The Subject Rendered Bare:
Biogenetics and the Ontological Impact on Psychic Subjectivity

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Scientific advances in biotechnology from the psychoanalytic tradition pose epistemological and ontological problems impacting the way that subjectivity itself is constituted. The point of interference into the subject of genetic enhancements, or the subject made “self objectified” by the rendering transparent of their genetic code, is in the “structure of self reference,” i.e. the relationship between one’s genetic substance and their environment. With the technological capacity to render bare one’s genetic code, this reality fundamentally changes the way subjects relate to themselves, the way that one “chooses himself” in relationship to his environs, as well as to (what he perceives as) his “nature.”

This paper is concerned with understanding how the impact of biogenetic intervention, and advances in biogenetics more generally interfere with the structure of “self reference,” and how that interference might challenge the very basis of desire, the ontology of the subject, and ethical praxis. The position that adopts genetic determinism, or the attitude of, “I am fully determined by my genetic makeup” does not directly threaten the subject’s ontological status, rather it is in the way the subject relates to others both responsible for that genetic enhancement, and to others in society that changes the contours of autonomy, freedom and dignity.

Out of the psychoanalytic tradition, the specter of biogenetic interventions reveals the ontological status of the subject all along, “when faced with the genome I am nothing and this nothing is the subject itself.”¹ In Slavoj Žižek’s critique of biotechnology, he locates three primary problems of biotechnological advances.²

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¹ Žižek, Slavoj, Organs Without Bodies: Deleuze and Consequences, 2004. Pg. 133.
² Žižek’s three areas that biogenetic advances impact include the current ethical strictures regulating biotechnology in social and political contexts are a subset of the ethical sphere critically defined by Jürgen
Examination into the way that human nature is developed in the psychoanalytic tradition of Freud and Lacan is strengthened by charting a theoretical legacy stretching back to German idealism, mainly the thought of Friedrich Wilhelm Schelling, which offers a framework for understanding the ways that biogenetics impact the ontology of psychic subjectivity. This combinatory reading of psychoanalysis with German idealism reveals four overarching threats to the ontological status of subjectivity.

Firstly, biogenetic interventions change the ontological status of the subject of technological manipulations, i.e. subjects of biogenetic interventions run the risk of being “dedifferentiated” as objects of nature to be manipulated. Secondly, the specter of a dedifferentiated subjectivity induced by biogenetic interventions has the capacity to prevent the subject from their capacity to "self differentiate" because it interferes with the freedom and autonomy of choice and act. Self-differentiation is a structural necessity for grounding one's freedom and autonomy in Schelling and Lacan's ontological account of the formation of subjectivity and the unconscious. In the psychoanalytic account of subjectivity, the subject "chooses" their unconscious configuration through a process of self-differentiation from their drives, as evident in Lacan's conception of the "act." Since biotechnological advances pose a potential "dedifferentiation" of the subject with bare life, biotechnology blurs this ontological process, thus dedifferentiating the very conception of human nature and what makes humanity unique.

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Habermas as "hyphen-ethics" or "provisional ethics"; research into the human genome has taken the "human, all too human" mainstay of philosophical inquiries into the human condition and rendered this as a substantial object of epistemological discourse; and thirdly, the only non-genetic disease that can afflict human beings is trauma, all other diseases and their cures are within the domain of biotechnology.
Thirdly, biogenetic interventions disturb identity making in the Schellingian-Lacanian tradition that posit "contractive self-sameness," because it prevents the capacity for radical differentiation of oneself from substance (institutions, culture, the life world) and the drives. The impact of this interference into human freedom and autonomy hampers the subject’s ability to ground an authentically free new beginning. Unlike Habermas' use of Hannah Arendt’s natality, (applicable to the political axiom) "contractive self-sameness" posits an ontological threat to identity making in the realm of the socio-symbolic, and this threat is imminent with the specter of biogenetic interventions.

Fourthly, the ontological threat of biogenetic interventions changes the way that desire functions. The biogenetically determined subject suffers from a breakdown in the openness of desire: all of a sudden “everything becomes clear,” there is no longer any enigmatic X to sustain our desire. The subject is “thrown out of joint” in relation to their ethical commitment to the Other and takes on what Lacan refers to as the “being of drive.”

