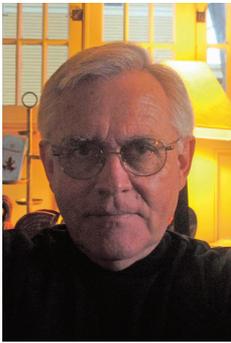


The Genome Project, Gnosticism and Personalism

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Introduction

This article has four parts. The first is a brief description of the Human Genome Project and its possible connections to American Eugenics. The second part raises the question about the possibility that the Human Genome Project is a Gnostic project. The third part will state the fundamental notions of Personalism in contrast to Gnosticism. The fourth part is the conclusion and provides an example of the manner in which Personalism works in history.

The Human Genome Project

The Genome Project is, in many ways, an American Adventure. It is financed by the Department of Energy, but there is a memorandum of understanding with the National Institutes of Health, to whom funds also were appropriated. The initial funding recommendation, made in 1988, was for \$200 million annually for 15 years. In a statement found in its website the Department says:

«More than a decade ago, the Office of Health and Environmental Research (OHER) of the U.S. Department of Energy (DOE) struck a bold course in launching its Human Genome Initiative... Organizers recognized that the information the project would generate – both technological and genetic – would contribute not only to a new understanding of human biology and the effects of energy technologies but also to a host of practical applications in the biotechnology industry and in the arenas of

agriculture and environmental protection... Today, the project's value appears beyond doubt...»¹.

The specific goals of the project have gone through a number of modifications. In the latest revision (1998), they are grouped in the following areas: Human DNA sequence, Sequencing technology, Human Genome Sequence Variation, Functional Genomics Technology, Comparative Genomics, Ethical, Legal, and Social Issues, Bioinformatics and Computational Biology, and Training and manpower. The project is expected to impact the following areas of the economy: 1) clinical medicine to which it will make available many and more individualized diagnostics and prognostics, drugs, and other therapies; 2) agriculture and livestock where it will result in hardier, more nutritious, and healthier crops and animals; 3) industrial processes where it will lead to cleaner and more efficient manufacturing in such sectors as chemicals, pulp and paper, textiles, food, fuels, metals, and minerals; 4) environmental biotechnology where it will bring about biodegradable products, new energy resources, environmental diagnostics, and less hazardous cleanup of mixed toxic-waste sites; 5) DNA fingerprinting that will help in the identification of humans and other animals, plants, and microbes; evolutionary and human anthropological studies; and detection of and resistance to harmful agents that might be used in biological warfare.

The Project has spent 3% to 5% of the budget toward studying the ethical, legal and social issues it raises². The issues explored are: 1) fairness in the use of genetic information; 2) privacy and confidentiality of genetic in-

formation, 3) psychological impact and stigmatization due to an individual's genetic differences; 4) reproductive issues; 5) clinical issues, 6) uncertainties associated with gene tests; 7) conceptual and philosophical implications, 8) health and environmental issues concerning genetically modified food and microbes, and 9) commercialization of products³.

The reproductive issues whose ethical, legal and social implications are being dealt with include: adequate informed consent for complex and potentially controversial procedures, and the use of genetic information in reproductive decision making and reproductive rights. I must confess that in my practice as a teacher, and clinical ethics consultant, the issue of reproductive rights has arisen only when it is necessary to justify an abortion.

The goal of training and manpower intends to nurture the training of scientists skilled in genomics research. But who will nurture and train them? This is a very important question because of at least two reasons: 1) a number of articles and Kuhl's book, *The Nazi Connection: Eugenics, American Racism, and German National Socialism*, have demonstrated the existence of a connection between American Genetics and Nazi Eugenics; 2) there is a renewed interest in America about Eugenics. The web page of the Center of Biomedical Ethics at the University of Virginia has the following statement: «The H.G.P. has kindled renewed interest in the possibility of amending our genetic legacy through preventive reproductive strategies, and perhaps eliminating certain diseases or disabilities that may be genetically linked. As a consequence, there is a renewed awareness of earlier attempts to manipulate heredity during the first quarter of this century under the aegis of the eugenics movement»⁴.

