

The Nature Institute

Craig Holdrege

The Need and the Task

In a recent book the Princeton biologist Lee Silver states,

While selfish genes do, indeed, control all other forms of life, master and slave have switched positions in human beings, who now have the power not only to control but to create new genes for themselves. Why not seize the power? Why not control what has been left to chance in the past On what basis can we reject positive genetic influences on a person's essence when we accept the rights of parents to benefit their children in every other way?¹

Within the past year more and more scientists are willing to state—not always as blatantly as Silver—that genetic and other biotechnologies should be applied full force to the human being. This sentiment has long been beneath the surface and is now beginning to emerge more clearly into daylight. And since the work that flows from this view is supported not only by government monies, but also by the large investments of venture capitalists, there are at the present time strong forces propelling this expansion of biotechnology forward.

In the materialistic view of reality the human being is in principle the same as a bacterium or a rat. Therefore it is only consequential to want to apply any technologies that are successful in animals also to the human being. The remnants of traditional belief systems, which have cultivated a sense of the sanctity of the human being, have prevented the materialistic view from being rigorously applied to the human. But such traditional religious and ethical sensibilities are becoming ever weaker and the call to stop at the human being rings increasingly hollow in the wake of the power and efficacy of technology.

In fact, the genetic world view promises its adherents a new form of religion, a reconnecting with the “true” foundations of life: no longer God, but the Genes. As E.O. Wilson, the eminent scholar of ants and the founder of sociobiology writes:

We are a single gene pool from which individuals are drawn in each generation and into which they are dissolved the next generation, forever united as a species by heritage and common future. Such are the conceptions, based on fact, from which new intimations of immortality can be drawn and a new mythos evolved.²

The following picture emerges from Silver's and Wilson's views: A product of genes—the human being—takes hold of his former master and enslaves this hereditary power in genetic engineering, while at the same time worshipping the genes over which he now has power. This grotesque mixture of crass reductionism with religious sentiment that lives in a vision of a paradise to be regained is not untypical in our times. A related chimera is often found, for example, in information technology circles: the vision of computer technology and networking solving the fundamental problems of human communication in a global village that connects all human beings.

A primary signature of these developments is that highly abstract intelligence becomes effective through technology. This activity arises out of intense research, is supported by vast sums of money and at the same time is infused with the religious zeal to create a new paradise. The effect on culture is, first, that the thoughts we form about ourselves and the world become increasingly abstract, suggestive shells void of concrete life—“genes determine life,” or “my brain processes thoughts like a computer.” Secondly, we

live more and more in a world that is made up of technological objects, and our experiences are mediated by cars, videos, computers, etc., which separate us from immediate interaction with our fellow human beings and nature.

Little is won by categorically rejecting this development toward abstraction in life, since we are all factually entangled in modern culture. But it is just as clear that if we blindly follow these trends, then human life will increasingly degenerate into the mimicry of the technology we have ourselves created-our thinking will, for example, become more and more like the operations of a computer.

A first way of addressing this dilemma begins when we can shed light on the nature of the scientific and technological developments, discovering and characterizing their presuppositions and tendencies. The more concrete our perception and thinking become, the less power the world of abstractions has over us. Freeing ourselves from the strictures of materialistic thinking, we can turn our attention to the rich and qualitative world of natural phenomena and strive to understand the inherent nature of these phenomena. To the extent that we succeed in this endeavor, nature begins to reveal her depths and we reconnect to life in a way that gives enriched meaning to our relations with the world around us. An ethical relation to nature arises out of the endeavor itself, and the longing for an abstract, all encompassing paradise, whether the lost spiritual or an envisioned genetic paradise, fades away.

The Initiative

The Nature Institute is a newly founded not-for-profit organization dedicated to addressing the tasks described above by developing phenomena-centered approaches to technology, science, and nature in research and educational activities. Without intensive, ongoing research we will never be able to meet the demands that the times present us. Initial funds have been raised to support the work and the Institute is now housed in “downtown” Harlemlville, adjacent to the Hawthorne Valley School and the Hawthorne Valley Farm.

Although the Institute is a new endeavor, it has its roots in work that has been carried out for the past two decades. At the present time Steve Talbott and myself are the Institute’s researchers. Steve is the author of *The Future Does Not Compute: Transcending the Machines in our Midst* and produces a highly acclaimed electronic newsletter, “NETFUTURE - Technology and Human Responsibility.” His current research focuses on the philosophy of technology and he is working on a book on this subject. I have worked in the area of heredity and have written the book *Genetics and the Manipulation of Life: The Forgotten Factor of Context*. I will continue to assess developments in genetic biotechnology, while researching further a contextual approach to heredity. As in the past this work is complemented by my research into whole organism biology of plants, animals, and the human being.

The results of the Institute’s work will be made available to the public and specialists through publications, lectures, and workshops. We also want to involve students-high school and college age-in research projects. This year, for example, I am mentoring a Hawthorne Valley School high school senior in his senior project, which involves doing a botanical and ecological inventory of a woodland swamp. We would like to create more opportunities for individuals to learn phenomena-centered methods by participating in research projects as interns. We hope to serve the needs of individuals and institutions involved, for example, in Waldorf education or Bio-dynamic agriculture, and we work in collaboration with the Natural Science Section at the Goetheanum.

We aim to place the work of the Institute within the context of the discussion of contemporary societal and scientific issues and interact with scientists, scholars, and educators who work in conventional settings, but are also seeking new ways of viewing technology, science, and nature. Such contacts are

already developing. We strive to speak a language that is not only appropriate to the phenomena themselves, but also accessible to anyone seeking a reorientation in research and education.

This work will have to engender the interest of individuals and institutions possessing the financial resources necessary to support it. At the present we are seeking sufficient long term financial support. Because we are convinced of the need for such work and have received a positive echo from many people, we are confident that the Institute can flourish.

For further information contact: Craig Holdrege, The Nature Institute 169 Route 21C, Ghent, NY 12075
tel: (518) 672-0116; fax: (518) 672 4270; [e-mail: nature@taconic.net](mailto:nature@taconic.net)

¹ Lee R. Silver, *Remaking Eden* (New York: Avon Books, 1997) p.236.

² Edward O. Wilson, "The Biological Basis of Morality" *The Atlantic Monthly* April 1998, p. 70. (This article is now a chapter in Wilson's new book *Consilience*, New York, Alfred Knopf, 1998.)

Craig Holdrege is the director of The Nature Institute. Author of Genetics and the Manipulation of Life, he teaches high school science at the Hawthorne Valley School in Harlemville (Ghent), NY.