



Frankenstein and Philosophy

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Frankenstein and Philosophy

The Shocking Truth

Edited by
NICOLAS MICHAUD



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And thank you to our readers and fans of *Frankenstein* for keeping alive a story far bigger than any one short (or not so short) human lifespan.

That Vital Spark of Life

Igor, Show them in. . . .

“It’s Alive! . . . It’s Aliiiiive!!!!”

With those immortal words, Mary Shelley, the author of *Frankenstein*, . . . well, did nothing. Shelley never wrote those words. Where did we hear them? We heard them at the movies. We heard them on TV. We heard our maniacal biology professor shout them from the top of the science building! (What some people will do for a research grant.)

Shelley’s creation keeps coming back. The creature has lived many lives and stalks the Earth in many creepy forms, in hundreds of movies, dozens of TV shows, in comic books, and even in many new novels which seek to re-engineer Shelley’s creature. So this book can dissect not just one body of work, but a vast proliferating corpus (or should I say corpse?) of popular entertainment, a monstrous mythology slouching through the mass mind.

This book stitches together assorted corporeal parts scavenged from many a fetid graveyard. We’re here to investigate and pay homage to a pop culture icon, and to have a bit of fun with it—and by fun, I do mean something a bit disgusting.

When you enter into the massive world that is *Frankenstein*, you find a whole bunch of philosophical—and, let’s be honest, shocking—toys to play with . . . Mel Brooks’s *You Don’t Have to Die*, *Frankenstein*, the lovable Herman Munster, Dean Koontz’s Dr. Helios, the terrifying monster brought to life by Boris Karloff, and the newly re-animated Adam Frankenstein, to name but a few.

Not that we don’t pay plenty of attention to Shelley’s towering masterwork, but you just may find that some of our chapters mention Mary Shelly and *Frankenweenie* in the same sentence . . . and what’s *Frankenstein* about if it’s not about breaking rules? So, if there’s a good place to tread where only God should, while wearing a pair of heavy black boots with studs in them, it’s here.

And you’ll find that once we start trampling upon those boundaries, our investigative probe unveils some blood-chilling questions: We will ask you if a re-animated corpse-man has a soul. We will consider the chilling question, “If it is wrong to make monsters, is it wrong to make babies?” And perhaps most pressingly, we’ll reflect on whether *Frankenstein*’s maligned creation would be wrong if seeking to end all of us . . .

So, dim the lights, sit back by the flickering glow of a candle, and let’s look deeply into the dull yellow eyes of the dark doctor’s foul creation.

On second thoughts, leave the lights on—and while you’re at it, bar the door.

Dr. Frankenstein's Easy Guide to Eternal Life

Wanna Live Forever? Don't Pull a Frankenstein!

MICHAEL HAUSKELLER

“It’s aliiiiive, it’s aliiiiiiiiive!!!” Who could forget that moment in James Whale’s 1931 film *Frankenstein*? The scene is one of the reasons why the monster’s creator, played by Colin Clive, comes across as being more than just slightly disturbed. Although he keeps denying it (“Crazy, a little bit, but I?”), the mad gleam in his eyes clearly marks him as an outright fruitcake. No wonder he has become the model for one of our most-cherished stereotypes, the “mad scientist.”

In Mary Shelley’s novel, however, there’s no hint of fruit-cakeyness. Shelley’s Victor Frankenstein might be slightly obsessed, but otherwise he seems to be quite sane. He is ambitious, a quality good scientists tend to be, and basically just wants to make the world a better place by ridding it of death, “that most irreparable evil,” and of disease. If that’s a sign of lunacy, then lately we seem to be surrounded by lunatics.

For thousands of years we’ve been dreaming about immortality, but only now, for the first time in human history, radical life extension seems to be a real possibility. Scientists are close to figuring out what makes us age, and many are hopeful that very soon we’ll be able to halt and possibly even reverse the ageing process, which would make us virtually immortal. At least we would no longer *have* to die. And could anything be more desirable than that? Dedicated anti-ageists such as Aubrey de Grey, and moral philosophers such as John Harris, and transhumanists such as Max More and Nick Bostrom assure us that death is the greatest of all evils and that nothing could be more important than getting rid of it. If that’s true, then it seems that Frankenstein’s ambition was actually quite sensible.

So why exactly did everything go so terribly wrong? Why did Victor Frankenstein, instead of becoming mankind’s greatest benefactor as he had planned to, end up creating something that he himself chooses to see, or perhaps cannot help but see, as a monster?