**The Dedifferentiated Subject of Biogenetic Intervention**

In *Organs Without Bodies: On Deleuze and Consequences*, Žižek levels an important criticism of Jürgen Habermas’ project in *The Future of Human Nature*, in which Habermas argues that biogenetic interventions pose a threat to the ethical self understanding of the species. Žižek points to a much more fundamental predicament that biogenetics presents, mainly that we already live in a world whereby we know enough about our genetic code prior to any intervention into that code. Habermas is then posing the wrong solution by formulating an ethics that
excludes scientific advances that threaten autonomy and human dignity and in the process, “pretending and acting as if this is not the case” so as to protect our dignity.\(^3\) What unites Habermas and Žižek in their assessment of biogenetic interventions is their commitment to following through with the enlightenment project, whereby “a new figure of freedom will emerge when we follow science to the end.”\(^4\)

The way that technology has influenced subjectivity since the time of Socrates has revolved around the notion that the bare life (\(Zoe\)), or the dark “thing-in-itself” that constitutes human essence has been the basis by which humanity realizes its life force. Coming after the Socratic shift, Aristotle sought for bare life to be mastered and cultivated through the organization of the life-world. Habermas, Lacan, and Zizek, have all shown, through processes of modernization human beings have been able to master life through technology. However, bare life returns to haunt humanity in biotechnological advances, particularly those into the genome. Biotechnology reverses the pre-modern problem of either externally encountering the thing-in-itself as an opaque essence or partaking in essence through a pantheism that relies on a metaphysical order. In genetic interventions we find ourselves firmly within the rawness of bare life, having the preconditions of our capabilities set by our genetic profile. The essence of the subject’s bare life is thus “dedifferentiated” from the life-world because the macro processes of daily life are grounded in the micro relations of our genetic material. The philosophical challenge thus arises that what once vanished into the thing-in-itself and made the thing-in-
itself appear opaque to phenomenal experience, humanity is domesticated and rendered visible as a technical object of technological inquiry. The shift then is an epistemological shift in how the human can be presented given that the life-world and bare life now coalesce.5

Man relies on nature and the paradox remains that there is only man in so far as there is a nature. Biogenetics reduces man to another natural object whose properties can be manipulated, what we lose is not (only) humanity but nature itself. Biotechnological interventions predetermine the socio-symbolic substance of the (talent and cognitive enhancements, etc.) expose the subject to what Žižek refers to as the subject’s bare life, or the state of, “I am my genes.” To Habermas, the genetic programming of human beings represents a domination of nature and a potentially negative self empowering of man, thus changing our self-understanding as members of the species - and perhaps touching upon a necessary condition for an autonomous conduct of life and a universalistic understanding of morality.6

The “shift” in ethical self-understanding follows the shift in the understanding of human nature in the (natural) sciences. The implications of this shift for Žižek present an ontological crisis for the subject of bioethical interventions. Where human beings had previously found a way to master nature in technology, now humans and nature are one and the same through the making visible and controllable of the genome. This process of “dedifferentiation” that Habermas discusses in the Future of Human Nature suggests a crisis for the ontological status of the subject because there is a direct confrontation between

5 Hourigan, Daniel, Biotech Fantasia, 2007. Pg. 6
scientific breakthroughs and humanist values, i.e. genetic predisposition confronts human dignity and autonomy. The shift Habermas is noting here follows the shift in the understanding of human nature in the (natural) sciences. Where human beings had previously found a way to master nature in technology, now humans and nature are one and the same amorphous collection of genes.

The Psychoanalytic Basis of Human Nature

How does this epistemological coalescence with bare life and the life world lead to an ontological impact on the basis of subjectivity? A reading into the psychoanalytic theory of subjectivity and human freedom reveals the way that desire and the drives form their relationship to human nature. Human nature, from the psychoanalytical tradition is thoroughly denaturalized, or subjectivated upon its traumatic confrontation with a symbolic realm of images and signifiers. Lacan develops a radical account of human nature in the twenty-first and twenty-fourth seminars, where he posits that human nature itself is unnatural, and that there is something within human nature itself that is unnatural, i.e. it’s unnaturalness is not constituted solely on its traumatic confrontation with the symbolic castration. In other words, as Adrian Johnston writes, “it must be in the nature of the subject’s nature to be receptive to this blow (symbolic castration) and its repercussions.” The “blow” that symbolic castration gives to the very denaturalized process of

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9 Symbolic castration is the gap between what I immediately am and the function that I exercise. This gap between what I am and the symbolic authority that confers onto me some symbolic mandate. By
naturalization, or entry into the socio-symbolic order is the very process of subjectification.

