

## A Nuanced Outlook of Human Perfection in Andrew Niccol's Movie, *Gattaca*.

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### ABSTRACT

*Andrew Niccol's 1997 movie Gattaca pictures a world where parents can engineer genetically strong kids and those who come without prior engineering are seriously at disadvantage. While freedom of perfection creates a borderless autonomy for any parent to choose their child's destiny, equally it tames those who were not engineered by science but by fate. The movie therefore poses an important question regarding the definition of perfection in a society where genetics shapes much of an individual's identity. This research employs Rene Descartes' concept of mind-body dichotomy to justify the stance of Vincent's eventual success to get into Gattaca despite being an invalid in a society where genetically engineered children are the highlight. It doesn't however deal not so much with the age long debate about technology versus human as it does about subtle humane virtues, will power, desirability and ambitions that stands out despite the border of genetic engineering that tries to subdue it.*

**Keywords:** borders, ambition, genetic engineering, biotechnology

### 1. Introduction

Andrew Niccol's 1997 movie *Gattaca* sets forth the idea of genetic engineering and its repercussions through the characterization of Vincent who isn't engineered genetically. Unlike his brother Victor and other kids. He forges wrong identity of another genetically engineered namely Jerome in order to get his way through Gattaca Aerospace association. Despite the fact that the world believes that anyone like Vincent who was projected to have a heart problem

and live no longer than 30.2 years, would never bat a chance to land in an elite place like *Gattaca*, he not only makes his way through *Gattaca* but also becomes the best among everyone that *Gattaca* has to offer. The movie captures the dystopia that might result from unmediated genetic engineering and eugenic projects on one hand and on the other hand, it highlights the majesty of human will and enthusiasm that is strong enough to outrace it.

### Literature Review

Olivia Banner (2011) argues that *Gattaca* portrays a world which is post racial where the measure for superiority is the genes, yet it delves into reinvigorating the primacy of whiteness in its narrativization (221-241). The author refers back to the Human Genome project (HGP) proclaiming that "in genetic terms all human beings, regardless of race, are more than 99.9 percent the same" which infers that race is not biological, but a social construct. Quite contrary to that the author also points out that even in a world where race is not the question of argument, like that of *Gattaca*, the prototype of a perfect kid would be, white tall children, reinforcing the archaic concept of race back again. The reflection of this dystopia as captured in the movie parallels my point of view that discriminatory practices will be even more fervent among the disadvantaged, and to those who are born through fate, not any prior engineering. On the other hand, Flury, Angela, and Eric S. Rabkin (2004) write, "My point of contention lies in this proposition that *Gattaca* is a (genuine) manifestation of distrust in science" (p. 1356), shedding light upon the archaic humanistic values that *Gattaca* embody despite being a science fiction movie.

Likewise, Hughes, Rowland (2013) makes a connection of postmodern reflux of the dystopian movies *Silent Running*, *Soylent Green*, *eXistenZ*, and *Gattaca*. He argues that the crux of these dystopian movies from an Eco critical perspective is that, no matter how much these movies focus on technology, they all come down to nature as the final resort that redresses all the wounds wrought by technology (36). For *Gattaca*, the author deduces that irrespective of the genetically engineered world, where an individual's identity is his strongly furnished genetics, Vincent sets off to defy this notion as a kid who was not engineered and sets off to become an astronaut. This argument parallels my stance that ambitions can ultimately outnumber genes. For those engineered kids who have no desire to go outer space, genetics would mean nothing, but for those whose hard work and uprightness are intact, genetics is not an obstruction.

