

NEVER LET ME GO - ASPECTS OF HUMAN INSTRUMENTALISATION IN BIOTECHNOLOGICAL PRACTICES

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Abstract

The article examines Jürgen Habermas's text: *The Future of Human Nature*, focused on the implications of the development of biotechnological practices such as preimplantation genetic diagnostics and the possibilities of embryo modeling. Habermas' thesis that the uncontrolled use of the mentioned practices creates a danger of possible instrumentalisation of man and the creation of relations of dependence between different groups of people is analyzed. In such a perspective, the report centers around Nobel Laureate Kazuo Ishiguro's novel *Never Let Me Go* as an illustration of a possible future in which technology will allow the creation of human clones used as a source of spare parts. Various examples of such instrumentalisation of the human body in the last two decades are also given - surrogate motherhood, the egg market and even the case in which parents created a child to save the life of his/ sister through a bone marrow transplant. These already available instances of instrumentalisation of the human are pointed out in order to question the anthropological consequences of the advancement of biotechnology and its almost unchallenged imposition as a form of scientific progress that will lead to the improvement of the humankind but perhaps it will rather mark its end.

Keywords: instrumentalisation , gene editing, human autonomy, biotechnologies

1. Introduction

The novel "*Never Let Me Go*", one of the books for which Kazuo Ishiguro received the Nobel Prize in 2017, tells the story of three friends Cathy, Ruth and Tommy who grew up in the elite school for gifted children without parents Hailsham. Hailsham graduates are encouraged in every way to develop their talents - they draw, write poems and stories, play different sports. Their supervisors are friendly and caring, and every year the students' works are exhibited in the billiard hall of the school. The best ones are collected by Madame, a sophisticated, conceited lady who arrives several times a year to look at the children's work, but avoids contact with them. From generation to generation among Hailsham students a rumour spreads about the Gallery, a mysterious place where approved works will be presented to a wide audience.

During puberty, relationships between students become complicated. The main character Kathy, on whose behalf the narration is conducted, and Tommy have liked each other since childhood, but they hardly express their feelings, and the more pushy Ruth begins a relationship with the boy. The two of them later break up, and after a two-year stopover at the Farm—an estate where orphans from Hailsham and other educational institutions must adjust to the world—the three friends lose touch. Cathy starts working at a medical center where she helps patients recover from painful surgeries. Already 31 years old, Ruth and Tommy end up as patients in the hospital. The three recalls about their childhood in Hailsham, and Ruth, struggling with her surgery, tries to help Cathy and Tommy resume their relationship. Among other things, if they prove their love, they can get a reprieve.

What is vaguely hinted at the beginning of the novel becomes clear: the students of Hailsham, as well as their later friends and colleagues, are clones, created for the sole purpose of having their organs transplanted into their originals when necessary. Most donors do not have the privileged childhoods of Hailsham alumni.

The boarding school is part of an experiment to test whether clones have souls. Higher education, the urge to be creative, and the rumour that those who truly love each other will live longer are methods of certifying their soulfulness. However, a delay is not possible; Tommy experiences a rare fourth explant, while Cathy awaits her first (Ishiguro 2006).

"Never Let Me Go" offers a fictional version of the question of the consequences of the development of medicine and biotechnology, of the possible instrumentalisation of the human, of the blurring of ethical boundaries in the pursuit of practical results - topics that have also been a subject of philosophical theorizations in recent decades.

2. Instrumentalisation

In *The Future of Human Nature* - a central text in the field of bioethics written in 2001 - Jürgen Habermas focused on preimplantation genetic diagnosis and the potential for modifications of the embryo precisely in the perspective of a potential objectification and instrumentalisation of human nature, a violation of human autonomy and creating non-egalitarian relations between different generations or groups of people. Habermas strives to construct a worldview-neutral and universally valid theoretical basis, through which it becomes possible to set the necessary, according to him, limits to a liberal positive eugenics. In an attempt to clear his thesis of any religious and metaphysical overtones on the subject of the inviolability of human nature, he emphasizes two basic principles on which life in modern Western societies is built - the ability for reflexive self-understanding and taking responsibility for one's own a living project and at least the theoretically and legally established symmetry of relations between individuals in the modern state. These basic premises of modern life are threatened by the possibilities of positive eugenics in several aspects.

