



Destiny and the Divine: Reflections on Spielberg's *Minority Report*

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The Chicago Tribune recently ran a story in which Arthur Caplan, Director of the University of Pennsylvania's Center for Bioethics, commented on potential new brain imaging techniques that might track people's thoughts. He said, "If I can tell you with a 60 percent likelihood that somebody's going to be a terrorist, a lot of folks will say that's good enough"—and I think he meant "good enough to put them away." The other scenario provided suggested that an employer would not hire a person who was proven to be a liar 90% of the time. Of course, the big question at hand is, are we predetermined by our genes and the seemingly haphazard functions of our brains? Western culture, particularly American, abhors the idea that a person may not be free to choose his or her own destiny. Free will is a cultural icon. There is an irony here because our society's love affair with science has produced this child we call determinism. The more that science and medicine unveil the mysteries of our humanity, the less it seems we control and the more we become slaves to our genes and our brain chemistry. In the scramble to find meaning, society is searching for ways to insert a sense of mystery or, may I say, divinity into life.

Reflecting on some of these themes, Director Steven Spielberg helps us imagine a dark future in this past summer's blockbuster movie *Minority Report*. The story centers on John Anderton (played by Tom Cruise), chief officer in a special "Precrime" unit that arrests and incarcerates would-be murderers with the help of three individuals called "Pre-Cogs" (short for Pre-Cognitives). Because of a genetic experiment gone awry, they have the ability to foresee a murderer's crime before the act is even committed. In an ironic twist, Anderton himself is charged with a murder he is destined to commit in the future and then proceeds to attempt to prove that he can change that destiny.

In truth, this is one of our society's greatest fears—to lose control of our future, our destiny. If science has the power to define our future, is there any room for a sense of autonomy or meaning? In a tense scene in a room called the "Temple," which is home to the Pre-cogs, Anderton and the federal investigator assigned to look for flaws in the Precrime system discuss the uniqueness of the Pre-cogs. The investigator, a graduate of Fuller Seminary turned cop, comments: "Science has stolen most of our miracles. In a way, [the Pre-Cogs] give us hope; hope of the existence of the divine . . .". And herein lies our desire to include within the paradigm of science a sense of mystery. When it comes down to it, there is no solace in cold hard science portraying life as merely a function of DNA and synapses.

Are we prisoners of our genes? In the final climactic scene, Anderton's supposed destiny is dramatically altered. Keenly uncomfortable with the direction of modern medicine, many in our society are stepping back from the barrage of deterministic language and proclaiming, if somewhat desperately, "I don't care what my genes say. I have free will!" It's not about free will, though. It is about whether or not there is anything mysterious and transcendent about us. The *Tribune* article states: "... we are our brains." We have to see ourselves as more than just our brains, however. We have to see human life as miraculous and realize that in the mystery of the Divine there is hope for humanity. That, in fact, is the minority report. ■

News From the Field

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The Future of Frozen Embryos

The question of whether frozen embryos should be given a chance to develop remains a hot topic in the news. In Britain, two cases in which the mothers want to preserve the embryos while the fathers want the embryos destroyed are heading to court. Natalie Evans had some of her eggs removed and fertilized with her fiancé's sperm before undergoing treatment for cancer. Now that she and her fiancé have split up, the father wants the embryos destroyed. Evans believes that implanting the embryos would provide her with her only chance to become a mother. In another case, Lorraine Hadley has two frozen embryos whom her ex-husband wants destroyed. Both Ms. Evans and Ms. Hadley are now infertile. In Britain, both mother and father must give consent for the storage and use of embryos. The women are arguing that the law discriminates against them.

In other news, the White House approved nearly \$1 million to support public education about embryo adoption—the process where "surplus" embryos are donated to other infertile couples for implantation. This option was first offered by Christian Nightlight Adoptions' "Snowflake" program. Critics charge that "adopting" embryos is an underhanded attempt to give legal/moral status to the human embryo and ultimately to undermine the legality of abortion. Supporters point out that there is nothing wrong with providing embryos who would otherwise be destroyed the opportunity to be adopted into a loving family.

Government Research Committee Urges Caution on Creating Gene-Altered Animals

A U.S. government research panel of scientists has issued a report urging more caution concerning the creation of genetically-altered animals. The 12-member panel expressed its gravest concerns over the risk of releasing genetically-altered organisms into the environment where they could cause havoc on the ecosystem, possibly wiping out entire species. The committee also expressed reservation over the entrance of products such as meat and milk derived from transgenic animals (animals with genetic code from another species spliced into its DNA) into the food supply. The panelists were concerned about the possibility that severe allergic reactions to the products might be experienced by some of the population. Questions were also raised concerning government regulation of this area. Participants worried that the responsibility for enforcement is currently spread over too many government agencies to be effective.