Kirby, David A. (2000) argues about the ethical and moral concerns of genetic determinism. For this he starts out by inferring some historical outlook of eugenics. From the ethical backlash of cloning from the Nazi Holocaust till the 60s and 70s when gene therapy was considered a viable treatment for several problems like Dyslexia, balding, left handedness and dyslexia, the author deduces the concept of genetic determinism, a concept which infers that humans are their genetics. However, he concludes by giving a bioethical stance to how technology should be used rationally, otherwise

there might be probable abuse of technology like in the world of *Gattaca* where the character's blood, skin and urine carries value but their actual faces as it appears in the ID becomes negligible. While I do agree that without a proper ethical redress technology can cause more harm than benefit, I do believe that to someone like Vincent in *Gattaca*, born with so called weak genes and was supposed to die at thirty, this knowledge to defy the world bolsters his strength to face the world. Obviously, he wouldn't have got the strength of this defiance to live longer, to exercise and be a better swimmer than his engineered brother and rediscover himself if he didn't have to hard to prove his worth in a genetically deterministic world like that of *Gattaca*.

On the other hand, Francis Fukuyama (2002) in "*Our Posthuman Future*" explores the probable ethical and social implications emerging from the proliferation of biotechnology by taking a reference to Huxley's *Brave New World*. He opines that technological developments along with bioengineering is a double edged sword since both its harms and benefits have been overstated. According to Fukoyama the future will be all enamored with biotechnology and there is no going back, yet regulating it is always an open option which needs serious consideration. I totally agree Fukuyama's contemplation about Aristotle's concept of cultural animals after which he deduces that human attributes are learnt from experience and can be transferred through non genetic matter. He also later argues that genes to have persistent role in shaping out selfhood and behaviour. My stance directly correlates with Fukoyama's concept of taking the middle view. Fukoyama (2002) writes, "One obvious way to draw red lines is to distinguish between therapy and enhancement, directing research toward the former while putting restrictions on the latter. The original purpose of medicine is, after all, to heal the sick, not to turn healthy people into god" (p, 208). However, the later scenario is much persistent in *Gattaca* which opens up a lot of questions regarding regulation of ethics related to cloning and genetic engineering. While genetics might be a radar to measure certain elements of an individual's personality, it cannot be its entirety, as much as Vincent's genetic strength could be measured since the day of his birth, but his determination and will could never be measured. In his book "*Of Grammatology*," Jacques Derrida challenges the notion of traditional binary oppositions in traditional Western philosophy. He counters Nietzsche's emphasis on logos and Heidegger's privileging of presence in order to counter the overreliance of binary oppositions in order to deconstruct the idea of single center and fixed meanings. His idea about unstable meanings and multiple "signifiers" in language is fascinating since it also resonates with the concept of fluidity of identities. In a world like that of *Gattaca*, genetic determinism is the only "center" to identify viable people deemed fit for intelligent works. Vincent's metamorphosis into Jerome, a genetically engineered kid in order to validate his identity as an astronaut despite lawfully being an invalid, mocks the genetic borders attested to those kids deemed as unfit for intelligent works. Thus, *Gattaca* deconstructs the fixity attested by genetic determinism and counters the idea of a genetic center which

only validates engineered kids.

In this way, various scholars have interpreted *Gattaca* within the paradigms of science and dystopia on one hand outlining the dangers of genetic engineering in the future.

### **Research Gap**

Scholars have delved into the concepts of technological dystopia, genoism and the possibility of a future where genetics would solely be the determining force to measure human potential. However, unlike other scholars who have delved into the age long discussion about genetic discrimination and its ethical concerns in the society, my contention is that *Gattaca* is not much a story about science, as much as it is about human condition. This essay hints into the significance of essential human components such as “will” and “creative suffering” as opposed to what is conventionally known as “perfection”.

### **Methodology:**

Mind- Body Dichotomy has remained one of the pertinent debates of western philosophy. Philosopher Rene Descartes famously wrote, “notwithstanding the supreme goodness of god, the nature of man , in as much as it is composed of mind and body , cannot be otherwise a source of deception” (p,32). His testimony complicates the age long debate about the connection between body and mind. Are we solely or senses or is our consciousness distinct from the limited knowledge we retrieve from our senses? The same debate continues to spread its roots in science when looked upon from the perspective of genetic engineering. Does implanting as stronger genes as possible in a child amount to a perfect child or is there more to the inherent consciousness that humans embody that cannot be engineered? This research employs Descartes’ principle of body- mind dichotomy in order to justify the fact that even careful engineering doesn’t assure perfection given that perfection is gut, willingness and ambition which cannot be furnished in labs.

