Perhaps philosophy shows most forcibly and persistently how much Man is a beginner. Philosophizing ultimately means nothing other than being a beginner.

Martin Heidegger

Regulations for the Human Park:
On Peter Sloterdijk’s Regeln für den Menschenpark

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Abstract

In September 1999, the German philosopher Peter Sloterdijk delivered a speech to a circle of intellectuals at Schloss Elmau in Bavaria that was to give the attending media an incentive to inaugurate a heated debate over the accuracy of his observations and especially over whether he advocates harnessing genetic technology to the improvement of human kind. Under the motto Regeln für den Menschenpark (‘Regulations for the Human Park’), the speech was subsequently published in book form with like title (1999, Suhrkamp Verlag, Frankfurt am Main).

First and foremost, Sloterdijk’s speech constitutes an answer to Martin Heidegger’s Brief über den Humanismus (‘Letter on Humanism’). It provides a backdrop against which one may examine the notions of human nature, humanism, and humanistic versus technocratic culture as they obtain in human society today.

In this short essay, I will first sketch the content of Sloterdijk’s speech, then present what I feel to be the down- and upside of human genetic engineering, and finally offer a general comment on the issues and author dealt with here.
The Ominous Speech

To Sloterdijk, the nature of literary philosophy is one of sending and receiving befriending letters by which the senders, writing out of and on the love for knowledge and wisdom, seek also to induce others to this love. In this sense, literary philosophy – and thus also humanism – is a form of telecommunication born of and aiming at a refined, intellectual appreciation.

Furthermore, humanism implies the task of fetching back humans from barbarism and, combined with the regime of a specific humanistic literature, is considered a formative antidote to humanity’s bestial tendencies. By turning it into the ideologies of civil nations’ grammar schools, teachers, professors, and priests governing canonical writings have turned humanism into that pragmatic and programmatic force that informs policies of conscription and forges national cultures out of alphabetized individuals by means of a quasi-enforced friendship.

However, with the progressive emergence of the electronic media (broadcast, television, computer), the formative influence of literary humanism became undermined and is in the process of being further eroded by the aggressively advancing libertine forces unleashed by communications network revolutions. Sloterdijk perceives, in the face of these galloping and overwhelming media developments, that the tradition of citizenry-forming humanistic literature has almost come to a standstill and increasingly sinks into archived oblivion. The nation-state / grammar school variant of humanism falls consequently short of its entrusted mission to domesticate human beings, and modern mass society can maintain its political and cultural synthesis only marginally by means of a humanistic canon.

Sloterdijk praises Heidegger for having immeasurably revalued the human animal by conceiving of it as radically different from all other animals on account of its potential to be entreated by ‘Being’ itself. But he criticizes Heidegger for neglecting in his account of human nature the natural-historical and social forces that form human beings. Sloterdijk points out that, despite its fundamentally beneficial character, Heidegger’s implicit call for pacifying the human animal through the subjective realization of its ‘true nature’ – which, in turn and if attained on a grand scale, would rectify the ills of human society – is necessarily far too limited in appeal and scope and remains hence insufficient for overcoming the bestial tendencies of human kind.

Sloterdijk diverts completely from Heidegger’s standpoint by conceiving of human beings as creatures inextricably determined by their biology and social-historical forces. Relocating his
philosophy to the bio-history of the human species and its wanting humanism, he leaves mere theory behind and approaches the actuality of human being in practice. Indeed, by suggesting that one could even go as far as to define a human as that creature which has failed in being and remaining an animal, he radically ‘biologises’ human being.\(^1\) Moreover, this ‘undecided’ creature’s effort at self-domestication through ‘anthropotechnologies’ paradoxically establishes its dominion over its own kind as well as other life forms.\(^2\) Hence, and especially in our permissive and uninhibiting times, it becomes questionable whether the caring for and forming of human beings by human beings can be at all competently addressed within the framework of domesticating, educational theories. As Sloterdijk suggests, one answer to this problem can be that, in one way or another, human beings have always bred themselves and been bred, but, with the advent of genetic technology, this practice can assume a critically different dimension because it is the hallmark of the technological – and specifically of the gen-anthropotechnological – era that human beings are increasingly on the active or subjective side of selection. This is why it is now a pivotal task to be practically engaged in the formulation of an anthropotechnological codex that shapes domesticating technologies and determines their application. To illustrate his point, Sloterdijk refers to Nietzsche who he presents as describing in *Thus spoke Zarathustra* the nature of human self-domestication and anticipating a future battle over what direction human domestication ought to take: will it be a breeding of ‘littleness’ or of ‘grandness’? Sloterdijk refers also indirectly to the Platonic state as a model for the ‘good’ state where the gen-anthropotechnological project is benevolently overseen by an elite of sages – but he proclaims the model’s practical impossibility because neither Plato’s ultimate reliance on divine authority nor the leadership of the wise are viable options for directing the human domestication of today and the future and, without either, the tending to human beings by human beings must in the end remain a vain if not disastrous undertaking. What remains are human beings on a rampage in a

\(^1\) The human animal fails in being and remaining a mere animal to the extent it is subjected to and adopts a domesticating enculturation that curbs, checks, and transfigures its basic animality.