American Eugenics has an interesting history. American Genetics was connected with it from its beginning. The geneticist Davenport, who taught at Harvard and Chicago is one of the best examples. The connection was strengthened by and with

the support of important, influential and wealthy Americans and foundations so that, by 1916, in the book "The Passing of the Great Race" could advocate for the implementation of... «A rigid system of selection through the elimination of those who are weak or unfit – in other words social failures – would allow solve the whole question in one hundred years, as well as enable us to get rid of the undesirables who crowd our jails, hospitals, and insane asylums. The individual himself can be nourished, educated and protected by the community during his lifetime, but the state through sterilization must see to it that his line stops with him, or else future generations will be cursed with an ever increasing load of misguided sentimentalism.

This is a practical, merciful, and inevitable solution of the whole problem, and can be applied to an ever widening circle of social discards, beginning always with the criminal, the diseased, and the insane, and

extending gradually to types which may be called weaklings rather than defectives, and perhaps ultimately to worthless race types». The result was that a significant number of states of the American Union voted eugenic laws into effect to prevent the procreation of "inferior families". At the federal level, legislation was passed to restrict immigration to largely "Nordic" populations. The eugenicist Charles Woodruff declared, «It is clear that the types of human beings from northwest Europe are our best citizens and have, therefore, to be conserved»; while the sociologist Edward Ross, in a phrase now used repeatedly by contemporary neo-Nazis, spoke of the «race suicide» that would result from «inferior» segments of the population gaining power. It is believed that by the early 1930s, the American eugenics movement was the most influential and prestigious among those Western powers who were interested in genetic and racial manipulation. According to one author even Hitler, in "Mein

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Kampf”, wrote admiringly of the US Immigration Restriction Act with its intended purpose of ranking “races” according to their genetic “suitability”⁵.

Since the end of World War II eugenicists have eliminated references to “ethnic racism” and have changed the names of their journals. In 1954, *The British Annals of Eugenics* was renamed *The Annals of Human Genetics*; in 1969, *The Eugenics Quarterly*, the successor of *The Eugenics News*, was renamed *The Journal of Social Biology*.

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Meanwhile, eugenicists began referring to themselves as “population scientists”, “human geneticists”, “psychiatrists”, “sociologists”, “anthropologists”, and “family politicians” – to distance themselves and their work from its out-

comes and from the ideology of “Nordic Superiority”⁶.

Is the Human Genome Project a Gnostic Project?

Eric Voegelin, for whom racism and nazism were a manifestation of Gnosticism, has written extensively about its nature. «By Gnosticism Voegelin understands a symbolic form at least as old as the Christian era itself. Gnosticism rose out of the fragile nature of earthly existence, which leaves many people thirsting for a certain and immediate deliverance from so hazardous a condition. The Gnostic creed movement gives its followers a sense of superiority over the uninitiated and its sage typically believes that he has become one with the godhead and has achieved liberation from the world of ordinary human beings»⁷.

Gnosticism overcomes the uncertainty of a life lived by faith by blinding itself to the reality of transcendence and proclaiming that man, and his intramundane range of action, have the possibility of bringing about men’s fulfillment through a work of self-salvation. The spiritual energy which Christians could devote to the santification

of life is diverted by Gnosticism into the creation of the terrestrial paradise⁸. When Gnosticism becomes an important element of a civilization, like in Comte or Marx, it creates the illusion of a “New Age” that is about to begin, one that will bring about the re-divinization of man, a man who lost his divinity with the disappearance of the ancient gods of pagan Europe when its civilization could no longer support them because «human existence in society became reordered through the experience of man’s destination, by the grace of the world-transcendent God, toward eternal life in the beatific vision»⁹.

The attempts of Modern Gnosticism to re-divinize man are, as Voegelin has explained, due to the effect of forces which are internal to Christianity. The “orthodox” Christian vision was established by St. Augustine in the *Civitas Dei*. In it Augustine dismissed the literal belief in millenarian ideas and effectivelly ended: «...The revolutionary expectation of a Second Coming that would transfigure the structure of history... The Logos had become flesh in Christ; the grace of redemption had been bestowed on man; there would be no divinization of society beyond the pneumatic presence of Christ in his church»¹⁰.

Joachim de Fiore broke with the Agustinian conception of Christian society around the year 1100 when he applied the symbol of the Trinity to the course of history. In his thought the history of mankind had three periods corresponding to the three persons of the Trinity. The first period of the world was the age of the Father; with Christ began the age of the Son, but it would be followed by a third age, the age of the Spirit. Each of these ages brought about greater spiritual fulfillment, as each new expression of Gnosticism promises greater material fulfillment, and the third age, like the Comtian age of positive science, or Marx’s communism, would also bring the ultimate fulfillment of mankind and the end of history.