### **Analysis and Findings:**

Andrew Niccol's 1997 movie *Gattaca* opens up the problematics associated with genetic engineering in a dystopian world where parents can choose the physical features they want to design for their children. The most bizarre thing about such a society is that perfection will no longer be an exception but norm since children are carefully engineered and are implanted with strong genes which will not only make them immune from inborn genetic disabilities, but also bolster their capacities to validate their status in the competitive job market. While the prospect of such careful engineering might look like a win- win, project, it can be too much to take for both disadvantaged kids and genetically engineered kids since the concept of perfection will linger all throughout their minds. This essay complicates the utopian vision of “perfection” as imagined by human civilization and scientific community for long and celebrates the

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transformative power of suffering and determination to outrun it.

The movie *Gattaca* succinctly poses the question: What significance does perfection hold when stripped of the essence of pure will? This scene replays in the movie with a cinematic contrast witnessed in two different instances, while genetically perfect Jerome immolates himself to death and a fire engulfs him, the camera immediately shifts to the child of fate Vincent, whose fiery rocket heaves him up to the space where he always wanted to be (1:41:26-1:41:41). The irony of this contrast being that as per his engineered genetics, it had to be Jerome who was born to travel outer space, not Vincent who was supposed to die at 30.2 years of age. What could be an explanation to this dynamic use of imagery? Speaking of the textuality of imageries in movies, Timothy Corrigan and Patricia White (2004) write, “Textuality in a movie image is an experience if the image as artifice or as constructed like a written statement or an aesthetic object to be interpreted” (p, 136); while Jerome’s immolation fire going down could suggest his lack of will power to survive in the world of perfect beings like himself, the eventual camera contrast depicting Vincent’s rocket fire going up in the space suggests triumph, which again problematizes the concept of perfection given that Jerome had far more of a perfect body and had every valid claim to be in *Gattaca*. However, as it turns out his territory of will and determination wasn’t as wider as Vincent’s. Before the immolation scene, Jerome is captured in a high angle shot with his blue eyes especially highlighted as he confesses to Vincent, “I only lent you my body, you lent me your dream ( 1:37:11). Here again, Vincent’ soul and body have become a distinct category. Descartes’ (1996), “body – mind dichotomy” complicates the matter of perfection further as he makes a point that the mind receives impressions only from the brain, “or perhaps even from one of its smallest parts, to wit, from that in which the common sense is said to reside” (p, 31). It is true that Vincent didn’t embody a genetically engineered body, but his mind which directs his will to live and all the intelligence he harnesses to gather this wit, the depths of his zealous and determined brain could hardly be measured in any degree of perfection.

It is again important to note that, lack of perfection is not so much of a problem in the movie as much as stagnancy and lack of transformation is. Vincent’s character undergoes a lot of transition throughout the movie. The uses of color transition talk a lot about transformation of characters as the movie is shot in an environment where there is no tint of a sunlight except in few instances where there is an amalgamation of usual colors blue, green and yellow. While Nicole has used blue color pervasively to separate Jerome from Vincent, Jerome never gets to bask in his own light, given that it is always blue for him. However, the shade used for Vincent changes from yellow during his childhood as an invalid to green as he grows up to surpass Anton during swimming which again transitions to an astral natural light which touches his face towards the end of the movie (1:42:19). As Patti Bellantoni (2005) points out “Some films use color transformation, or its flow, to support the evolution of a character throughout

the movie ( p, xxvi) . Different attribution of color dynamics hint at the transformation that makes Vincent an astronaut from a simple invalid. Conversely, given that Jerome doesn't capture any of these color variations, his character doesn't undergo any major change up till the end.