\(^2\) The human animal is also an ‘undecided’ creature because, on the one hand, it is a failed animal retaining a certain degree of animality in form and drive while, on the other hand, its enculturation is always repressive, moot, and transient. ‘Anthropotechnologies’ are all methods employed by humans for the purpose of human (self-)domestication. Modes of human domestication entail human dominion over humans and other forms of life because, first, models for domestication are always authoritarian and, second, to the extent another life form impedes or is expedient to a mode of human domestication, it will be either eliminated or harnessed to human ends.
world where they have abandoned both the gods and the wise to rely on their foolishness and half-knowledge. Sloterdijk proposes that a way out of this dilemma may be the re-consultation of those archived letters containing the befriending wisdom of old in the hope of finding past answers to present quandaries.

**Contra Human Genetic Engineering**

If we are intelligent enough not only to ask what the implementation of a technology can do but also what is undone by it, to whom it will give greater power and whose power will be reduced by it, it becomes obvious that human genetic engineering cannot be permitted to take on universally formative dimensions, for this may well mean that an elite of technophiles roots out the tender shoot that humanity is before it has even come to a bloom. Seen in this light, a comprehensive genetic design of a hominid is highly objectionable and must be opposed. Whatever the wisdom of repugnance, the habitual outrage directed at the infringement of genetic pre-determination upon humanity and its cherished values is not enough to overpower this development. We must go further and confront the thrust of genetic technology with an at least equally powerful alternative.

To adopt genetic engineering as a means to general human ‘betterment’ amounts really to nothing more than once again shuffling down the well-trodden path of human mediocrity and its notorious remissness – only this time we resign completely in the face of our problems and betray our potential to come to terms with our existence by choosing the easiest way out: incapable of correcting what we perceive to be our troublesome shortcomings – be they of a physiological, psychological, or social nature – we might erase the equation altogether. Moreover, the crucial question as to who will decide the character of human genetic determination will be a source of bitter controversy and this understandably so, for it is questionable whether someone willing to go to great lengths in order to actualize an ‘ideal’ design and, for that purpose, must step outside of conventional morality to be able to exercise the unrestrained power needed for the project, will actually use this power to benefit as many as possible. Hence there is the very real danger that human genetic engineering takes on a politically disparaging character, which would mean that it spells its own curse. Human life is
marked by the fear of self-reflective, transient beings about the loss of familiar parameters, meaning, and the omnipresent potential immediacy of demise – the gravest threats to a self-conceived entity which relies on ideas of continuity, coherence, safety, and security for its psychological and physical well being, and threats that, at the hands of scrupulous technocrats, could become a sweeping actuality if no inspired change is inaugurated by which humanity can avert the danger of becoming an artifact designed to please arbitrary paradigms of beauty, resilience, and efficiency. What must concern us here is how to transform the human disposition without leaving this in good hope to the course of time or geneticists. To object against the genetic design of human beings – or shall we say transhumans? – by merely defending the ingrained concepts that it challenges while insisting on the inviolable uniqueness and worth of human life amounts unfortunately to nothing more than an exercise in vain complacency, for all this accomplishes is gratifying customary conceit, presumption, and pretension. To counter a technology and philosophy that espouses a genetic revision and consequently a redefinition of what it means to be a human being, its adversaries have to do likewise and implement an equally powerful alternative that entails the evolution and not the abolition of human being. I am afraid that any other approach will invite but dire and futile conflict, sterile theoretical discourse, resignation, and indifference – all of which leaves the world basically as it is when something of practical, constructive import is appropriate. To be sure, the prospect of genetically planning human life poses a great challenge for its opponents, for in the ensuing quarrel over the validity of, desirability of, and methodology underlying the effort to gentechnologically overcome human flaws, one entrenched form of egotism argues with another over the nature of anthropotechnology: shall it be humanistic or technocratic or is it possible to strike a balance between the two extremes? But, then, the human predicament can never be properly diagnosed and remedied if the doctors themselves suffer from it! To shrug off any thinker’s thoughts fancying the idea of a genetic utopia as the dismissible dreams of a frustrated person gone berserk and contenting ourselves with a formal confrontation can be considered a dangerous failure to heed to the signs of our times. The chapter of genetic engineering has been opened, a chapter which can become the introduction to an accredited, living manual unchallenged in its appeal by any alternative vivacity! If in the past the religious and aesthetic consciousness was sacrificed to the mode of the rational, scientific mind, then now, with the dawn of human genetic engineering, the tender sprout of human conscience is in danger of being systematically rooted out to make place for an
obscure growth whose final manifestation cannot be anticipated by supporters and adversaries alike. I have only one bit of advice to offer to ward off the threat of a full-fledged gen-
anthropotechnology: (re)consideration and, if need be, concerted, knowledgeable resistance on a global scale that employs something by far more substantial and effective than sentimental platitudes.

