

# "GATTACA"

Theological Reflections the morning after our filmgroup's discussion of this 1997 sciflick, which made little money but has become so famous for its intellectual stimulus that on "Google" I found 67,100 sites!

## The Story

Having moved from the atomic age deep into the genetic age, the world's divided into an overclass of genetically designed (a new definition of "natural"-born)--the "Valids"--& an underclass of randoms, who are "faith"-born or "God"-children--the "In-valids." **VINCENT**, conceived from sex in the back seat of a car, is an In-valid. His brief-encounter lover, **IRENE**, is a Valid, but slightly imperfect, & therefore disqualified from being an astronaut. **JEROME** is a perfect Valid, but has been wheelchaired by an accident.

Vincent, whose DNA (taken at birth) indicates his heart won't let him live more than thirty years, has another kind of heart: steady determination to be an astronaut (literalizing, it occurs to me, the Roman maxim *Aspera ad astra* [Severe self-discipline to reach the stars]). His brother is a Valid but lacks Vincent's undesigned drive-heart-spirit, so twice loses a fraternal physical-endurance (swimming) contest: sardonically, the film shows manifoldly the human spirit's superiority over products (including genetic engineering) of the human mind & limitations of the human body (Vincent overcoming his DNA-predicted destiny). This optimistic theme appears in the line most used to advertise the film: "There is no gene for the human spirit." And another: "Strength doesn't always come from the body."

Because in love with Vincent, Irene (Greek, "peace") is willing to step down into his underclass, sacrificing the brave new world of the bioformed, which is now doubly threatened, viz. by Vincent's contra-spirit & by Irene's leal(loyal)-love (in the Bible, the sacrificial theme, consummate in the Cross--which appears as a pendant at two\* critical events in the film).

Vincent manages to purchase Jerome's identity, undergoes a painful leg-lengthening (while lying cruciform), & gets a continuing supply of J.'s blood (by finger-pad) & urine--both, for the frequent necessary DNA testing at the Gattaca Aerospace Corporation, where he has been a janitor. V. takes on J.'s persona, & J. lives in V.'s dream--& suicides when the dream dies into the reality of J.'s rocket-trip.

To sharpen the contrast between the two social levels, & add suspense, the dramatist has the rocket mission director murdered, & the detectives find an In-valid's eyebrow hair (yes, V.'s) & search diligently for the supposed murderer--who turns out to be the director's replacement (Gore Vidal, famous author, who was willing to join the cast because of his fascination with the script). Having everything to lose & much to hide, V. is imperiled right up to the moment when, at the entrance of the rocket which was to take him to Titan, his cover is blown: dressed for the trip, his finger does not have a Jerome pad! But the tester turns out to be J.'s father, changes the "In-valid" screen-image to "Valid," and lets him pass.

Only in one detail does the film show that V.'s fraud has no future. When he saw J. for the last time (& had [communion?] wine with him), J. showed him the well-stocked (with blood-pads & urine sacks) frig & said, "This will last you for a while." V. beat the system only once. But in this richly symbolic movie, was once enough? Was "Titan" (heaven) his final destination? Would he ever have to achieve transcendence again? Only V. & Irene look up at launches, & they always do: are they, like Christian saints, living in the kingdom which is both now & not yet, in the Lord who both has come & is coming?

1 With his eye for details, our son Mark remarked the DNA dominance in the film: "Gattaca" contains the four letters used in genetic coding, & Jerome lived at the top of a spiral (helical!) staircase.

2 In his THE ABOLITION OF MAN, C.S. Lewis portrays runaway analytic **reason** as dooming humanity in the dark hole of philosophical & ethical relativism, which cannot escape narcissism & solipsism. Hypertrophy, apocalypse: any power (in that case, logic & language) developed far enough defeats humanity. In "Gattaca," the hypertrophy of genetic science, applied to social engineering, is the apocalypse. (The Romans had a phrase for it: *argumentum ad absurdum*, a sense-making idea pushed so hard it turns into non-sense, nonsense, absurdity.) In the 20th century, the fact that people are manipulable was pushed to the totalitarian nonsense that

\* At his conception & at his birth: VINCENT, victor into space, was a (Protestant) Christian by birth (Western crosses, not crucifixes).