How Lacan defines nature is intimately connected to how he conceives of the “nonexistent sexual relationship” thesis, and both ideas are rooted in challenging the standard ontological account of human nature as rooted in harmony and wholeness.\textsuperscript{10} For Lacan, human nature has a direct impact on liberty and freedom for the subject. In Seminar eighteen, Lacan points out that the freedom enjoyed by the autonomous subject is made possible by “the lack of an integrated organic foundation as the grounding basis of this subject’s being.”\textsuperscript{11}

The subject dedifferentiated with nature from biogenetic interventions is thrown into an ontological predicament that establishes the subject’s relation to their own symbolic castration, i.e. to their own symbolic substance, rendering palpable the social situation that eludes their core being. Because “nature can attain itself, its self-identity, only at the price of a radical decenterment: it can only find itself in a medium outside itself,”\textsuperscript{12} the subject of biogenetic intervention may no longer be able to access their core being.

Lacan refers to this elusive core being as that which is “in the subject more than the subject,” their thingness, or object petit a, that kernel within itself that is something foreign to itself. A subject deprived of the mysterious excess within them, their object petit a must develop a radically new way of understanding their

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\textsuperscript{12} Žižek, Slavoj, \textit{The Abyss of Freedom}. The University of Michigan Press, 2000. Pg. 44.
own freedom. Traditionally, all identity consists of a gap between the positive properties of the person, what is known about that person, and the mysterious properties that sustain that person’s future, that *something more* in the subject. How that something more is interfered with can be understood when looking at the example of Huntington’s disease. With advances in the Genome, anyone with a genetic predisposition to Huntington’s disease is able to not only know whether they have the terminal disease but in many cases, doctors are able to determine the exact degree of life that person will have, when they will die, etc. Regardless of whether the subject chooses to know their fate, or does not choose to know, the mere fact that an Other knows about the status of my genetic fate makes my elusive thingliness more intangible. This erasure of my own capacity to be free from the Other’s knowledge about my own genetic life interferes with the something in me that is more than me.

**Schelling and Self-Differentiation**

The influence of the metapsychological philosophy of Friedrich Wilhelm Schelling has been profoundly absorbed by psychoanalysis, particularly Lacan’s account of human nature and the transcendental materialist emergence of subjectivity. In Schelling’s metapsychological texts *Ages of the World* and the *Weltater*, the ontogenesis of psychic subjectivity is put forward in dramatic mythical and theological terms. Schelling’s idea of freedom is structurally dependent on a radical capacity for freedom, but the ground by which freedom is constituted is split and lacking, similar to Lacan’s account. For a subject to be lacking in autonomy, it is the result of a lack of capacity to be determined by the substance that the subject
desperately seeks to self-differentiate from. This capacity to self differentiate is an ontological structural necessity for the Lacanian-Schellingian theory of subjectivity, as Adrian Johnston points out in the “Ghosts of Substance Past”

being gives birth to the non-being of a desire which, although it owes its existence to being, seeks to achieve a relative autonomy with respect to it.”

Put into Lacanian terms, the transition from the real ground to the reality of existence occurs in a barred real, that is a real that is always already out of joint. The “ground” by which the subject constitutes itself is already structurally an excess within being. The excess of being desires an exit via negation, (the process of differentiation from ground) whereby the subject breaks free from their drives. It is this break with the drives that makes true subjectivity possible.