**Pro Human Genetic Engineering**

Humans are involved in ongoing strife and conflict, engage in an unending struggle for a befitting existence, and continuously seek peace and happiness while being never quite capable of answering conclusively to the age-old question of how to live. Humans cultivate tolerance and fellowship while, at the same time, they entertain racial, religious, cultural, national, and ideological divisions, breed contradiction and confusion in thought and feeling, and preach non-violence and love while they maintain weaponry and attitudes that perpetrate mass killings. Humans justify and encourage ruthless competition in almost every walk of life in the name of power, prestige, pleasure and comfort, and the idea of progress; they willingly or mindlessly contribute to mutual exploitation in the name of profit, social order, and civilization; and they champion the cause of freedom, fraternity, and equality while availing themselves of every opportunity to perpetrate domination, self-concern, and partisan advantage. But not only are they involved in all of this, they have also come to convince themselves that this their scramble is actually for the purpose of finding the befitting existence and that all negative effects attendant upon it are, at best, a necessary evil and, at worse, normal, but in any case inevitable for human survival. Thus, human life is but a series of conflicts constituting a veritable battleground on which humans find themselves in constant conflict between what is and what should be, between thesis and antithesis. By accepting this state of affairs as inevitable, the inevitable becomes the norm, the natural, the true. But when the veil of this self-defensive acceptance is pierced in a moment of sincere scrutiny, human life shows itself to be more often than not nothing but a sad scuffle characterized by fear, loneliness, and despair, a wearisome routine of boredom and repetition marked by a total lack of love occasionally relieved by some pleasurable distraction or infatuation. All of this is aggravated by the smothering or inciting opinions of experts,
ideologists, philosophers, religious and secular leaders, and theorists of various orders and their propaganda. And how could it be otherwise since also they, as well as their predecessors, are but humans labouring helplessly under the very same conditioning. The result is that none of them can ever lay the foundation for truly wholesome collective relationships. Upon closer inspection, then, it appears as if humans have fallen victim to a tragic error of inward fragmentation that expresses itself outwardly in the essentially irreconcilable operations of a sociality that serves a convenient coexistence, not a living together, not a fresh relating beyond image- and judgement-making. No clever theorizing or tinkering with political, economic, and social arrangements can help this condition, for they are themselves symptomatic of and conditioned by the very same error. This error, then, seems to lie in using the cerebral activity of human consciousness in a way that the mechanical movement of this structure – acquiring information, obtaining experiences, interpreting them according to previous conditioning, and reacting on the basis of all that – is at the disposal of, is owned and possessed by, the ego, the self, the me, the I. This I-consciousness is at the centre of human being, creates a defence out of the information and experiences it acquires, identifies with them, and seeks to own them and impose them on others. With that, conditioned reaction through image- and judgement-making – and thus all conflict – begins; without it, it ceases. In order to end the human tragedy, there must be a fundamental reformation of being human – the whole approach to life has to be radically transformed! But for such a revolution to come about, it must issue from the individual who thoroughly understands the nature of mentation, has overcome her or his problematic nature, and attained to that place on which she or he can stand secure and serene to move the world. Only the action of such an individual upon society can be called revolutionary in that she or he is not merely acquiring and applying an ideology and technique of revolution but, by embodying not conceited knowledge that incites self-righteous passions but genuine wisdom, is herself or himself in revolution. To be wise means here to know the nature of the knower, known, and knowing and to act on the basis of it. Considering the notoriously ego-centric disposition of humans to be, generally speaking, unredeemable, I hold that such a revolution is beyond the bounds of the possibility of ever coming to actually transform human collective relationships on a grand scale. This is so because the pioneering inner transformation the individual has to go through requires, in my opinion, not only an initial, tremendous leap of faith, but it is also the most demanding and problematic undertaking a human can embark on, for it questions and unsettles the very basis of ordinary
experience: self-consciousness and its corollaries I, me, and mine. But, if humans are neither inclined to nor capable of undergoing this process ‘naturally’, what if behaviour genetics, perhaps in combination with nanotechnology and artificial intelligence, would one day hold out the prospect of designing a brain that begets a type of consciousness able to pass through various experiences without allowing pleasure or pain to impress on it? Through untold centuries, humans have carried the burden of self-centred imagining, judging, and desiring – what if the time comes when human ingenuity permits to throw this burden off to clear the path for the greatest art of living: to leave the afflictive prison of ego and step out of the vicious circle of responding through memory? After all, it is in the immediacy of experiencing what eludes its fabrications that mind can overleap its old self-enclosing constructs and perceive the unitary, living process of which it is a part. I am well aware that this may tie unreasonable, and some will even find silly, hopes to the workings of a technology and its experts, but let it be done for the sake of this thought experiment. The paradox that emerges with this idea is that human genetic engineering, the anthropotechnology, is acceptable as that erroneous pursuit which, at the cost of humanity as we now know it, could hold out the promise of liberating humans from the thrall of ego, and of liberating the world from the distress human self-centeredness causes across social and species boundaries. The grotesque conclusion is that the subjective error of humanity as is, i.e., to think ‘I’, would be corrected by humanity’s erring, i.e., the very pursuit of a technological enterprise informed by self-interest. In the end it would mean that humanity sets itself a monument of its own, ideal consummation. I deliberately omitted here to mention any other change genetic engineering could bring to human kind because in the face of ego’s grip on this species and the significance of shaking off its fetters, all the rest pales, at least to me, into insignificance. Yet another paradox of human existence is that we persist in creating a world that renders us physiologically and psychologically unwell. Our grotesque conclusion to this predicament seems to be that if the cultural mould we create does not fit us well, we – by way of the fashionable commodification of our wants – ought to make ourselves fit the mould rather than adjusting it to our needs. That way, human genetic engineering could become the most formidable means of adjusting human being to the technocratic existence.
A General Commentary