Playing God

In Shelley’s novel, Frankenstein himself blames the whole mess on his ill-considered attempt to “learn the hidden laws of nature,” to “penetrate” the “physical secrets of the world,” to “unveil the face of Nature” and to pursue her “to her hiding-places.” Frankenstein talks about nature as if she were a woman that he wants to bed and that he is determined to have whatever it takes. And if she doesn’t readily give herself to him, well, then she must be taken by force. The whole thing comes very close to a rape fantasy.

But after the rape comes remorse, and punishment. Or perhaps punishment first, and then remorse. After his creature has gone rampant, Frankenstein expresses disgust at his own actions. He speaks of his “unhallowed arts,” which led him, despite his good intentions, to commit “deeds of mischief beyond description horrible.” He doesn’t talk about God directly, but his choice of words

(“unhallowed”) suggests that he feels he committed a sacrilege, an act that somehow defied God’s will and the natural and at the same time divine order of things, and that he has been justly punished for this.

The movie version is far more explicit. In Whale’s *Frankenstein* he shouts, after his creation has actually begun to move and shown that it is indeed alive: “In the name of God, now I know what it feels to *be* God!” And in the prologue that was added to the film to warn viewers of the shocking nature of the events that they were going to see, the presenter summarizes the whole story by saying that “Frankenstein sought to create a man after his own image, without reckoning upon God.”

In *Bride of Frankenstein*, James Whale’s 1935 sequel to *Frankenstein*, Mary Shelley herself played by Elsa Lanchester who later remorphs so splendidly as the Bride, conveniently explains what her story is all about. Her purpose was, she says, to “write a moral lesson about a mortal man who dared to emulate God.” All this strongly suggests that the violation, the crime that Frankenstein committed, was that he assumed a power that only God should have. The ancient Greeks called this *hubris*. Frankenstein made himself *like* God and was punished for it *by* God.

Traditionally, the power to give life was seen to be God’s prerogative. It was the ultimate power that only God possessed. But what exactly does that mean? Does it mean that it’s *impossible* for anyone ever to gain the power to give life? Or does it simply mean that whoever acquired it would be like God himself, equal to him in power and knowledge?

This thought, or hope, inspired not only the efforts of Dr. Frankenstein, but also those of countless alchemists, those harbingers of modern science, when they were trying to figure out how to transform things into other things: lead into gold, dead matter into something living. In their search for the *philosopher’s stone* and the *elixir of life*, often seen as the same substance, which was supposed to give those who got hold of it wealth, wisdom, and power over life and death, they followed the path that was already suggested by the Genesis chapter in the Bible. We are used to thinking that Adam and Eve were expelled from the Garden of Eden for having eaten from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, but that’s not entirely true. If you read closely you’ll find that in fact God wants them out because he’s afraid that now that they have smartened up they might also eat from the second unusual tree in the Garden, namely the tree of life:

Behold, the man has become like one of Us, knowing good and evil; and now, he might stretch out his hand, and take also from the tree of life, and eat, and live forever. (Genesis 3:22)

If they *did* eat from it, they would be, in all relevant respects, just like him, and he can’t have that. Adam and Eve’s expulsion from the Garden of Eden is not so much a punishment as a preventative measure: God protects his privilege.

It’s not really clear, though, why we shouldn’t aspire to become immortal, why this is being withheld from us. God’s jealousy seems to be all that stands between us and eternal life. There’s no consideration of what is good for *us*. Of course we don’t necessarily need a better reason or any reason at all. Perhaps all we need to know is that if we try to pull a Frankenstein we *will* be punished. It could be just a fact of life that certain things need to be left alone, because if they are not, then we’ll have to deal with some very unpleasant consequences.

So what we are being warned against is simply that if we cross certain lines and enter areas that have never been explored before, then the consequences are unforeseeable and likely to be bad. We are not made for crossing those lines. Better safe than sorry. Beware of the unknown. So the message is perhaps not that it is in some way morally *wrong* to cross those boundaries and “emulate God,” but

simply that it is highly *dangerous*.

Frankenstein's story brings to mind that of the sorcerer's apprentice. While his master's away, the apprentice can't resist the temptation to play master himself. He tries out the magic spells he has heard his master use, and it's working just fine. He gets the broom to fetch water to prepare a bath for him. That was easy. Unfortunately, when the bath is full the broom keeps fetching water. The house floods, and the apprentice has no idea how to stop it. Not quite so easy anymore. Luckily, before everything goes to hell, the sorcerer returns and brings things back to normal.

In Frankenstein's case, the master stays absent. Things really *do* go to hell. Yet the message is the same: there are things that are too big for us and that can easily get out of control. We can only ever *play* at being God, like children who dress up as adults. We deceive ourselves into believing that we have godlike power and wisdom, while in fact we don't. And that is why sooner or later we will screw up.