First of all, the human body is not merely a thing among things, a person exists in the dichotomy between "being a body" and "having a body" (Habermas 2003, 12), a boundary that biotechnologies erase. "The capacity of being oneself requires that the person be at home, so to speak, in her own body - points out Habermas - ...It is the body that our sense of direction refers to, denoting center and periphery, the own and the alien... But bodily existence enables the person to distinguish between these perspectives only in condition that she identifies with her body. And for the person to feel one with her body, it seems that this body has to be experienced as something natural – as a continuation of the organic, self-regenerative life from which the person was born." (Habermas 2003, 57-58). According to Habermas' reasoning, one's own freedom is experienced in reference to a nature-given beginning which is not at our disposal. So what appears to be an expansion of freedom of personal choice in the notions of advocates of genetic manipulation, according to Habermas, actually threatens to limit freedom in collisions of personal continuity. The distinction between nature and culture is necessary exactly so that the person can feel himself as the author of his own destiny. The natural starting point of one's own body sets the foundation for building a personal identity before and beyond the fluidity of socialization and educational practices. "We can achieve continuity in a 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 a 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 (Habermas 2003, 60) Genetic manipulations of the embryo, and in the long run - perhaps of oneself, cast a shadow over this possible space of freedom.

In a similar vein, Habermas makes his second major objection to liberal eugenics – positive eugenic intervention in the future life by endowing it with a certain gift or physical characteristics would possibly take away the exclusivity of authorship over its own life project. It is not the same, Habermas argues, the education in relation to parental preferences, which the person can later revise, and the programming in the silence of the bodily determination. Genetic intervention goes beyond the field of communicative I-you

interaction potentially present in the process of socialization. It implies an objectifying and instrumentalizing attitude in which the future human being is presupposed not as a possible unique person, but rather as a means of realizing someone else's intentions. Probably this attitude would not continue after the birth of the child, and yet it is likely to damage the moral self-understanding of the person concerned, depriving him of the mental condition that would enable him to take full responsibility for his own destiny. "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 (Habermas 2003, 62).

Undoubtedly, such a revision of one's own genetic program, at least at this stage, is also impossible in traditional childbirth. The essential difference, according to Habermas, is the violation of the principle of reciprocity, that outline the moral and legal framework of the modern state. Genetic programming creates the danger of establishing a hitherto unknown non-egalitarian, paternalistic dependence between, generally speaking, the designer and his product.

"Setting the pace for a self-instrumentalisation of the species?" is the title of the paragraph in which Habermas expresses his final major disagreement with preimplantation genetic diagnosis. In it, he emphasized two main points: the instrumental use of embryos for scientific purposes and the parents' decision whether or not to give life to an embryo in case of risk of genetic malformations. In the first case, the prepersonal life is implied entirely as an object, as a thing that serves external purposes. In the second case, justifications for unbearable future suffering to a great extent obscure the evaluative perspective on a life worth living, which in turn seems to narrow the boundaries protecting human life and thereby destroy our moral self-awareness.

In the postscript to "The Debate on the Ethical Self-Understanding of the Species" - the central text of the three that form the corpus of *The Future of Human Nature* - Habermas recounts the colloquium Law, Philosophy and Social Theory held in America in 2002. There, the metaphysically loaded reflections of the German philosophers, critically discussing: "the question of whether further development in genetic technology is needed disintegrate in the confrontation with the concreteness of the question 'how' it should be practically implemented. (Habermas 2003, 75)

3. The enhancement or the end of the man

Two decades later, for the majority of researchers in the field of biotechnology, who are also among the scientists with the largest funding pools, this development seems unquestionable. In this respect, it should be pointed out that preimplantation genetic diagnosis is already performed almost everywhere in the world, although in most countries it is possible only in cases of serious risk of genetic diseases. Also, despite legal prohibitions, in 2018, the Chinese scientist He Jiankui announced on YouTube "that two genetically modified babies – Lulu and Nana 妞妞- had come "crying into the world as healthy as any other babies". (Beers 2020, 2) He created these babies in an attempt to make them resistant to HIV. The consequences of this procedure are yet to be clarified, but in the opinion of the researchers "the birth of genetically modified baby was something "everyone in the burgeoning, multi-billion-dollar field of genome editing knew would come one day." (Beers 2020, 3). The case of the two babies, created in defiance of all medical and ethical standards, seems to exemplify Habermas' concerns about the instrumentalisation of man.