Humanism turns out to be a communal fantasy enabled by literate society where, through canonical literature, interested participants discover their common love for the inspiring movement of humanist philosophy. In essence, then, this humanism is but a dream about the fateful solidarity of the literate. Having emerged in Roman antiquity as a reaction of citizens concerned with civil decency against the cruelty displayed in the sanguinary circus games sanctioned by the government as a form of mass entertainment, humanism can also be found incarnate as a short-sighted anthropocentrism with an exclusive stress on human interest that readily lends itself to justify just about any human pursuit. That the very designation ‘human’ can no longer be understood in terms of humanitas, the Roman characterization from which it is derived and which originally implied an exaltation and honouring of the virtues of an educated Greco-Roman civility, seems not to bother anyone. Soon, the term ‘human’ came to be used either thoughtlessly or, at best, for literary convenience or as a self-flattering referral (e.g., in the first distinction between homo humanus and homo barbarus where the former referred to those who embodied the ideal of Roman civility and the latter to all who did not). Today, it goes simply unnoticed that what calls itself a ‘human’ being corresponds hardly to the denotations of its very own label. I retained the word here solely for literary convenience.

Heidegger’s recommendation to rectify the human tragedy by learning how to ‘exist in the truth of Being’ is noble but inadequate in that it can only appeal to rare and specially inclined individuals and is thus too limited in effect to be decisive to human affairs in general. Anthropotechnology, denoting the totality of means used by humans to deliberately cultivate their own kind, is a functional part of the humanist movement and known to human kind since times immemorial. The novelty is that nowadays, anthropotechnology, inspired by applied science, is leaving traditional boundaries behind and, by being harnessed to the technocratic as well as transhumanistic cause, threatens to assume the form of a gen-anthropotechnology that seeks to replace human life with a self-made, perfected version of it. Thus, anthropotechnology enters a stage at which it is rightfully eyed with great suspicion if not abhorrence for its apparent potential to break away from what has been declared sacrosanct with the rise of humanism, namely the axiological edifice formative of – though no longer clearly normative to – the humane consciousness. For where technocrats and propagators of transhumanism reign, the
human element usually ceases to be an end in itself and becomes a means to an end other than a human(e) one.

