

Year 11 Interesting Ethical Issues

Here are a list of films and documentaries that you may find interesting to watch. Films and programmes are an interesting resource for exploring ethical issues as they raise questions about our moral conduct and responses to various situations.

The film *Gattaca*, starring Uma Thurman and Ethan Hawke, is set in the future where genetic testing is embedded in society and leads to discrimination. Here is a link to the film on YouTube - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tzG3I7nMEks>

When you have watched the film consider these questions. If you have watched the film with members of your family you could have a discussion about the issues raised.

1. When Jerome's parents went to a genetics centre for a second child, the geneticist stated "I have taken the liberty of eradicating any potentially prejudicial conditions - premature baldness, myopia, alcoholism and addictive susceptibility, propensity for violence and obesity." The father then asks "We were wondering if we should leave some things to chance." To this the geneticist responds, "You want to give your child the best possible start. Believe me, we have enough imperfection built-in already. Your child doesn't need any additional burdens." Would it be irresponsible for the father to want to leave something to chance?
2. In an outtake to the movie, the geneticist states that for an extra \$5,000 he could give the embryo enhanced musical or mathematical skills – essentially splicing in a gene that was not present on the parents' original DNA. Would musical or mathematical skill be more like physical abilities, which are pretty rigid, or more like moral qualities (proneness to pity or violence) which are less rigid?
3. Vincent states in the movie that "it's illegal to discriminate – 'genoism' it's called – but no one takes the laws seriously." This is in fact one of the standard criticisms of genetic profiling: if we have genetic data on people, then employers or insurance companies will use that data to minimize financial risk. Assuming that this will be true, would the benefits of genetic profiling still outweigh the

disbenefits?

4. Consider this dialogue regarding the rigorous testing of Gattaca personnel. Director Josef: “we have to ensure that people are meeting their potential.” Investigator: “Not exceeding it?” Director Josef: “No one exceeds his potential.” Investigator: “If he did?” Director Josef: “It means that we did not accurately gauge his potential in the first place.” This dialogue exhibits a common criticism that determinism is unfalsifiable – that is, an advocate of determinism would not admit that any test could even theoretically count against determinism. Is this a valid criticism of Director Josef’s specific position?
5. The moral message of the movie is that we can rise above our genetic predispositions, with specific emphasis on our pre-determined physical abilities. The movie’s message also applies to our ability to overcome pre-determined behavioural traits – an issue more typically involved in the philosophical debate about determinism. The prime example of this in the movie was the revelation that the Director Josef committed the murder, even though his genetic profile indicated that he was completely non-violent. Which is a better “refutation” of determinism: Vincent living past 30, or Director Josef committing a murder?
6. Near the close of the movie, Vincent explains to his brother how he was able to beat him in the swimming contest: “You wanted to know how I did it. That’s how I did it, Anton. I never saved anything for the swim back.” Now that we know the secret, is there anything about Vincent’s actions in the movie that really refute determinism?
7. The original screenplay concludes with the following coda: “In a few short years, scientists will have completed the Human Genome Project, the mapping of all the genes that make up a human being. After 4 billion years of evolution by the slow and clumsy method of natural selection, we have now evolved to the point where we can direct our own evolution. If only we had acquired this knowledge sooner, the following people would never have been born:” It continues listing famous people and their illnesses, such as Hawking who has Lou Gehrig’s Disease. A version of this coda was in fact filmed, but deleted from the final movie. How would this argument differ from the following: couples should have as many children as

physically possible since limiting births would mean that we wouldn't bring into existence valuable people?