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Daoism and Liberal Eugenics: Response to Chai¹

Michael Campbell

In his interesting paper, David Chai shows how Daoist metaphysics may be brought to bear on arguments against genetic enhancement (GE).² His chief contention is that Daoism “can contribute to Jürgen Habermas’ social-political opposition to liberal eugenics by offering an onto-cosmological line of defense” (p.98). The centrepiece of this contribution is the claim that “the human body is simply a temporary abode for the animating spirit of Dao; as it is given to us by Dao, we have no right to claim it as our own or treat it as we see fit.” (p.100) As a result, “[i]f the Daoists of ancient China had access to the kind of technology necessary for genetic manipulation, they would reject it on the grounds that to alter the nature of what does not, cosmologically, belong to us is to engage in selfish and short-sighted behaviour.” (p.104)

Although Chai presents Daoism as adding to Habermas’ critique, appeal to Daoist metaphysics in fact constitutes a significant departure from the Habermasian position. Habermas claims that we cannot derive ethical truths from metaphysical speculation; in our ‘post-metaphysical’ age we can no longer think that there is an ideal form for human life, waiting to be discovered. Rather, responsibility for determining a way of life falls squarely on the shoulders of the particular individual. As a result, Habermas thinks that any objection to enhancement must relate to the

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- (1) For discussion of an earlier draft of this paper, I thank Stephanie Holmquist and Hon Lam Li. Jeffrey Choi and Tomas Gutierrez provided helpful guidance on issues of translation from the *Tao Te Ching*.
- (2) Chai restricts his attention to philosophical Daoism, focusing in particular on passages from the *Zhuangzi* (莊子). It is curious that he neglects to mention the religious strands of Daoism, especially those concerned with medicine and the pursuit of longevity. From that perspective, Daoists would seem amenable to the use of enhancement technologies. But I raise this only in passing; in what follows I will follow Chai and confine my attention to Daoism as a philosophical position rather than as a religious practice. Thanks to Stephanie Holmquist for raising this issue.

formal preconditions of choice, rather than to substantive claims about the merits of one choice over another. In other words, GE is objectionable, if it is, not because it is the ‘wrong’ life choice, but because it somehow undermines an agent’s capacity to make free choices. (Habermas 2003, 11ff).

In setting out to weld a metaphysical worldview onto the Habermasian framework, Chai has therefore set himself an ambitious task. For his project to be fully successful he must show: (i) that Habermas is wrong regarding the failure of traditional metaphysics; (ii) that Habermas is right regarding the objectionable nature of enhancement technologies, but, that this is due to the fact (iii) that GE conflicts with Daoist metaphysics; and (iv) that Daoist metaphysics is correct. In his paper Chai focuses exclusively on (ii) and (iii) and does not consider (i) or (iv). I will follow his lead on this. I will try to show that even within this narrow remit, Chai’s argument is unsuccessful. The fault is not fully his own, however; there are serious problems with Habermas’ critique which a Daoist metaphysics is ill equipped to solve.

Before we start it will be helpful to clarify some terms. GE refers to procedures which alter a subject’s genes in order to produce desired traits which are above the species norm. Following Chai’s lead, let’s restrict our attention to use of GE on unconsenting subjects (e.g. through modifications at the embryonic stage). We can take as our paradigm case that of parents (or prospective parents) selecting characteristics for their children.

Liberal eugenics (LE) is the view that genetic procedures are morally acceptable so long as they do not compromise the freedom of any individual to form and pursue their own conception of the good. According to LE, what (if anything) counts as a eugenic intervention depends on what the subject herself would count as a good characteristic. LE thus has built into it default permissiveness; the only universal value is respect for individuals, and the only acts that are by their nature wrong are those which conflict with this respect, including actions which would compromise a subject’s ability to make autonomous choices. Habermas is a liberal eugenicist; he agrees that GE is only objectionable if it can be shown to violate the conditions for respect for individual autonomy. He differs from proponents of GE such as Nicholas Agar only in his conviction that GE does in fact violate the LE stricture.

Chai endorses Habermas’ claim that GE on unconsenting subjects violates the demand of respect for individual’s autonomy. He quotes with approval Habermas’ assertion that through GE “the fundamental symmetry of responsibility that exists among free and equal persons is restricted.” (Habermas 2003, 14) Once we intervene in a subject’s genetic code, we make (supposedly) irreversible changes to another’s personality, which are (supposedly) different in kind from the changes effected

through child rearing. Habermas claims that these changes will prevent the future child from making fully authentic life choices. Chai builds on this, supplementing the claim of inauthenticity by reference to the purportedly Daoist requirement to ensure one's own connectedness to the Dao. According to him, GE turns reproduction from something "inherently natural into something that is utterly artificial." (p.108) Any artificial interventions are "detrimental to one's well-being and connectedness to the Dao, the source of all life in the universe." (p.100) Thus, "[p]arents who obsess over the future state of their children are thus enslaved to an egoism unlike any other." (p.107)

In order for this argument to be convincing the effects of GE would have to be very radical indeed. Here Chai, following Habermas' lead, overplays the power of GE.³ We are living organisms, and our characteristics and behaviour are the result of interplay with an environment. (Buchanan et al 2000, Appendix One) There is thus no reason to think that GE could ever, even in principle, give an individual the level of control which would allow them to determine such things as another's patterns of thought or their place in society. The most that GE is likely to achieve is to increase the probability that, under the correct conditions, its recipient will develop certain coarsely grained physical or psychological traits such as a certain level of physical prowess or a certain degree of intelligence. Moreover, even if we secure certain talents for a child, it will remain up to them whether or how they use them. A genetically enhanced child might have a predilection and an aptitude for basketball, but it does not follow that they will utilise this talent.