With regard to the genetic design of human beings, I propose that education, training, and breeding are not only etymologically related because language demonstrates how pedagogy collaborating with politics constitutes a very practical procedure involving deliberate designing and manipulating, promoting and sorting out, disciplining and selecting. Breeding tendencies are natural to human kind, differing only in degree and not in quality from one another. In the age of a genetic technology that is officially engaged in the wholesale production of transgenic crops and livestock, prenatal genetic selection, and embryo-banking, it has become time that we earnestly ponder and utilize our potentials to make manifest what we deem unequivocally to be the good of and for human kind. The uneasiness that many of us feel when considering the prospect of comprehensive, genetic manipulation does not rest so much on the fear of wrong being done than on the fear of losing that last, however flimsy, impression about what is wrong. We fear that our convictions will be undermined to an extent that our preconceptions become so completely ousted that we are forced to rethink – or perhaps forget if we didn’t already – what ‘human being’ and ‘being human’ means. And all that with a result that cannot be but uncertain.

There has to be a higher, overarching moral sense: a unifying social conscience and an embracing and inspiring sense of community if the human culture is to regain its health and resist the imposition of genetic predetermination! In contrast, the conception of a genetic technopoly is likely to include the firm establishment of a self-justifying and self-perpetuating technocracy with absolute sovereignty over human life, the chief objective being to render hominid life a genetic commodity and eventually substitute a fashionable ideal for human being. This possible climax of the current genetic frenzy really means the abandonment of the human cause, the unconditional affirmation of transhumanism, and essentially devolution instead of evolution. What is more, since the suggestions that the directors of this reformative project could be found within the ranks of specially trained philosopher-scientists or even be specifically bred (perhaps in the image of ancient sages) are equally ludicrous and absurd, the question as to who will credibly oversee the undertaking remains unanswered. It is hard, if not impossible, to see how gen-anthropotechnology could issue from sagacity and thus bring about the same because it deems impossible that wisdom salutes technological commodification, that imperfection breeds
perfection, that injudiciousness begets wisdom. What is certainly possible, however, is the management of gen-anthropotechnology by rather dubious characters. In the face of such a prospect, one may well exclaim, ‘Only God can help us now!’; but it is in vain – the entreat ing voice will remain unheard. Helpless and foolish, we are left to our own devices to make our fate what we will.

On a last word regarding Sloterdijk’s *Regeln für den Menschenpark*, I hold that, contrary to many critiques levelled against him, he neither recommends nor condemns the genetic planning of human life. Instead, he raises the question as to its plausibility and possible actualization; he cautions against fancying the formation of the ‘good’ state by means of genetic technology because no credible authority overseeing such undertaking can be had; he asks whether the wisdom of old cannot rescue humans from their perilous course; he points to the humanistic impotence in containing the wave of permissiveness so blatant today – an uninhibiting force that fosters the ‘bestial’ in human being and radically compromises the humanistic domestication of the human animal; and, in the face of progressive genetics, he urges us to press for the careful formulation of an anthropotechnological codex before the decision is taken out of our hands due to our negligence or indifference.

In my opinion, Sloterdijk has significantly fertilized the discussion on contemporary human affairs, but, in the end, he appears as well forlorn in the face of current developments in the domains of media and genetic technology. As a result, he must necessarily leave unresolved the issue of the humanistic lifestyle being apparently condemned to doom by the technocratic one, for also he cannot foretell its outcome with certainty (and who could anyway?). I don’t resent his rather pessimistic evaluation of the human condition, for I understand him only too well, nor do I resent that he employs hyperbole and generalization, for I use them myself liberally and understand that such means of expression may be indispensable to certain forms of literary work. But I resent that he discards without much ado the possibility, however faint, that, one day, after having realized the futility of their long-standing orientation, humans may turn to an introspective journey in order to liberate themselves from viewing their existence through the filter of self-centred reminiscence. In this vein, I resent that he does not even remotely consider the role education could play in learning about the nature of mentation and the corollary quest for freedom from the fetters of ego. I think, however, that for someone like Sloterdijk, who sees
human being as predominately determined by the process of enculturation, it may be considered wise to omit suggesting an educational reform leading to a decisive change in the human disposition and on a grand scale, for it is inconceivable who could and would implement and undergo it. In any case, the media attending Sloterdijk’s speech derided him for the wrong reasons, and it now lies with the public to take up the thread of his thought, heed to his admonishment, and seriously ponder the future anthropotechnological codex or, perhaps, be pondered by it in Nietzschean fashion: from icy heights, seeking after everything strange and questionable that has hitherto been excommunicated by morality.

Bibliography