But is so much caution really necessary? Whale's Frankenstein, in the 1931 movie, clearly thinks that things only get interesting when they get dangerous. After all, "where would we be if nobody tried to find out what lies beyond" and to discover "what eternity is for example?" If we take our caution too far, there can be no science, and without science no progress. And isn't it even our *right* to know things, and to live?

We've been condemned to ignorance and death by an unjust God or perhaps an indifferent nature. So why not fight? Why meekly accept the death penalty? Why not *change* the order of things? It seems we've got nothing to lose, even though that doesn't seem to be what Mary Shelley believed. Although . . .

Gods Have Duties, Too!

Both in Shelley's novel and in most of the many movie versions of *Frankenstein* (including *Frankenstein*) there are plenty of hints that prompt us to read the story as being about a man who commits a sacrilege by violating the natural order of things and who, as a direct consequence, unleashes a terrible evil that comes to haunt him. And that's how people tend to remember the story. In the public imagination, Frankenstein is the guy who, driven by curiosity and ambition, creates a monster which then wreaks havoc wherever it goes.

However, what does not quite accord with this common reading is the fact that the creature actually appears to be rather nice at first. In the novel, his only fault is his ugliness, which is inexplicable since he was actually designed to be beautiful. But although the parts still are beautiful together they form a whole that clearly is not. It is repulsive, and this repulsive *appearance* is all that Frankenstein ever sees when he refers to his creation as a "demoniacal corpse," a "vile insect," or a "abhorred devil." Yet in truth the creature is anything but an insect or a devil. His natural impulses are good and he's far from stupid.

After being rejected by his creator, he wanders about until he finds a safe place to hide. From his hiding place he's able to observe a family of three, and by listening to their conversations he quickly learns the human language. After a couple of years he is able to read, and not just any stuff, but things like Plutarch's *Lives*. And he can talk about philosophy and the natural sciences as if he had studied them at the university in Ingolstadt just like his creator. A monster that reads the classics and that speaks like a romantic poet does not seem to be much of a monster at all.

Boris Karloff does a much better job at being a monster, with his constant grunting, outstretched

arms, stiff walk and limited mental ability, but his monster too can be rather sweet, delighting in sunshine, flowers, and even cigars. Although he's a bit short-tempered and can be quite deadly when provoked, he is actually quite a gentle creature, more like a frightened child or animal than a boogymon "fiend." Whatever the "abnormal brain" that Frankenstein's assistant mistakenly pinched did to him, it clearly hasn't made him evil. The reason why the creature starts killing people is that he is being treated very badly by almost everyone he meets. He defends himself.

In the novel, things are a bit more complicated because he is much more human, or much more adult, than in most of the movies. The reason for his violence is a very human one: he wants to take revenge, and he executes his revenge with a coolness and determination that only a human could muster. And why? Because wherever he went, all he has ever met with is hate and abhorrence. Experience has embittered him, and he has every right to be mad. "I was benevolent and good; misery made me a fiend." His "accursed," "unfeeling," "heartless" creator has abandoned him for no good reason. And he had no right to do that because a creator has a *moral obligation* to look after his creation.

We should not give life to a being that can think and feel and suffer, and then just leave it to fend for itself. Instead, we have a duty to make sure that it gets what it needs, not only to survive, but also to live well. And that includes, perhaps more than anything else, love. Frankenstein should have loved his creation. Instead he hated him right from the start. And *that* is when things began to go wrong. If he had loved him, as a father loves his child, there would have been no monster. But he didn't. So who is the monster now, Frankenstein or his creation?

But if Frankenstein is to his creature what a father is to his child and also what God is to man, then we can read the whole story as a comment on our relation to God, and God's failure to provide for us as he should have. If we understand ourselves as God's (or Nature's) children, then by denying us eternal life and instead condemning us to die and to rot in our graves, whoever has made us has failed in his duty. "You purpose to kill me," the creature chides his creator, "How dare you sport thus with life? Do your duty towards me, and I will do mine to you." This is man complaining to God about the injustice of mortality. "I ought to be thy Adam, but I am rather the fallen angel, whom thou drivest from joy from no misdeed." And that is also what happened to Adam eventually, and what will happen to each one of us. "You accuse me of murder, and yet you would, with a satisfied conscience, destroy your own creature." Just as Frankenstein demands that his creature be good while at the same time doing his best to destroy it, or to wish that it had never come into existence, God asks us to be just and good, while at the same time condemning us to death and eternal darkness through no fault of our own.