Once we understand the limitations of GE, it no longer seems to be different in kind from other ways that we modify human beings. Firstly, we already make eugenicist decisions in the choice of a potential mate and the decision of when to have children. Secondly, we alter children's environments in ways that have significant effects on their development, including gene expression. Thus, far from turning a natural process into an artificial one, GE represents no more than a refinement of current formal and informal techniques for phenotypic selection (aka 'child rearing'). No person's characteristics arise solely through the operation of blind chance; there is always a degree of artifice in the raising of human beings.

Neither Habermas nor Chai have given us grounds for thinking that GE is any more objectionable, than, say, education. This becomes particularly apparent if one considers how GE will appear from the point of view of the recipient. No one gets to choose the traits that they inherit upon entering adulthood. Given that it is not clear why GE should be any

(3) Relatedly, both Habermas and Chai overstate the extent to which a parent-child relationship can ever be one of equals. After Freud, it seems naive to think that parent and child could ever be in a relationship of 'symmetric responsibility'.

more a cause of resentment than (say) one's childhood diet or educational regime.⁴

Daoist attitudes to enhancement turn on how we are to understand the concept of the Dao (道), which constitutes the fundamental ontological category in Daoism. Here we can distinguish between two readings, which I will call *prescriptive* and *non-prescriptive*. (The contrast is somewhat rough, but it is enough to get on with.) On a prescriptive reading, the only correct way to live is in accordance with the Dao. On a non-prescriptive reading, no normative standards can be derived from the truth of Daoism; to grasp the Dao is to recognize that all normative judgements are equally unsupported. Chai seems to prefer a prescriptive reading, hence his exhortation that we “relieve ourselves of the fear beclouding our understanding of existence and personhood, such that we can get on with enjoying life as we are anatomically meant to” (p.111). But in fact neither reading gives us grounds for objecting to GE; a prescriptive reading rules out too much, whereas a non-prescriptive reading fails to rule out enough. I will take these points in turn.

According to a prescriptive reading, Daoism holds that the only correct way to live is in accordance with Daoist principles. To act in conformity with the Dao means to live in accordance with natural necessity – to cultivate the attitude of not choosing (Wu Wei, 無為). On this view, GE is objectionable (and may even be banned) on grounds that it involves intervening in the natural order of things, and thereby severs us from our “connection to Dao” (p.105).

This view gets us the right result, but at too great a cost. To live in accord with natural necessity would seem to require foregoing not only GE but also all the contrivances of modern life, including modern medicine. Chai seems happy to draw this conclusion. He cites with approval Master Yu's “cosmic fatalism” (p.107), and says: “To be free from the bonds of life is to be free from viewing life as different from death, free from the need to over-protect life in the face of death's impending arrival.” (p.110) Well, admirable or not, Master Yu is certainly not ordinary. It seems hard to believe that we should all strive to be modern day Masters Yu, thinking that every time we consult a doctor we show ourselves to be weak or befuddled. Accordingly, we will need a very strong argument for the truth of Daoist metaphysics if we are to convince people that ‘life is no different from death’. Chai is of course welcome to suggest one. But even if he does, note that this objection to GE turns on the

(4) Of course, if the GE has especially pernicious effects then it can legitimately be especially resented, but the same would apply to environmental or dietary injuries.

truth of a particular metaphysical-cum-moral outlook. Daoism in this case is no ally to Habermas.⁵

According to a prescriptive reading of the Dao, the natural contrasts with the artificial, the products of human ratiocination. But there is another sense of nature in which the products of human behaviour are natural. After all, humans are a kind of animal, and what we produce is in one sense just another arrangement of physical stuff. On the non-prescriptive reading, the Dao includes all of nature in this more inclusive sense. There is no way for one's behaviour to be inconsistent with the true Dao, for the Dao is expressed equally in all possible outcomes. On this view, although grasp of the Dao may engender a certain attitude, no conclusions concerning how to live can be derived from it. The fundamental insight of the Dao then is the negative judgement that there is no pattern inherent in the nature of things; every judgement as to how one ought to live is as equally ill-supported as any other. (Hence, the famous opening lines of the *Tao Te Ching*: "The Dao that guides is not the true Dao" [道可道，非常道])

Use of enhancement technologies involves making an evaluative judgement about the relative merits of different outcomes. A (non-prescriptive) Daoist would view such a judgement as misguided at best and hubristic at worst; it confuses a merely human Dao with the true Dao. But this is more abstention than objection as, after all, the judgement 'enhancement is bad' is as unsupported as its negation. In this case, the fact that a Daoist would not choose enhancement gives us no reason to think that non-Daoists should be prevented from choosing it, if they wish. So, on a non-prescriptive reading, the Daoist is too sanguine a figure to rule anything out.

Would a Daoist choose GE for their child? Well, how would a Daoist raise children? (The oddness in 'I learned to be a hermit from my parents.')

In acting in their child's benefit, a parent prioritises one set of outcomes over another. Is this consistent with life in adherence to the Dao? If a Daoist may participate in the roles of parenthood, to remain Daoist they must remain aware that nothing makes the outcomes for which they aim better than any others. In this case, their single unironic hope for their child will be only that they too, when fully grown, will come to see the emptiness of aspiration.⁶ Given that GE neither helps nor hinders the child in their pursuit of this realisation, a Daoist will view it with benign indifference.

(5) In his paper Chai also quotes with approval Michael Sandel's critique of enhancement, and I think it is in fact Sandel, rather than Habermas, who is Chai's natural ally.

(6) And even this hope is in danger of shading off into the vacuous hope for things to be as they will be.

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