But if in *The Future of Human Nature*, Habermas purposely limits his reasoning to the field of PID and genetic modifications (Habermas 2003), in close or more distant contexts of reflection, numerous other examples of the instrumentalisation of man by means of biotechnologies can be listed. For example, although prohibited in most EU countries, surrogacy is legalized in Greece, Canada, some American states, Russia, Great Britain, Australia and Ukraine. In turn, commercial surrogacy is allowed in India, Ukraine and the

state of California, and as statistics show "for this reason, over time, India has become a preferred destination for 'fertile' tourism as the cost of the procedure there is less than a third of that in the US and the UK' (Savova 2019). Similarly, in her book *Body Shopping*, Donna Dickenson – Professor of Medical Ethics and Humanities at the London University – emphasizes on both the trade in organs and tissue and the instrumentalisation of the feminine body through the practices of voluntary or commercial egg donation for scientific purposes and for in vitro fertilization. Her research shows that in the "ovum market" in the USA and Western Europe eggs obtained from suitable - in height, eye and hair color, IQ, exam results, musical gifts, athletic achievements, etc. – donors are traded for hundreds of thousands of dollars (Dickenson 2011, 21). These mechanisms of genetic selection, while distinct from the possibilities for preimplantation genetic intervention in the embryo, raise ethical questions similar to those raised by Habermas.

Another ethically problematic case that made headlines around the time Habermas published his book was that of Molly Nash, a girl born in 1994 with the rare genetic disease Fanconi anemia. It is predicted that Molly is unlikely to live the age of 10, as she is expected to develop myelodysplastic syndrome or leukaemia. The solution that pediatrics professor John Wagner offered her parents was to use in vitro fertilization to create a second child who did not carry the Fanconi anemia gene and could serve as his sister's bone marrow donor. And so, in August 2000, Adam Nash was born, and a few months later, bone marrow taken by him was transplanted into Molly. She successfully tolerated the treatment and so far the two have no serious health problems (Almost two decades 2018). Of course, Molly and Adam's situation largely falls outside the liberal positive eugenics critiqued by Habermas. Here, the unconditional value of a child's life does not seem to be challenged by the consideration of the use of embryos or the possible physical suffering of the second child, a risk which, according to the doctors, is negligible. Yet it is not particularly difficult to imagine a life lived with the awareness that it was created as an instrument serving a purpose external to itself. It is not so difficult after this successful case to present another more distant picture - of children created to donate organs or tissues to their older sibling, which actually brings us back to Ishiguro's story.

At the end of "The Debate on the Ethical Self-Understanding of the Species", Habermas makes the unexpected clarification that his reasoning makes sense only if humanity wants to belong to some moral community. "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 its entire 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? (Habermas 2003, 73) And indeed, we live in a world whose global market offers everyone with the necessary resources the desired - a happy death, a healthy kidney or a suitable egg. So it is hard to believe that the moral community of humanity would survive the self-evident proofs about long life, health, beauty that science promises to provide, as well as the liberal thesis about the unlimited freedom of personal choice. Therefore is not likely the development of reproductive medicine and genetic engineering to be stopped or delayed by complicated and often difficult to understand arguments in the register of the enumerated.

So, I will end as I began - with a fictional picture of a possible future achieved through the means of biotechnology. In *The Possibility of an Island* Michel Houellebecq tell this story: Daniel is a depressed comedian in love with a woman who rejects him. He committed suicide, but not before a way was devised for rich men to clone themselves. Two thousand years later, these clones inhabit separate stations, communicating with each other by machines and meekly waiting for their aging to transfer to the next clone's body. It is said that somewhere there are neo-people, rude and uncivilized savages who live together in tribes and clans. Daniel 25, a distant successor of Daniel I, leaves the station and thus eternal life, meets the savages, reaches the sea, and begins to wait for the end of his life there (Houellebecq 2007).

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