Social Theory & Health, 2005, 3, (242–244)

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Book Review

The Future of Human Nature
Jurgen Habermas
Polity: Cambridge, 2003

Social Theory & Health (2005) **3,** 242–244. doi:10.1057/palgrave.sth.8700049

This short book comprises three pieces: the first two are expanded versions of lectures given by Habermas at the Universities of Zurich and Marburg (the latter being followed by a short postscript) and the third is based on a speech he gave on receiving the Peace Prize of the German Book Trade. All three date back to 2001.

Habermas has built up a wide-ranging and highly theorized body of work over the years. Unsurprisingly, the present contributions are best interpreted and assessed against the background of his other, largely ongoing projects. Nevertheless, given the salience and interest in genetic advances, not to mention the degree of urgency with which the social impact of these advances requires to be addressed, the central piece – 'The Debate on the Ethical Self-Understanding of the Species' – easily warrants the attention of those who are unfamiliar with Habermas' other works. Its strength is its positioning at the interface of the philosophical and the social. Reflections on the ramifications of such topics as 'preimplantation genetic diagnoses' (PGD), Habermas' principal focus, tend to be *either* philosophical *or* sociological, rarely both. This discussion betrays expertise and sophistication across disciplinary boundaries. It represents, imaginatively and provocatively, 'the perspective of a future present, from which we might someday perhaps look back on currently controversial practices as the first steps toward a liberal eugenics regulated by supply and demand' (p. vii).

At the crux of the issues with which the lecture deals is a concern with human nature in general, and the possible implications of decisions taken in relation to PGD and its sequelae *now* for humans and human nature in *the future*. Habermas confronts the likely effects: (1) on those personally and irreversibly affected by genetic interventions chosen prior to their birth and 'on their behalf' by others (for example, their parents, within the framework of extant state laws), and (2) on future appreciations of human nature itself.

In relation to (1), he writes: 'when the adolescent learns about the design drawn up by another person for intervening in her genetic features in order to modify certain traits, the perspective of being a grown body may be

superseded – in her objectivating self-perception – by the perspective of being something made. In this way, the dedifferentiation of the distinction between the grown and the made intrudes upon one's subjective mode of existence. It might usher in the vertiginous awareness that, as a consequence of a genetic intervention carried out before we were born, the subjective nature we experience as being something we cannot dispose over is actually the result of an instrumentalization of a part of our nature' (pp. 53–54). Such awareness is likely to prove alienating (although it need not always be so).

Turning to (2), he suggests that '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' (p. 67). In other words, genetic interventions stand to threaten not only our sense of self (inviting self-alienation) but also our very concept of human nature and our potential for communicative action (inviting, as it were, a form of species-alienation).

There are particular and general consequences if individuals are to become 'co-authors of the life of another' (p. 81) that we have yet to think through. By the time we do so, *if we do*, it may be *too late*. The die will have been cast. It is Kantian autonomy that is imperilled here: 'the programmed person, being no longer certain about the contingency of the natural roots of her life history, may feel the lack of a mental precondition for coping with the moral expectation to take, even if only in retrospect, the *sole* responsibility for her own life' (pp. 81–82). This 'lack' strikes at the heart of (Western) morality and (discourse) ethics.

Habermas raises not only abstruse philosophical and sociological issues around PGD. Characteristically, he asks too how parliamentary and other bodies might reasonably adjudicate and legislate in relation to genetic diagnosis and engineering. His Marburg 'postscript' is especially interesting in this respect. He starts by identifying the different 'starting points' of German (and maybe European) and American protagonists. In Germany, he stresses, the philosophical discussion remains sceptical and focused on *whether* developments in genetic technologies (especially in the domains of organ breeding and reproductive medicine) are permissible. In the USA, by contrast, discussion is mostly around the question of *how* developments 'already essentially taken for granted' should be implemented (p. 75). For 'pragmatically minded' Americans, in short, developments in genetic engineering 'don't generate any fundamentally new problems of their own'

(p. 76). It is precisely this sociologically informed, while philosophical, character of Habermas' consideration of the ramifications of the 'new genetics' that I found interesting. Too often philosophical and sociological analyses are *artificially* separated.

The literature on the new genetics is expansive and growing. The criteria for assessing new contributions should therefore be strict. Although Habermas' track record on such issues is limited, two things count in his favour: first, his consideration of substantive issues of this sort is theoretically grounded; and second, his contribution is genuinely interdisciplinary, located at the interface of philosophy and sociology. Furthermore, this short, densely argued volume stakes out a sophisticated and humane position of its own, all the stronger for its emergence out of an ongoing dialectic with critics of Habermas's reconstruction of the project of modernity. It is a firm and powerful reminder that interventions in the human genome are bound up with the identity and self-understanding of the species. Accordingly, it should be required reading for social and life scientists and clinicians whose expertise and interests bear on developments in biotechnology and genetic research.

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