

Designed Futurity and Ethical Closure in *Gattaca*

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Abstract:

This article revisits the film *Gattaca* (1997) not simply as a warning about genetic determinism, but as a film that stages ethical unease without pursuing institutional change. While the narrative clearly exposes the injustice of allocating futures through genetic prediction, it ultimately resolves this tension at the level of individual exception rather than systemic reform. The film's ending performs a manoeuvre of ethical closure. It renders injustice intelligible and emotionally survivable yet leaves intact the structures that produced it. Drawing on Frank Kermode's reflections on narrative endings, the article reads *Gattaca* as a science fiction film that contains disruption within coherence. The film affirms endurance and aspiration, but it does so without unsettling the governing logic of designed futurity that it initially calls into question.

Keywords: *Gattaca*, Designed Futurity, Ethical Closure, Genetic Determinism, Biopolitics.

I. Introduction

Speculative narratives have long served as spaces where societies work through questions about how futures are imagined, regulated, and justified. Andrew Niccol's 1997 film *Gattaca* remains a foundational film within this tradition, frequently read as a cautionary tale about genetic determinism and its eugenic and biopolitical forms of control. While such readings have productively exposed the ethical dangers of reducing human worth to biological calculation, they often frame the film primarily as a warning against genetic science itself. This article proposes a different emphasis. Rather than asking whether genetic prediction is ethically legitimate, this article examines how *Gattaca* frames futurity as designed and allocated in ways that absorb critique within narrative resolution rather than extending it into structural transformation.

The film presents a world in which futures are assigned in advance through genetic forecasting, transforming probability into destiny and prediction into policy. From birth onwards, individuals are categorised and channelled into social roles based on biological data that purports to anticipate not only health outcomes but also capability and reliability. This organisation of life does not simply regulate bodies. It structures expectation and aspiration, shaping what counts as legitimate. The ethical problem here is less about the existence of merit itself than about how demonstrated capacity is replaced by pre-certified worth. Vincent Freeman's trajectory makes this distinction explicit. His success affirms merit as effort and discipline. The film exposes the ethical failure of systems that deny access to futures before merit can be demonstrated. Yet *Gattaca* does not pursue this insight toward institutional transformation. Instead, it resolves ethical tension through individual exception, allowing Vincent to succeed without reconfiguring the mechanisms through which futures are distributed.

This article argues that *Gattaca* performs what may be termed ethical closure: a narrative process through which systemic injustice is acknowledged yet rendered survivable through personal transcendence rather than collective revision. Drawing on biopolitical critique as contextual groundwork and narrative theory on closure, the analysis shifts attention from what the film criticises to how that critique is narratively resolved. In doing so, the article reframes *Gattaca* not simply as a warning against genetic prediction, but as a study in how speculative narratives manage ethical disruption while leaving the architecture of futurity intact.

Set in a future shaped by genetic engineering, *Gattaca* follows Vincent Freeman, a man conceived naturally and classified as genetically “invalid” in a society that increasingly relies on in vitro fertilisation and embryo selection to design offspring. Crestfallen by not being able to pursue his lifelong ambition of being an astronaut due to his predicted heart condition, Vincent assumes the genetic identity of an Olympic silver medalist swimmer Jerome Eugene Morrow, a genetically “valid” individual whose own life has been derailed by not being able to be the best even after being designed to be the best. Through this impersonation, he gains access to the Gattaca Aerospace Corporation, where he is subjected to routine genetic verification while preparing for a space mission. The narrative culminates in Vincent’s successful launch into space, enabled by private discretion rather than institutional reform, and Jerome’s subsequent self-erasure. This trajectory foregrounds the film’s central tension between earned capacity and pre-certified worth, setting the stage for its exploration of designed futurity and ethical closure.

Reflecting on the film years after its release, actor Ethan Hawke, who portrayed Vincent Freeman, has noted that *Gattaca* was largely ignored at the time. He says in an interview, “So rarely do films use the device of metaphor or allegory, and *Gattaca* really does it. *Gattaca* was ahead of its time. All this stuff about genetic engineering and the stuff that is happening now, it was a little ahead of

its time” (Hawke). Such reflections point to *Gattaca*’s endurance as a text whose ethical and narrative concerns emerge more clearly over time rather than through immediate spectacle. As Hawke observes, time has really been a friend of *Gattaca*.