We feel we haven't deserved this. And that is why some of us rebel against the natural order of things, like Dr. Frankenstein. Because it's unjust. So we are the badly mistreated creature, but we are also Dr. Frankenstein trying to fight back. We are both, and that means that Dr. Frankenstein is also the monster that he created. They are mirror images of each other. Victor Frankenstein is the "modern Prometheus," who steals fire from the Gods to protect us and who is severely punished for it and made miserable. He is also Lucifer, the "archangel who aspired to omnipotence." But Lucifer is also the "light-bringer," planning to "pour a torrent of light into our dark world." Yet Frankenstein's creation compares himself to Lucifer when he explains his actions to his creator: the "fallen angel becomes a malignant devil."

Monsters are made, not born. But the greatest monsters are those who make monsters. "Am I to be thought the only criminal?" the creature asks defiantly. The greatest monster is not the creature. It is not Dr. Frankenstein either. The greatest monster, it appears, is God himself.

Are Things Really That Bad?

This is *one* way of looking at the world. It's the way that Frankenstein looks at it before he succeeds in his endeavor. Before the catastrophe that turns his thinking around. It *may* be the way, or one of the ways, that Mary Shelley, perhaps without being fully aware of it, looked at the world.

It's also the way today's transhumanists look at it. As the arch-transhumanist Max More puts it:

No more gods, no more faith, no more timid holding back. Let us blast out of our old forms, our ignorance, our weakness, and our mortality.

The world is bad, so let's create another. But is that really so? *Is death the greatest evil? Have we been treated unjustly? Do we really have a good reason to rebel against the natural order?*

Of course, growing old is no fun. It's not easy getting used to it. And that we will all, each and every one of us, one day, and much sooner than we would like, cease to exist is a thought that is almost incomprehensible. How can *I* die? Will not the world end with me? (And in a sense it does.) And whenever we try to get our heads around this, we are struck by the horror of non-existence, "the void that presents itself to the soul," as Shelley's Frankenstein tells us.

Yet the Greek philosopher Epicurus pointed out a long time ago that once we're dead, we couldn't care less. Death is no harm because we won't be aware of it. As long as we are, death is not, and as soon as death is, we are no longer there to suffer from it. We are not scared of dying because death is not an evil. Rather, death is only an evil to the extent that we are scared of it. Get rid of the fear and everything is fine.

Besides, if we look at the bigger picture, we may find that the death of the individual is actually quite useful. If people didn't die, we would probably not even exist because nobody would have bothered to create us. In a world in which nobody dies, or at least nobody has to die, there would be little need for children. They would only increase the problem of overpopulation, and since we would have no reason to make room for the young, our children would find it very difficult to create a place for themselves in society. So a world in which people didn't die would very likely be a world without children.

There would be no fresh eyes with which to look at the world. No sense of wonder, no surprise. There would be little change, and no progress, or at least no moral progress. When we get older we tend to become quite inflexible in our views. We know how the world works. We have settled down not only in the world, but also in our own minds. Death allows the world to move on, to explore new avenues of being. We live only because others have died.

If Frankenstein were real and if he had succeeded in discovering the "secret of eternal life," then we would all be pre-Victorians now with an early nineteenth-century frame of mind. Or rather, we wouldn't exist at all. Because *they* would. So all things considered, the fact that people die and don't live forever is actually quite a good thing.

But what about knowledge, and power? Should we not try to gain more control over things, and over our own lives, so that we are more able to protect ourselves and others from a world that at times can be very cruel and hostile indeed? Yes, perhaps, but how far are we willing to go with this? How far is it *good* for us to go? How likely is it that our aspirations will contribute to making this world a better place? And is making the world a better place really what people want when they strive for more knowledge and power?

There is such a thing as "senseless curiosity." It is what Shelley's Frankenstein later in the book

believes he was driven by when he set out to uncover the secret of eternal life. At first he flattered himself with the thought that he'd become mankind's greatest benefactor, their very own Prometheus. But perhaps it was all a sham. Perhaps it was just plain old curiosity, of the kind that kills the cat without a clear purpose, just the desire to find out whether it can be done, whether *we* can do it, whether *he* can do it.

Should there really be a limit? *Must* we accept that we are finite creatures? Let's go and find out. Let's acquire knowledge, for knowledge is power, and we like power, not so much because we can do certain things with it, things that we are interested in doing, not because there is really a *need* to have more of it, but for its own sake.

In fact, power is felt to be so desirable that we're willing to do almost anything to get it.

One man's life or death were but a small price to pay for the acquirement of the knowledge which I sought, for the domination should acquire and transmit over the elemental foes of our race.