This break with the chaotic forces of the drives ends up being a conscious choice, or what Lacan refers to as an “act.” The idea of a conscious choosing of one’s own unconscious is akin to the position that Freud adopted when he wrote that the subject “chooses their neuroses.” In both Freud and Schelling, the subject exists prior to symbolic castration without subjectivity and the unconscious, “the unconscious and the subject are co-emergent, owing their existence to the same ontogenetic factors.” In other words, “no subject(ification) is possible without the unconscious.” The subject’s atemporal founding gesture of its own consciousness remains forever out of grasp because the act remains behind the veil of repression that structures all reality after the moment of mergence into the socio-symbolic

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This structural necessity that founds the unconscious is kept unconscious, according to Schelling because it produces a horror of freedom for the subject, or an “abyss of freedom” that can never be realized.

How might this ontological mergence into the socio-symbolic impact the dedifferentiation of the biogenetic subject? By interfering with the bare life (embodied existence) of the individual,

“the ontogenetic ground out of which full subjectivity emerges is linked to the embodied existence of the individual. Moreover, the emergent subjectivity possesses a degree of freedom in so far as its drive-ridden nature bequeaths to it the absence of a natural programme.”

This basic “absence” of the subject’s natural programme is what Lacan refers to as lack. Unlike Kant, freedom does not arise from a special faculty in the noumenal realm that possesses an innate capacity for autonomy – rather; freedom arises for the psychoanalytical subject precisely as a consequence of the incomplete and deficient harmonization of the various faculties forming the individual’s subjectivity. What we have then is a biogenetic subject that may lack the freedom and autonomy required to perform the negation of their ground precisely because they may remain conscious of the determined interventions into their genetic code, which they perceive to determine their very nature.

The Capacity to Make a New Beginning

Schelling’s notion of “contractive self-sameness” points out how the subject can only actualize itself against substance (spirit, culture, institutions) by positing a

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totally contingent process of self-differentiation between its ground and drives. This fundamental tension that founds identity is also the founding of the unconscious itself. In this founding gesture of consciousness, the means by which a subject chooses itself, i.e. the “act of identity” is determined by the multitude of the drives. As Schelling points out, “if, in making a decision, somebody retains the right to reexamine his choice, he will never make a beginning at all.”¹⁷ In the moment of “making a beginning” through the founding gesture of identity formation, the genetically enhanced person could lose hold in the capacity of autonomy needed to make a beginning.

This capacity for the subject of biogenetics to make a new beginning is reminiscent of Habermas use of Arendt’s natality. Arendt’s concept of “natality” is the central category for political and not metaphysical thought for Arendt, it represents the primordial possibility to act, the infinite possibility to be something new.¹⁸ Since biogenetic interventions limit the subject’s capacity to make a new beginning, the role of freedom is central in both natality and contractive self-sameness.

As we have seen from the psychoanalytic tradition thus far, biogenetics doesn’t necessarily change the status of the subject; it is the way that the structure of self-reference is interfered with in the subject’s socio symbolic substance that poses the ontological threat to subjectivity. As Žižek points out, freedom remains a part of the real but the agent requires a degree of agency to assume a free distance towards the act of realizing one’s own freedom.

“Freedom can become the predicate of a subject only in so far as the subject accomplishes the act of self-differentiation by means of which it posits itself as grounded in and simultaneously different from its contracted substance: a free subject has to have a ground that is not itself; it has first to contract this ground and then to assume a free distance toward it via the act of primordial decision that opens up time.”

Since human freedom is fundamentally barred from the subject’s consciousness and its very ontological ground is founded on an abyssal unconscious relation to the register of the real, how do biogenetic interventions impact this process of realizing the appropriate space or distance towards one’s subjective freedom?

Genetic interventions interfere with the very normative ground of human freedom and thus problematize the standard conception of human freedom. The Schellingian-Lacanian-Zizekian tradition shows that there is no positive/realizable version of human freedom, and the ontological process is structurally embedded on a failure of access to one’s own freedom. The subject realizes itself in relation to an abyss of freedom it can never fully fathom. On the liberal side of the argument, some have argued that genetic interventions might be a way to realize the “abyss of freedom.” The problem with this argument in favor of accessing the abyss of freedom as revealed in one’s genetic code is that this process interferes with the way that desire functions.