II. Designed Futurity: From Prediction to Allocation

In *Gattaca*, the future appears less as an open horizon than as something pre-arranged. It is organised in advance rather than negotiated as it unfolds. Futurity is engineered before birth through in vitro fertilisation and embryo selection, where prospective parents are encouraged to choose desirable traits and minimise genetic risk. Genetic testing at birth then functions as the subsequent mechanism through which this designed futurity is assessed, confirmed, and distributed. Health risks and projected viability are inferred from biological data and treated as authoritative grounds for future endeavours. What begins as a prediction gradually takes on the force of allocation. Probability hardens into policy. Vincent’s own life was statistically foreclosed at birth. His projected life expectancy was 30.2 years, a calculation that reduced his future to a biological countdown rather than a space of possibility. Futures are assigned not based on demonstrated ability but on anticipated performance. From this point onwards, careers and aspirations are structured around what genetic profiles are presumed to allow. The system presents future allocation as a neutral scientific outcome. The result is not only exclusion but the quiet normalisation of discrimination as a routine administrative procedure. Uncertainty is not eliminated but administratively managed; statistical likelihood is converted into institutional certainty. The future becomes legible in advance, sortable through biological categories that appear objective while remaining deeply normative. Responsibility for inequality is shifted onto the individual, allowing structural inequality to be framed as personal limitation or failure. In this way,

the ethical problem is not only discrimination, but the stabilisation of a life-course that no longer needs justification once it has been biologically authorised.

Within this framework, merit is redefined. Excellence is no longer something to be achieved through effort and practice. It is something to be identified in advance. The distinction between capacity and prediction collapses, and biological probability is treated as moral entitlement. Those deemed valid are assumed to deserve opportunity, while those classified as invalid are denied it not because they have failed, but because they are expected to fail. The injustice becomes visible at precisely this point. Futures are foreclosed before action can occur.

Vincent Freeman's existence exposes the instability of this logic. His physical endurance, intellectual discipline, and relentless commitment consistently exceed the expectations encoded in his genetic profile. Yet the system is structured in such a way that this excess cannot be recognised legitimately. In order to attain the future he yearns for, Vincent must conceal his identity and submit to the very mechanisms that exclude him. His success therefore confirms two things simultaneously: that genetic prediction is unreliable, and that the system remains incapable of acknowledging merit once it has been pre-emptively denied.

What makes *Gattaca* ethically compelling is not simply that prediction fails, but that its failure does not lead to revision. The narrative demonstrates that genetic forecasting misrecognises human capacity yet continues to organise futurity around it. This disjunction reveals the core tension of designed futurity. The system persists not because it is accurate, but because it provides a stable framework for managing uncertainty and risk.

III. Verification and Biopolitical Enclosure

Gattaca presents a future in which access to opportunity is governed not through overt coercion but through biological verification. Genetic data functions as a routine administrative filter, determining employment eligibility and social mobility. Rather than dramatising surveillance as spectacle, the film emphasises its banality. Identity is continuously confirmed through blood, skin, and urine, transforming biological traces into a condition of institutional access.

This logic aligns with Michel Foucault's account of biopower, which marks a shift from sovereign power's right to take life toward a regulatory regime concerned with the management of populations. In *Society Must Be Defended*, Foucault famously describes modern power as one that seeks to "make live and let die" (Foucault 241), indicating a form of governance in which biological existence itself becomes politically legible. Within such a framework, life is not judged morally or juridically but statistically, according to norms of risk, efficiency, and predictability.

In *Gattaca*, this biopolitical rationality is enacted through normalisation rather than exclusion. Vincent's designation as an invalid does not result in legal prohibition. Instead, it renders his future probabilistically negligible. His body is treated as a deviation from the norm, not a threat to it. This reflects Foucault's insistence that biopolitical regulation operates at the level of populations, where deviation is tolerated so long as the overall logic of classification and optimisation remains intact. Power persists not by eliminating anomaly, but by rendering it illegible within a broader field of statistical management. Vincent states towards the end of the movie that he is "ten thousand beats overdue" (*Gattaca*), a private measure of lived time that exceeds statistical expectation. This excess remains administratively invisible. The film demonstrates that such governance does not collapse when biological prediction is contradicted. Vincent's success exposes the fallibility of genetic forecasting. The institutional system remains unaltered. His achievement is treated as an exception rather than a reason to reconsider the predictive regime itself. In this sense, *Gattaca* illustrates how

biopolitical systems accommodate individual deviation without relinquishing their foundational logic of control.

These elements establish the film's ethical critique of genetic governance as a system that mistakes biological probability for human destiny. This critique is not allowed to destabilise the structure of the designed future. It is narratively contained, preparing the ground for a resolution that restores coherence without institutional transformation.