In other words, eternal life is, paradoxically, something worth dying for, and perhaps also worth killing for, because eternal life is the acme of power. Frankenstein is well aware of the contradiction. "Who shall conceive the horrors of my secret toil as I dabbled among the unhallowed damps of the grave or tortured the living animal to animate the lifeless clay?" Life is destroyed to be created anew. But at least Dr. Frankenstein regrets his actions, although he never fully realizes to what extent he may have been motivated not by benevolence, but by sheer power hunger. His self-awareness is constrained by his need to think of himself as a fundamentally good man, one that has erred and sinned, yes, but still one who always wanted to do good.

Professor Pretorius in *Bride of Frankenstein*, who is yet another of Frankenstein's alter egos, has no such scruples. He is said to be even crazier than Frankenstein, but only because he has no illusions about what he wants and why he wants it. Moral concerns hold no sway over him. He is crazy because he is so damn rational, a perfect illustration of G.K. Chesterton's witty remark about the madman being not the one who has lost his reason, but rather the one who has lost everything *but* his reason. Frankenstein kills without remorse to get what he wants, and what he wants is to bring about "a new world of gods and monsters" by creating a whole race of new humans that would serve him as their God. A race of naturally born slaves, play things for their all-powerful ruler.

And that's the trouble with both knowledge and the power that springs from it. The more knowledge and power we have, as a species, the more easily can it be used against us, as individuals. The atom bomb is a powerful tool, but if you are one of those on whom it is used, you won't feel very powerful at all. Each new power also makes us more vulnerable. The power over life and death might appeal to you as long as you imagine that power to be in your own hands. But chances are that it is not you at all, but rather someone else who possesses it, and who wields it to make you do his will.

Mark Twain once said that to a man with a hammer everything looks like a nail. The question is, will you be the man with the hammer, or will you be the nail? Perhaps a world in which people do not have *too* much power is far better for most of us in the long run, for our weaknesses do also protect us from each other.

How to Be Happy

"Learn from me, if not by my precepts, at least by my example, how dangerous is the acquirement

knowledge and how much happier that man is who believes his native town to be the world, than he who aspires to become greater than his nature will allow.” This is Frankenstein’s final resumé, the lesson that he has learned from his experience and that he urges us to take to heart. Trying to become greater than our current nature will allow, so that in order to succeed we will have to change that very nature, is dangerous. But it is dangerous not so much because it might invite trouble by provoking the wrath of the gods or anything like that, but rather because we can’t be really happy when we’re constantly chasing a dream that may well turn out to be a nightmare—and that might not even be possible to realize.

We always need to ask ourselves, and reflect very carefully about, what we want and why we want it. Knowledge appears to be a good thing, but too much knowledge, or perhaps pursuing the knowledge with too much determination, may very well make our lives pretty miserable. One reason for this is that pursuing knowledge beyond certain limits might be nothing but a fool’s errand. We are somehow assuming that we can know everything, that our minds are powerful enough. But why should we assume that? We are ourselves a work of nature, and if nature is powerful enough to create something that is capable of understanding all its workings, then it must also be powerful enough to conceal things from us. There is no guarantee, and in fact it’s very unlikely, that we are actually capable of understanding more than a tiny fraction of the universe.

However, the most important thing to remember is that we shouldn’t get too obsessive about anything, be that knowledge, life itself, or some other thing. As the ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle knew, the route to a good life and to happiness lies in finding the right balance between the extremes.

The pursuit of knowledge is fine as long as it is just one of many activities that make up our lives. And so with everything else. It is fine as long as it does not become an obsession to weaken our affections and destroy our taste for what life has to offer us. Then, and only then, will it become “unlawful, that is to say, not befitting the human mind.” That is what happens to Frankenstein. He postpones his own life to pursue a specter, in his case the specter of an eternal life.

Victor Frankenstein’s life is a failure not so much because his creature does not turn out the way he conceived it, but rather because he fails to see that eternity can be found only in the present, in the here and now. The secret of happiness is the discovery that our native town *is* the world, and that whatever we may find when we venture beyond its boundaries, it is not likely to make our lives any better.

Victor Frankenstein in the Twenty-First Century

DANILO CHAIB

Today a real Frankenstein walks among us. I realized this in May 2010 when I was taking the subway in London and read in the newspaper *Metro*:

Maverick Frankenstein Scientist Creates Artificial Life.¹

I thought: “Whaaaaat?” Could it be just the sensationalist press trying to get attention? But then, another newspaper the next day I read: “Frankenstein’s Lab creates Life in a Test Tube.”² “OMG,” I thought, “Is this for real? Who is this Frankenstein anyway? Is he a philosophical clone of Victor Frankenstein? Is he going to fashion a creature and let it loose in the world, only worrying about the consequences when it’s too late?”

