may at least in principle be presupposed?

Reference to the collective good of treatments likely to be developed obscures the fact that this implies an instrumentalization incompatible with the clinical attitude. Of course, research involving the destruction of embryos cannot be justified from the clinical point of view of healing, because the latter is tailored to therapeutic dealings with second persons. The clinical perspective, rightly understood, individualizes. But why should the standard

of a virtual doctor–patient relationship apply to research conducted in the laboratory at all? If this counterquestion does not take us back to the essentialist controversy over the "real" destiny of embryonic life, there indeed seems to be no alternative to an open-ended weighing of goods. The only way for this controversial issue not to end up in an ordinary process of weighing is to accord prepersonal life, as I have tried to explain in section III, a *specific* weight of its own.

This, now, is where the long-prepared argument comes in that the advances of genetic engineering tend to blur the deeply rooted categorical distinctions between the subjective and the objective, the grown and the made. What is at stake, therefore, with the instrumentalization of prepersonal life is the ethical self-understanding of the species, which is crucial for whether or not we may go on to see ourselves as beings committed to moral judgment and action. Where we lack compelling *moral* reasons, we have to let ourselves be guided by the signposts set up by the *ethics* of the species.[58]

Let us suppose that, with research involving the destruction of embryos, a practice will come to prevail for which the protection of prepersonal human life is secondary to "other ends", even if these ends consisted in nothing more than the prospect of developing high-ranking collective goods (such as new medical treatments). The desensitization of the way we look at human nature, going hand in hand with the *normalization* of this practice, would clear the path for liberal eugenics. Here we can already discern the future *fait accompli*, by then a fact of the past, which later apologists will be able to refer to as the Rubicon that was crossed. Looking at a possible future for human nature makes us aware of the present need for regulation. Normative barriers in our dealings with embryos are the result of the point of view taken by a moral community of persons that fends off the pace-makers of a self-instrumentalization of the species in order to safeguard – let us say: out of concern for itself, but in

the broader perspective of the ethics of the species – its communicatively structured form of life.

Embryonic research and PGD stir up our emotions mainly because they *exemplify* a danger which is associated with the perspective of "human breeding." By depriving the fusion of two sets of chromosomes of its contingency, the intergenerational relations lose the naturalness which so far has been a part of the taken-for-granted background of our self-understanding as a species. If we abstain from "moralizing" human nature, we might see the emergence of a dense intergenerational stream of cumulative decisions cutting across the contemporary networks of interaction in a one-directional, vertical way. Whereas the effective history of cultural traditions and formation processes unfolds, as Gadamer has shown, in the medium of questions and answers, genetic programs would give future generations no opportunity to respond in the same way. Getting used to having human life biotechnologically at the disposal of our contingent preferences cannot help but change our normative self-understanding.

In this perspective, the two controversial innovations, even while still at their initial stage, make us aware of how our lives might be changed if genetic interventions aiming at the modification of traits were to *become normal practice*, emancipating themselves entirely from the context of the therapy of individual persons. It could, then, no longer be ruled out that alien and, in this case, genetically fixed intentions take possession, through enhancing eugenic interventions, of the life history of the programmed person. This is why the question of whether and how an act thus reified affects our capacity of being ourselves, as well as our relation to others, is so disconcerting. Will we still be able to come to a self-understanding as persons who are the undivided authors of their own lives, and approach others, without exception, as persons of equal birth? With this, two presuppositions of our moral self-understanding, spelled out in terms of an ethics of the species, are at stake.

This fact, however, can account for the heat of the current controversy only as long as belonging to a moral community is still a vital interest. It cannot be taken for granted, after all, that we will still *want* this status of a member of a community that requires all its members to show equal respect for every other member and to be responsible in their solidarity with all of them. That we *shall* act morally is inscribed in the very sense of a (deontologically conceived) morality. But why – if biotechnology is subtly undermining our identity as members of the species – should we *want* to be moral? An assessment of morality as a whole is itself not a moral judgment, but an ethical one, a judgment which is part of the ethics of the species.

Without the emotions roused by moral sentiments like obligation and guilt, reproach and forgiveness, without the liberating effect of moral respect, without the happiness felt through solidarity and without the depressing effect of moral failure, without the "friendliness" of a civilized way of dealing with conflict and opposition, we would feel, or so we still think today, that the universe inhabited by men would be unbearable. Life in a moral void, in a form of life empty even of cynicism, would not be worth living. This judgment simply expresses the "impulse" to prefer an existence of human dignity to the coldness of a form of life not informed by moral considerations. The same impulse accounts for the historical transition, which is repeated in ontogenesis, to a posttraditional stage of moral awareness.

When the religious and metaphysical worldviews lost their binding nature and the transition to a tolerated pluralism of worldviews took place, we (or most of us) did not turn out be cool cynics or indifferent relativists, because almost by reflex we held – and *wanted* to hold – to the binary code of moral judgments being right or wrong. We readjusted the practices of the lifeworld and of the political community to the premises of a rational morality and of human rights because they provided the

common ground for a humane existence irrespective of any differences arising from the variety of worldviews.[59] Perhaps the affective opposition raised today against a dreaded change in the identity of the species can be explained – and justified – by similar motives.