

Comments on Thomas Fitzgerald's "Genome: Moral Choices and the Polity"

James Peacock¹

"Ought to do, and ought not." The closing phrase by Thomas Fitzgerald announces a call for an ethical basis for decisions, personal or policy, concerning the genome and the power of science to design humanity through genetic engineering. Pondering this issue, Fitzgerald sets forth a searching – and scorching – critique of contemporary culture in general. His analysis leads to a desperately troubling conclusion: the scientific paradigm which has empowered humankind to alter its fundamental evolutionary process has also disempowered it to responsibly and intelligently think through the ethical issues that this genetic freedom confronts. Empirical science and scientific empiricism are keystones in rationalization and bureaucratization process which has corroded the deeper and richer and more adventurous, responsible, heroic, spiritual, and moral modes of understanding, living, deciding, and acting that Fitzgerald yearns for as a source in wise ethics concerning genome or anything else.

What can I add to Fitzgerald's lucid, thorough, sophisticated, probing, devastating exposition of the situation and the issue? I am in the position of the lay person, the common citizen, in that I am not expert in the technicalities of the Human Genome Project. I am also, as an anthropologist, in the position of the empirical scientist or scholar who has been culturally cauterized – stripped by rationalization and secularization of those basic human intuitions and ethical commitments which Fitzgerald attributes to the lay person and on whom he rests his hope for decent wisdom. In any case, I agree firmly, with virtually all of Fitzgerald's argument – my agreement being based on his speaking and my listening, for I have not thought through this issue on my own.

I would add one corrective and one addition. The first, the corrective, concerns the next-to-last paragraph. Fitzgerald states, "There, as here, an idea survives, prevails – among how many I could not suppose – about spirit immanent in each of us, and our

essential dignity as humans." "There" refers to "the country" in the previous sentence, which means "the people," that is, all of us, in contrast to the experts and those in power. "Here" presumably means the author himself or perhaps includes the experts and policy-makers; in any case, the "heres" and "theres" are said to share the human spirit and dignity noted. My comment is this: As a human being, I believe, also, in our human spirit and dignity than is common among most who evoke it. However, as an anthropologist I would call for a deeper grasp of this human spirit and dignity than is common among most who evoke it. That is, we must be certain to consider the many cultural dimensions for all human kind and be careful not to imprison our concept in that of a single cultural and historical tradition, including western. I call not for multiculturalist awareness, but for serious search for the unity beneath diversity – after thorough and critically accosting diversity.

The addition is implied by Goethe's admonition: *Wahrheit ist tat*. Truth is in the deed. Profound understanding and wisdom will come not only from studies, committees and consultants but also from these in dialogue with those leaders who must decide and act. Reflections on those decisions and actions must be channeled back into studies and consultations, which in turn must create decision and action, again and again. Among those who must act are physicians, whose ethical slogan "Do no harm" is not a bad start.

Notes

1. James Peacock is the Director of the University Center for International Studies and Kenan Professor of Anthropology at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. He is former President of the American Anthropological Association, a member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, and author of *The Anthropological Lens*.