Conspiracy Theory!

“It’s Alive! It’s Alive!” cried Craig Venter, along with his team of biologists of the J. Craig Venter Institute³ in May 2010. The speech was published by the famous TED series.⁴ “Perhaps it’s a giant philosophical change in how we view life,” said Craig Venter about his creation of a living bacterium with synthetic DNA. Craig went on to explain that the practical implications of this new life form could help society in ecological matters: “Also, at Synthetic Genomics, we’ve been working on major environmental issues. I think this latest oil spill in the Gulf is a reminder.”

But how, we wonder, can these little bacteria help us with the oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico? Now let’s fast forward to November 2010, when British celebrity Stephen Fry appeared in a video posted by the BBC on a page dedicated to the oil spill entitled “Has the Oil Really Gone?” Stephen Fry and Mark Cawardine asked Mike Utsler, COO Gulf Coast Restoration, BP, whether it was really accurate to state that the vast majority of the oil spilled by the Deepwater Horizon had been successfully dispersed. The answer Mr. Utsler provided was really the seed of countless blogs to say that Frankenstein’s monster was actually on the loose: “The oil plume is actually disappearing, the plume is biodegrading, there is a new form of microbiology that is attacking this plume and using it as a food source.” Whaaaaat?

To add more scariness to this scenario, just after Utsler uttered those words, some “staff members” showed up and said that he could no longer stay for the remainder of the interview. But, hey, what’s so polemical about all this? What drives so many curious nerds to endlessly discuss on blogs the consequences of a new life form on the loose? Apparently, this new life form was created to help society, isn’t that right?

What’s the problem with creating new life to help us? That was exactly, you might remember

what Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* was about, what the "Modern Prometheus" was doing. For Shelley we can pave Hell with good intentions, but not Heaven . . . or Earth. The same thought is brought light by philosopher Jürgen Habermas. Habermas believes that inequalities and injustices can actually go away in our society, but not when science is dictating the dominant ideology. Rather, the improvement should be in the human heart, on a moral level. For Habermas, we already have the tools to reach an egalitarian society, where morality is always a dynamic value, being constructed every day by social relations.

The Habermas Corpus

The huge monster in Shelley's novel doesn't have a name. In our case, the little artificial bacterium created by Venter does. Many biologists started to call the first being having an entirely synthetic genome by the nickname "Synthia." Habermas argues against creations like Synthia, especially in his 2003 book *The Future of Human Nature*, which voices a criticism against human cloning and other practices promoted by the idea of *liberal eugenics*.

Liberal eugenics advocates the use of reproductive and genetic technologies where the choice of enhancing human characteristics and capacities is left to the individual preferences of parents acting as consumers, rather than the public health policies of the state. From this idea, a bio-social movement had sprung, defending practices that would improve the genetic composition of a population, usually the human population, but without the intervention of public opinion or the state. Habermas criticizes the philosophical and moral intentions of scientists who claim that they're doing research in order to improve humanity for the better. Do you remember Victor Frankenstein in Mary Shelley's book? He was obsessed with helping society, but without really interacting with society itself.

Craig Venter claims to be helping society too. We can actually see those claims two years before Synthia had been born, in a video published by TED in March 2008.⁵ In this video, at time 14:42, you can see Craig Venter showing a slide to the public, explaining that the future uses of synthetic and engineered species are to: 1. increase basic understanding of life; 2. replace the petrol-chemical industry; 3. become a major source of energy; 4. enhance Bioremediation; and 5. drive antibiotic and vaccine discovery and production.

All of Venter's predictions worry Habermas. He thinks liberal eugenics is a threat to the foundations of the human moral community. He also argues that liberal eugenics will fundamentally alter relationships in the moral community, since with it reproduction will change from a natural process of creation to an artificial process of manufacture. That manufacture will undermine moral equality, and thereby human rights. And, as a result, liberal eugenics will undermine individual freedom and autonomy. For Habermas, what seems good for society (as Victor Frankenstein thought when creating his monster) is actually, as Mary Shelley explained in her book, an irresponsible act leading innocents like Justine to suffer the injustice of a horrible death as a consequence of the uncontrollable behavior of Frankenstein's monster.

