

Editorial: What is special about the gene?

The gene may be yesterday's concept as far as science is concerned. However, it is still alive in the popular imagination. It presents a rich challenge to humanities disciplines in generating ideas and analytic perceptions. Furthermore, as the gene and genomics escape the laboratory into everyday life and culture, they shape, and are shaped by, the world views of ordinary people. This in turn modifies the responses of individuals and groups as they engage with scientific and social developments and policies. While much of the discourse about genes and genetics beyond the laboratory is conducted in the language of decision-related and procedural ethics, or that of social analysis, there is a need to stand back and consider how deep, but not necessarily critically-articulated metaphors and understandings are constructed and affect the nature of perceived, taken-for-granted reality.

In response to this challenge, a symposium was organised in September 2007 by the Centre for Applied Ethics at Cardiff University. The event emerged from co-operative work between the Centre for Applied Ethics, Cardiff's School of Religious and Theological Studies, and Birmingham University's Centre for Global Ethics, on a project entitled 'The Meanings of Genetics'. This project explores the relationship between humanities disciplines and genetics. It asks what the humanities could contribute to understandings of genetic science and technology, and the manner in which these might be interpreted in, and impact upon, contemporary culture. It also attempts to engage with the challenges and opportunities that genetics and genomics pose for the humanities in terms of their methodologies and understandings of human being.

A first symposium was organised in 2006, and its papers have already been published in *Health Care Analysis*.¹ Collected here are the contributions to the second symposium, where scholars from philosophy, history, English literature, cultural anthropology and linguistics, together with a poet, addressed the question: 'What is special about the gene?'

Three key themes emerge from the symposium papers and discussions. First, it is clear that the old issues of genetic determinism and the nature/nurture debate continue to trouble humanities scholars, amongst others. In the present collection of papers, the contrasting approaches of linguist Alison Wray and anthropologist Tim Ingold in their respective papers are significant. While Wray explores the possibility that there may be genetic determinants to linguistic capacities, and that such determinants would have significant implications for educational policy, Ingold questions the coherence of the nature-nurture dichotomy, and thus the very possibility of a consistent notion of genetic determinism. Philosopher Lenny Moss's exploration of competing concepts of the 'gene', and the indeterminism that holds between genotype and phenotype, adds to the consideration of this problem.

A second, related theme concerns the politics of genetics and in particular the politics of identity. Genetics potentially challenges our understanding of who we are, and of

our history. In 'Hybrid vigour? Genes, genomics, and history', Roberta Bivins explores the impact that genetics will have upon the methodology of the historian, suggesting that the gene and genome can be understood as a source of historical information. This store may never replace more orthodox historical data sources, but it may increasingly become an important complement to them, not least as ordinary people increasingly understand themselves as genetic beings.

The final theme concerns the different ways in which the gene and genome are understood by scientists, humanities scholars, and the lay public. The papers herewith illustrate the diverse methods and conceptions, together with rhetorical and metaphorical structures, to which the different humanities disciplines appeal in order to articulate the gene and its place in human culture. This problem is addressed most directly by David Amigoni in his reading of Ian McEwan's novel *Saturday*. He begins to figure the ways in which humanistic and artistic cultures can engage with the cultures of the natural sciences. However, the possible misunderstandings and ambiguities that exist between scientific and humanistic approaches to the gene remain to be explored adequately. Further symposia could fruitfully bring natural scientists and clinicians together with humanities scholars more directly.

One contribution to the symposium that is not included in this volume are the poems of Michael Symmons Roberts. He offered readings from his collections *Raising Sparks* and *Corpus*.² Symmons Roberts worked with Sir John Sulston when he was sequencing the genome. Moved by its beauty and poeticism, he has produced a number of poems relating genetics to love poetry. So, for example, in a tribute to John Donne, 'Mapping the Genome', he reworks the metaphor of the lover mapping geographically the terrain of their beloved's body in terms of the mapping of the beloved's genome itself. This kind of endeavour begins significantly to bridge the gap that may exist between scientific and lay understandings of the gene, possibly opening up dialogue and public understanding.

The symposium demonstrated the urgent need for the humanities to engage with and explore genetics and genomics, as genetic understandings become increasingly part of lay cultures, and thus shape the frameworks, for good or ill, within which contemporary selves, communities and histories are understood. We hope to organise follow-up events, and would be pleased to receive any comments and expressions of interest in this work.

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¹ Y. Egorova. 'Editorial', *Health Care Analysis* 2007; 15 (1): 1-3.

² M. Symmons Roberts. 1999. *Raising Sparks*. London: Jonathan Cape; M. Symmons Roberts. 2004. *Corpus*. London: Jonathan Cape.