Desire and the “Being of Drive”

As we have developed up to this point, the Lacanian subject is founded on a negative ontological gesture conditioned by the drives. The rendering visible of the genetic code threatens to disturb that thing that is in the subject more than the

subject, what Lacan refers to as object petit a. Object a is also what sets desire in motion. It confers the consistency of our desire, and as such, it serves as a mediator between jouissance and desire. The subject makes itself an object out of itself. In this sense, the subject who makes herself the Other’s object-cause of desire becomes her own cause. With the specter of the subject of biogenetic intervention that is made aware of the basis of their genetic code (as in the example of Huntington’s disease) there is a breakdown in the openness of desire. All of a sudden, “everything becomes clear,” there is no longer any enigmatic X to sustain our desire. The subject of biogenetic intervention is thrown out of joint to their ethical commitment to the Other and takes on what Lacan refers to as the “being of drive.”

The “being of drive” is strikingly similar to the way that the coalescence between the bare life subject of biogenetics as a tool of scientific manipulation and the being of drive operates. As Žižek claims, science "doesn't think," it "knows", ignoring the dimension of truth, and is as such drive at its purest. Within psychoanalysis, this knowledge of drive, which can never be subjectivized, assumes the form of knowledge of the subject's "fundamental fantasy," the specific formula which regulates his or her access to jouissance. That is to say, desire and jouissance are inherently antagonistic, exclusive even: desire's raison d'être is not to realize its goal, to find full satisfaction, but to reproduce itself as desire. How is it possible nonetheless to couple desire and jouissance, to guarantee a minimum of jouissance within the space of desire? This is made possible by the famous Lacanian object a that mediates between the incompatible domains of desire and jouissance.
As the example of Huntington’s disease shows, even if I didn’t want to know my genetic constitution, the Other still knows and his knowledge of my genetic fate fundamentally changes the way that desire operates. The fundamental issue becomes, how do we “protect the Other from pain, of keeping him in protective ignorance.”

This predicament then presents the subject with the truth of their condition all along. The very contours of psychic subjectivity are forced into a confrontation with the real and blocked from the object petit a that sustains their desire.

“The confrontation with the meaningless real of the genome thus obliterates the fantasy screen through which I perceive reality: in the formula of the real I am compelled to directly access the real.”

The subject is forced into a position reminiscent of Hegel’s “infinite judgment” the spirit is a bone, this subjective attitude is revealed in the condition of “I am my genetic makeup. In a way this argument brings us back full circle to confronting the ethical impasse of Habermas’ “hyphen ethics” or how to orient ethics in the face of biogenetic infinite judgment. Zizek argues that it is incumbent to follow this logic of infinite judgment to its end and not posit the overarching challenge as one of ethics (as Habermas does) but to notice how the predominate issue should be to follow the enlightenment project to its logical end where, “a new figure of freedom will emerge when we follow science to the end.”

The real danger of biogenetic interventions, if not a matter of ethics is addressing the socio-economic context from which it operates. As Žižek points out, when biogenetic uses are co-opted by the “interests of corporate capital and of the

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state agencies tempted to rely on it in order to increase their control of the population,"22 the very coordinates of the liberal-democratic subject disappears.

Conclusion

Biogenetic advances impact subjectivity in the realm of the “structure of self reference," meaning that the way these technologies are perceived will have the largest impact on the socio-symbolic substance of the subject. In the realm of psychic subjectivity, this potential impact entails an utterly concrete form of power exerted over the subject. With the specter of biogenetic interventions, the psychoanalytic tradition reveals that it is not so much that we lose our freedom and dignity but that we realize we never had it in the first place. If we follow infinite judgment ("I am my genes") to its logical conclusion, based on the progress of scientific advancement into the genetic code, then we must not seek to invent entirely new ethical codes.

When we engage on a new path, full of dangers and shattering new insights, we need to stick to old established rules as a practical guide for our daily lives, although we are well aware that the new insights will compel us to provide a fresh foundation for our entire ethical edifice.23

Thus Žižek rejects Habermas’ clinging to “old humanist mores” and a “common language of rational morals” that rejects science, in favor of following science through to its very end. The ethical question, in light of Žižek’s position remains twofold, how might we change the structure of self-reference, and how might this change then inform new notions of freedom, responsibility, and autonomy?

Works Cited