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and leads to the re-divinization of man through the impact it is expected to have on human health, human environment and, ultimately, the human race of the future. If one follows the standard way in which disease is understood in Public Health theory and practice – as the result of the interaction of humans and a pathogen in the appropriate environment – the idea that through it humans can banish death is implicit in the aims of the Project. The following quotation is taken from an article by Drell and Adamson and can be found in the website of the project. «Your medical record will include your complete genome as well as a catalogue of single base-pair variations that can be used to accurately predict your responses to certain drugs and environmental substances. This will permit you to be treated as a biochemical and genetic individual, thus making medical interventions more specific, precise, and successful. In addition, the increased power of medicine to predict susceptibility to specific diseases will allow you to alter your lifestyle to reduce the likelihood of developing such diseases or to be treated with preventive or disease-delaying medicine».

And through Gene Testing the benefits of the Genome Project are available to future generations. They will be used «to diagnose disease, confirm a diagnosis, provide prognostic information about the course of the disease, confirm the existence of the disease in asymptomatic individuals, and with varying degrees of accuracy, predict the risk of future disease in healthy individuals and their progeny»¹¹.

While other technologies will be used to improve the environment and provide better foods. Thus the members of a humanity from which genetic disease has been eliminated, living in an environment that has been perfected through genetic technologies, and eating food that has been genetically modified to keep it healthy can in principle live for ever. It is also necessary to see that the possibility is open to transform abortion into one of the most

important tools to bring about this new humanity that will live for ever. One must keep in mind the idea that the ethical, legal and social arm of the project is based on the idea that there are reproductive rights to be exercised by persons.

Personalism

The word “Personalism” is usually associated with the thought of Emmanuel Mounier. However I take it to be not a philosophical school, but a way of thinking about and relating to others. Personalism has always occurred when and where there has been an “I and Thou” relation between two humans, or to be more precise, when there has been what the Spanish physician Pedro Lain Entralgo called a “dyadic relationship”. In such a relationship two individuals relate to each other in such a manner that they are always a subject to the other and at the service of the other’s intentions. The other can never be reduced to an object, much less an object that could be manipulated to achieve one’s goals¹².

I believe that the works of Eric Voegelin and Bernard Lonergan are personalist because through the correct understanding to which they lead one is enabled to discover the nature of subjectivity and the other as a subject with intentions. This is one of the reasons why the poem on the Apocalypse of Abraham plays such a central role in Voegelin’s thought and Lonergan explicates the nature of intersubjectivity and the role it plays in the construction of the good in which humans live¹³.

Personalism would consider, in contrast to Gnosticism which claims to have already grasped the meaning of human existence and the end of history, that both human existence and human history are a mystery in which two subjects, God and Man, speak to and respond to each other. Let me share a quotation from Voegelin himself. «...from

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the cosmos as it impresses itself on man by the splendor of its existence...The man who receives the impression, in his turn is endowed with an intellect both questioning and imaginative. He can respond to the impression by recognizing the divine mystery of a reality in which he is a knowing partner, though it is not of his making. In this experience of the cosmos, neither the impression nor the reception of reality is duly factual. It rather is alive with the meaning of a spiritual event, for the impression is revelatory of the divine mystery, while the reception responds to the revelatory component by cognition of faith. An experience that is structured in the manner just adumbrated cannot be described in terms of subject and object ... (it) is to be described as a process within a reality that comprehends both the cosmos with its divine mystery and man with his mind in which the mystery becomes cognitively luminous» . Thus, the personalism that I refer to accepts that 1) the divine mystery of a reality of which humans are a knowing partner, 2) humans begin the cognition of the mystery of this divine reality begins with an act of faith, 3) human existence is an event that occurs in hazardous conditions and that the risks that it implies cannot be engineered away, 4) salvation from these hazards can only come through God's gift of his grace and his love, and that 5) intramundane activity can never bring about total human fulfillment.