The movie not only critiques the concept of perfection but also celebrates the transformative power of suffering and pain. It suggests that perfection is not inherent at birth but is rather something cultivated through perseverance and struggle. Vincent's ability to harness his pain into motivation is portrayed as his most commendable attribute which eventually cherishes his dream to be an astronaut in an impossible world. Frederich Nietzsche famously quoted, "What doesn't kill me makes me stronger" (p, 6), shedding light on the importance of creative suffering to fortify oneself. Vincent's perseverance to make it to *Gattaca* and in the outer space beyond all odds adds to the fact that, while genetic discrimination became a poison to so many engineered kids like Jerome, it became an elixir to Vincent as his faculty to resist suffering was more fervent than the others. If viewed from this perspective, genoism has made Vincent stronger than having weakened his chances to get into *Gattaca*. The point is this that irrespective of his frail body, what worked as a catalyst was the strong sense of determination that Vincent embodied which ruled out every bit of obstacles that would suggest otherwise. For Descartes this situation bespeaks of the polarization of two different blocks that comprise of the human, consciousness and physical body. He writes, "For all these sensations of hunger, thirst, pain, etc are in truth none other than certain confused modes of thought which are produced by the union and apparent intermingling of mind and body" (29). Vincent's body labelled genetically as an inferior bred body might be a thing, but his faculty of doing things always resisted those dictates since his consciousness always defied the confines labeled by genoism.

Scholars have mulled around the concept of genetic discrimination while speaking of the movie. Olivia Banner (2011) argues that *Gattaca* portrays a world which is post-racial where the measure for superiority is the genes, yet it delves into reinvigorating primacy of whiteness in its narrativization, reinforcing the archaic concept of race back again. However, my contention is this that if it wasn't for the genoism of *Gattaca*, perhaps, Vincent would never learn to hustle and explore what is inside his deeper core. For instance, in the swimming scene in 1:32:42, Vincent and Anton set of swimming in the water again making a contest about who can swim the most farthest , Vincent drifts far away and Anton is surprised how the diminutive Vincent of the past he knew could do that, Vincent replies, " This is how I did it. I never saved anything for the swim back". The only difference between Vincent and Anton as for the present situation, was this that Vincent was labelled as an invalid right from his birth, but Anton had everything it takes to get into *Gatacca*. Yet, Vincent had one thing stronger and fervent than that of Anton, a strong source of determination and indulgence to give up to his full potential. Diver, Colin S., and Jane Maslow Cohen (2001) describe *Gattaca*



as a genuine manifestation of a distrust in science since it puts its trust upon the heroic efforts of a protagonist who wants to become an astronaut (1356). This also bespeaks about the mighty force of pain, suffering and uncertainty that can teach valuable lessons to people beyond a predetermined life of privilege the genoist world in *Gattaca* have been promised to those naturally tagged as valid.

### **Conclusion:**

This paper discussed some of the cinematic cues of the movie *Gattaca* which goes beyond technology versus human and shifts to human condition. The wonders of science are obviously the biggest focus of science fiction movies or dystopian movies which is not an exception. However, the might and core strength of determination that humans carry are often overlooked while focusing on tremendous amount of changes science engenders. The purpose of this paper is not about what science can do as much as the wonders that humans can do. Considering the fact that human mind is still the most complex thing to comprehend, I think that believing that one day all of that human mind will come down to science will be an understatement. The system might change, but the kernel things that humans live for, for instance, a quest to go beyond their pre-set earthly limitations and ambitions to outnumber the impossible will be forever. Descartes' body- soul dichotomy becomes a kernel point of discussion here given that the territory of consciousness that gauzes determination is a complete departure from the body that carries the soul. The question that will haunt civilizations therefore will not be whether or not science can engineer bodies. The real challenge however, will be whether or not they will be able to engineer emotions, willingness, curiosity and all the constructive qualities that will determine anybody's place in the world they inhabit in. Descartes' "body-mind dichotomy" complicates the matter further and nudges towards the haunting debate about consciousness that cannot quite submit into the confines of body chemistry.

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