Good Synthetic Intentions

Craig Venter, still on TED's presentation, gives us more clues of why he is producing synthetic life. "Why do this?" asks Craig Venter at minute 10:45 of the video. He continues:

I think this is pretty obvious in terms of some of the needs. We're about to go from six and a half to nine billion people over the next forty years. To put it into context for myself: I was born in 1946. There are now three people on the planet for every one of us that existed in 1946; within forty years, there'll be four. We have trouble feeding, providing fresh, clean water, medicines, fuel for the six and a half billion. It's going to be a stretch to do it for nine. We use over five billion tons of coal, 30 billion-plus barrels of oil—that's a hundred million barrels a day. When we try to think of biological processes or any process to replace them, it's going to be a huge challenge. Then of course, there's all that CO₂ from this material that ends up in the atmosphere.

Habermas's retort is that, everything Craig Venter says above is sustained by a group of ideas that justify society as it is. But this paradigm works for society *as it is*, and doesn't look for any structural social transformation. But what if countries decide to change their policies, and have a huge worldwide agrarian reform? It's known that much of the land owned by the cattle industry in Brazil, for example, could be used to create little villages, each one sustained by their own agricultural production. This ultimately would decrease the immigration from small cities to big cities, like São Paulo (with more than twenty million people). People unemployed in big cities would eventually find employment in small cities and miserable areas in big cities, like the "*favelas*" (slums) could disappear.

This solution, to share land to solve the problem of poverty was actually proposed in a book by Thomas More (1478–1535). The book is about a little island where equality was finally achieved by its inhabitants. The island's name gave the book its title, *Utopia*. Although criticized for being unrealistic, many arguments in this book are actually prevalent even today, and many philosophers have tried to bring that distant island within our horizon. More's book seems to be the opposite of the dystopian vision gifted to us by Mary Shelley, but perhaps there is a reason for some hope.

What's true for many philosophers, including Habermas, is that the growth of world population is not something "natural" and "unstoppable." It is instead a symptom of the inequalities that persist in a society centered on the individual, the same society that drove Victor Frankenstein away from his loved ones in pursuit of his own selfish and egotistical aims. Music teacher and philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau, in his *Discourse upon the Origin and the Foundation of the Inequality Among Mankind*, agreed with More, saying that lands and cattle are the primary private property and the seed for all inequality. Rousseau imagined that the first person, who, after enclosing a piece of land, took it in to his head to say, "This is mine," and found people ignorant enough to believe it, was the true founder of the society for which Craig Venter is justifying his acts. Rousseau wonders: "How many crimes, how many wars, how many murders, how many misfortunes and horrors, would that person who said 'This is mine' have saved the human species, who pulling up the stakes or filling up the ditches should have cried to his fellows: Be sure not to listen to this imposter; you are lost, if you forget that the fruits of the Earth belong equally to us all, and the Earth itself to nobody!"

So basically, for More, Rousseau, and Habermas, the way to eradicate hunger is not "more food." Among the practices in the food industry to keep up the price of the product is to control the quantity. There are several cases of food being wasted while confined in storehouses in order to stop the decrease in price for the products. Robert H. Frank, a professor of management and economics at Cornell University, affirmed in 2009 that paying farmers not to grow crops was a substitute for agricultural "price support programs." The "price support program meant" that farmers had to incur the expense of plowing their fields, fertilizing, irrigating, spraying, and harvesting them, and then selling their crops to the government, which stored them in silos until they either rotted or were consumed by rodents. According to Robert Frank, it was much cheaper just to pay farmers not to grow the crops in the first place.⁶

If those practices from both government and farmers are real, then the problem of hunger in the

world is not scarcity of food. Shelley's Frankenstein actually developed the same argument as an excuse to create "synthetic life" as Craig Venter. Victor Frankenstein wanted to free mankind from disease and natural death: "what glory would attend the discovery if I could banish disease from the human frame and render man invulnerable to any but a violent death!"

This hope justified his production of a new life form; but when he finally achieved his goal instead of giving love to the creature, he abandoned it. Victor's abandonment of his creation reveals that he never really cared about society. He wanted personal gain, and he then realized too late that his creature wouldn't fulfill his ambitions. Mary Shelley was the daughter of a philosopher, founder of the feminist movement worldwide, Mary Wollstonecraft (1759–1797). Shelley's mother wrote books such as *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, where she writes that women should participate more actively in history. Shelley knew then, that a character isolated from society, like Victor Frankenstein, and at the same time obsessed with helping the very society he ignored, would never have the courage to face such a *different* creature! Victor was not used to dealing with different people; he had no education in understanding other cultures. And so he had to abandon the creature and save himself because he could not accept anything so different from himself.