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people are malleable. (When you "manipulate" some-thing/-body, you "hand"le for your own purposes, but you do not change the form; but something "malleable" can be beaten [Lat., "hammer"] or pressed into a new shape.) Humanity can be pushed around, but not given a shape different from the "image of God.") The dozen versions of socialist tyranny produced little except 100 million corpses: reality resisted ideology.

The hubris issue of the genetic age is what to do with our genetic-engineering power to change the shape (as it were) of humanity--not just genetic manipulation in the therapeutic interest of a single person, but germ-cell change automatically replicable inline, i.e. in succeeding organisms (people). Most scholars (including Francis Fukuyama), & all religious leaders, say HALT! TOO FAR! The film properly manipulates the fears attendant upon the chilling possibility, not futuristic but present, that we can "play God" to a biological extent never before possible, and that we will prove to be an inferior deity.

3 Religion always asks the question "What is sacred?" In "Gattaca," it is a perfection of bio-humanity achieved & maintained at the **dehumanization** of all & the **subjugation** of the lower ("In-valid") class. The resultant society worships the idols of rational control, predictability, & perfection. The fatal flaw in all utopias (BRAVE NEW WORLD, 1884, et al) is the total loss of human FREEDOM, LIBERTY, at least for the lower class. Religion collapses into reverence for the state; ethics shrinks to obedience to the state; esthetics is appreciation for what the state says is worthy of appreciation & emulation. The Gattaca state produces a superhumanity of designer people who are (to use a Garrison Keillor phrase) "all above average," & by various means induces the "God"-made people to have only designer babies--with the prospect that eventually imperfection will be eliminated (the Manichaeian eschatology). As a two-level society, the story speaks to all social discrimination, racism, classism, ethicism, chauvinism, sexism, bigotry (the film neologizes "genoism").

4 The Bible puts in only one appearance, a verse (Eccl.7.13, falsely screened as 3.3) emerging out of the blackness after the film's title (its priority presumably highlighting the importance of its statement): *Consider God's handiwork: who can make straight what he has made crooked?* (CEV: "If God makes something crooked, can you make it straight?") A theme in Qoheleth's wisdom is the folly of perfectionism, to which the world of Gattaca is committed, in pathetic-demonic parallel to the Bible commitment to **holiness**. If that were the point of presenting these as the film's first words (& first image), the film would be a story-exposition of the truth that Luciferianism (playing God, to improve on his works) is folly. But the next (& last) line to emerge on the opening screen questions that interpretation: it honors not God but the goddess: "I not only think that we will tamper with Mother Nature. I think Mother wants us to" (Willard Gatlis). The fact that the two quotations are antithetic presents us with the film's intellectual challenge: should "science" (including technology & its societal applications) do everything it can, or be restrained? & if the latter, why & to what ends & by whom & how? (On restraint, consider Jesus' temptations [Mt.4.1-11 & parallels].)

5 Besides Google, I used these online on "Gattaca": Hollywoodjesus.com (Christian reviews of films & other media), Roger Ebert (in Chicago Sun-Times), Epinion.com, & bruching.com. Members of our filmgroup submit materials from various sources.

6 Defiance is the diapason tone throughout. As the VC box puts it, the film's "a sci-fi thriller about an all-too-human man who dares to defy a system obsessed by genetic perfection." Vincent's last name is "Freeman." His last words before taking off into space sound like those of many a dying Christian facing the final liberation: "Maybe I'm not losing it [the earth]. Maybe I'm going home." Put here too Jerome's honor to Vincent: "I only lent you my body: you lent me your dream." And when Irene says to V. that nobody can beat the system, V. says "It is possible." Elsewhere, V. says "There is no gene for fate," "Blood has no nationality," & "They [the rulers of Gattaca] have discrimination down to a science."

7 Under Enlightenment modernism, science replaced religion; in Gattaca, bio-science has replaced God, conformity has (with the exception of Vincent the contrarian) eliminated the individual, & predictability has closed the formerly open future.