Conclusion: The way in which Personalism works in history

To conclude this article I share some of the history of Texas. The incident I will share is, I believe, evidence of the civilizational forces that are brought into play by Personalism. But where Gnosticism has unleashed the forces of Eugenics, Nazism, and perhaps the self-salvation intended by the Human Genome Project, to create a civilization that gives persons the right to bring about the death of the unwanted and the undesirable, Personalism unleashes forces that can create

a civilization in which those who would otherwise feel superior are at the service of those who need them, and together they create new alternatives. Here is the history. One of the first Spaniards to enter what is now Texas was captain Alonso de Leon. He came towards the end of the XVII century. The following is a quotation from the report of his expedition; it shows the way he saw the natives he encountered there: «...when they feel weakness and they find themselves strong, they do not let the occasion pass by and push against the enemy. But if they are not as powerful there are no hounds like them in the wilderness; regardless of the fact that they run around naked and that all the species of vegetation in the wilderness are full of thorns. Some of the ones who are caught are so full of thorns that they seem bulls that have been lanced or shot with arrows. There is no difference between capturing these peoples and hunt for beasts, for even in that they are like them» .

Yet, to his credit, Alonso also realized that his words did not fit the mysterious reality he had just encountered. In fact these natives that seemed like beasts were persons, as much as he was, and in need of God's love and grace as much as he needed it. Thus, he was among the first to request that missionaries be brought to the peoples he had just encountered. The Franciscans came and organized missions that became beacons in which and from which a new civilization began to spread. In the sacred spaces and times the missionaries organized, under the protection of the Spanish soldiers, the men and women who had initially been seen as beasts ended their nomadic existence and settled, and learned to read and write, to cultivate the land and raise the cattle. With time the Spanish soldiers, the Blacks that came with them, and the natives – the so called “Indians” – married with each other and became the first Texans.

In this example of what Personalism is and how it can bring about a civilization of life I believe can be identified the following ingredients. The first is a person, Alonso in

this case, open to the mystery of the reality which he encounters, an openness that allows him to see beyond what he can put into words and thus discover, even if vaguely, the meaning of the encounter. A government, the government of Spain, which while pursuing its earthly aims still maintains an openness toward those structures and persons – the Church and its missionaries –, whose aim is to direct the gaze of humans toward transcendence; and this government is willing call on these structures and persons to be at the service of its subjects. There are also the persons who make up these sacred structures – the missionaries – who have willingly surrendered many things that others would consider an absolute necessity, in order to be ready to go and be at the service of others. Finally, there is the openness of the natives, which allows them to hear a call from the Beyond and to enter into a relationship with the soldiers and their government, the missionaries and their church and, with soldiers and missionaries, create a new civilization.

NOTE

¹ http://www.ornl.gov/TechResources/Human_Genome/publicat/97pr/01prefac.html.

² http://www.ornl.gov/TechResources/Human_Genome/elsi/elsi.html.

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³ http://www.ornl.gov/TechResources/Human_Genome/elsi/elsi.html.

⁴ <http://hsc.virginia.edu/medicine/inter-dis/bioethics/bibliographylombardo.htm>.

⁵ Quoted by Jonathan Marks. <http://www.uncc.edu/jmarks/eugenics/eugenics.html>.

⁶ <http://bethuneinstitute.org/documents/naziconnection.html>

⁷ <http://www.endtimesnetwork.com/oldnews/arpio.html>

⁸ DANTE GERMINO, in E.VOEGELIN, *The New Science of Politics, an Introduction*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1987, 107.

⁹ *Ibidem*.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*.

¹¹ *Ibidem*, 109.

¹² *Ibidem*, 111.

¹³ http://www.ornl.gov/TechResources/Human_Genome/publicat/primer2001/6.html.

¹⁴ P. LAIN ENTRALGO, *La Relacion Medico Enfermo: Historia y Teoria*, Revista de Occidente, Madrid 1962.

¹⁵ E.VOEGELIN, *What is History?*, in T. HOLLWECK and P. CARINGELLA (edited by), *What is History and Other Late Unpublished Writings*, Louisiana State University Press, Baton Rouge 1990, 96-97. B. LONERGAN, *Method in Theology*, Herder and Herder, New York 1972, 48.

¹⁶ E.VOEGELIN, «The Beginning and the Beyond», in T. HOLLWECK and P. CARINGELLA (eds.), *What is History and Other Late Unpublished Writings*, op. cit., 177-179.

¹⁷ A. DE LEÓN, *Historia de Nuevo León con noticias sobre Coahuila, Texas y Nuevo México*. Gobierno del Estado de Nuevo León y Centro de Estudios Humanísticos de la Universidad de Nuevo León, Monterrey 1961, 37.