Despite all the melancholic drama perpetrated by Victor Frankenstein and his whining throughout Shelley's book, he is seen as a villain by many, as depicted in the comic books series published by DC Comics, *Frankenstein, Agent of S.H.A.D.E.* There, the "creature" actually leads a group of superhumans fight against many villains, of which the most powerful villain is, guess who? Victor Frankenstein, of course! He is there, as a bloody villain threatening the world with biotechnology. There are people who interpret Shelley's Victor Frankenstein as a villain for imposing his egoistic wishes upon nature. Most people make the moral judgment that, when we interfere in another person's life and make this life worse, this is wrong. This morality is well depicted in a hilarious Tim Burton version of Frankenstein, *Frankenweenie*.

Be Your Own Frankenstein

Let's give *you* the opportunity to create your own synthetic life form. What would you like to create? A bacterium? A protozoa? A fish? A dinosaur? Or maybe, would you like to reincarnate someone? Like your beloved doggy? Tim Burton did this twice, actually. In 1984, he filmed *Frankenweenie*, and the ad for the film said, "A Comic Twist on a Classic Tail." More than twenty-five years later, in 2012, Burton re-animated *Frankenweenie* and got nominated for the Academy Award for Best Animated Feature.

Frankenweenie, in a really smart way, evidences Habermas's point of view, even using Victor Frankenstein as the hero. This time Victor is a boy who loves his doggy Sparky and does everything to be with him (even bringing the doggy back from the dead). However, many school colleagues of Victor's learn his techniques, and in order to win a science competition, they start to bring other dead pets back to life. Things don't go well, as every animal they try to reincarnate turns out to be evil. The logic of the movie is clear: If you don't have love, your creations will turn against you and against others, as well.

It's not just that you have to care about your creation and then your creation will care about you. It's more than that. You have to care about the interactions your creation will have with others. It's no wonder that, at the end of *Frankenweenie* (Spoiler alert!!) Sparky, Victor's *creature*, saves everyone from the evil pets! There is a morality in Sparky that motivates him to care about others. Hanna

Arendt (1906–1975) pointed out that the life of a human being proceeds only on the condition that there is interaction with other human beings: For human beings, “to live” means—according to the expression in Latin, “to be among men” (*inter homines esse*), and to die, “to cease to be among men.” In other words, the verb “to live” can’t be seen as singular: *to live* is always plural.

It’s Alive! It’s Aliiive . . . and Controlled—(Really?)

Craig Venter in an interview in *Time* magazine in July 2012, praised Shelley’s *Frankenstein*. Apparently he is writing a book on synthetic life and going through all the history of “Vitalism”, a theory which posits that living things are materially different from nonliving things, and tries to explain the background to that kind of thinking. Venter said that this was first clearly articulated by Mary Shelley in *Frankenstein*.⁷

The reporter was surprised by Venter’s raising the topic of Shelley’s book, and took the opportunity to ask Venter what we have discussed throughout this chapter: about the laws of unintended consequences! Venter answered that when his team cried “It’s Aliiive!” in May 2012 and made their announcement of having created synthetic life in the laboratory, President Obama himself asked his new commission to look at this issue. This commission’s report stressed that Venter and his colleagues are building components to be able to terminate or limit the spread of any new life form.

As an example, Venter mentioned the tens of millions of experiments that he has been doing since the 1970s, like putting genes of every organism into *E. coli* in laboratories, and declared that there has never been a problem. The reason for this is that the laboratory *E. coli* has a chemical dependency. It can’t survive outside the special lab medium. So, Synthia is under control! Conspiracy theorists would respond: Really? Have you never heard of chaos theory, Craig Venter? Or better yet, have you never seen any horror movies? It always starts with someone saying “Everything’s under control” and then suddenly, Frankenstein’s monster is pulling the heart out of the body of some innocent little girl!

If You Want Immortality, Do Something Meaningful During Your Life—(Really?)

Victor Frankenstein went in search of immortality, and accordingly to Venter, he found it. Venter categorically says that if you want immortality, you should do something meaningful during your lifetime. Victor Frankenstein did something meaningful in his lifetime: a ‘scientific act’ that set his monster loose and killed his entire family and friends. Well, this type of immortality, apart from making a good gothic novel, doesn’t seem so great. What is meaningful, really? Is the love of Tim Burton’s Victor for his dog meaningful? The attitude towards life and society should be considered by everybody in their actions.

As Habermas sees it, the problem is not genetic engineering itself, but the mode and scope of its use. In a world with wars, hunger, and social inequality, science should focus on changing the structure of society rather than the individual. The program of liberal eugenics blinds itself to this task because it ignores how biotechnology can be used collectively, serving society as a whole, rather than doing what Victor Frankenstein did, isolating himself from society, and trying to “cure” a society that he never interacted with and maybe never even really loved.

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