IV. Earned Capacity and Pre-certified Worth

Gattaca is sometimes read as a critique of merit itself. The film, however, strongly affirms earned capacity while criticising the ethical distortion that occurs when merit is treated as something that can be certified in advance. The target is not excellence, but pre-certification. Probability is mistaken for entitlement, and genetic profile for demonstrated worth.

The embryo selection scene already establishes this logic at its origin. Vincent's parents, having learned their lesson after Vincent's genetic defects, go for genetic selection in conceiving the second child. The doctor tells them "The child is still you. Simply the best of you. You could conceive naturally a thousand times and never get such a result" (*Gattaca*). This normalises the idea that the future is a blueprint. The later institutional world then converts that blueprint into a sorting system, those who are designed become presumptively legitimate, while those who are born naturally are treated as risks whose futures can be foreclosed before they act. The injustice is not that ability is irrelevant; it is that ability is not allowed to count unless it arrives with the correct biological credentials.

Vincent's trajectory is the film's clearest defence of earned capacity. His success is not accidental. It is the outcome of sustained training and refusal of imposed limits. The swimming motif condenses this ethic. When Vincent says, "I never saved anything for the swim back" (*Gattaca*), the film frames achievement as total commitment rather than inherited advantage.

More deeply, the film's sharpest ethical contradiction is that Vincent's merit cannot be recognised as merit within the institution. He must first become 'Jerome' to get into the space where he can then demonstrate, repeatedly, that he belongs. It is a contradiction that exposes institutional misrecognition. The system claims to reward merit, but it recognises merit only when it is pre-endorsed by biological prediction.

Jerome's arc deepens this critique by showing how genetic prediction also harms those it is meant to privilege. Designed for excellence, Jerome's selfhood is organised around rank and perfection. Coming second becomes an existential collapse. Despite his promised genetic advantage, he is left paralysed after a suicide attempt. His tragedy shows what happens when merit is redefined as predetermined superiority rather than lived achievement. The film therefore stages two ethical injuries at once. Vincent is excluded despite capacity, and Jerome is destroyed by the demand that designed excellence must translate into destiny. Vincent's lover Irene Cassini and Dr Lamar's son are also shown as victims of the genetic screening system. Even though she is genetically engineered, Irene has an unacceptable likelihood of heart failure. Dr Lamar's acknowledgement of his own son's genetic shortfall further underscores the fallibility of the supposedly perfect system.

Gattaca demonstrates that genetic prediction cannot exhaust human capacity and that merit, understood as effortful achievement, can exceed design. But the film does not translate this insight into systemic reform. Instead, it resolves the contradiction through exceptional passage (Vincent),

private discretion (Lamar), and containment of dissent within personal space. Earned capacity is affirmed at the level of character, while pre-certified worth remains the institutional grammar through which futures are distributed.

V. Ethical Closure: Exception Without Reform

The closing movement of *Gattaca* brings into focus what I have been calling ethical closure. The film does not deny that genetic prediction fails. In fact, it goes out of its way to show how unreliable and reductive the system is. Yet the exposure of that failure does not lead to institutional change. The injustice is acknowledged, even dramatised, but it is ultimately resolved at the level of individual exception. Ethical tension is eased through personal discretion and quiet withdrawal rather than through any restructuring of the system itself. The larger framework of designed futurity remains intact.

This tendency is visible earlier in the narrative as well. Several moments seem to open the possibility of critique, only to contain it within personal recognition. Anton Freeman's silence after losing the swimming contest, for instance, registers as a form of reckoning, but it does not extend beyond the private encounter between the brothers. Nothing in the social order shifts as a result. Irene's acceptance of Vincent's identity similarly marks an emotional turning point, yet it leaves untouched the mechanisms that regulate access and evaluation. These scenes matter, but their significance is contained. They register ethical disturbance without unsettling the structures that produce it.

The most decisive instance of this containment appears in the pre-launch testing scene with Dr Lamar. The unexpected DNA test reaffirms that the verification regime is still fully operational.

The system has not weakened. Lamar's response is telling. He does not expose its injustice or challenge its legitimacy. Instead, he retreats into personal discretion, invoking his son as someone "not all that they promised" (Gattaca), and allows Vincent to proceed. Recognition occurs, but it remains private. The system remains unchallenged and its procedures remain the same.

Vincent's successful launch gathers these earlier acts of containment into a final resolution. His departure into space confirms what the narrative has already suggested: that effort and endurance can exceed genetic forecast. At the same time, the conditions under which this success occurs matter. Vincent does not enter the future openly as himself. He does so under an assumed genetic identity, and the institution is never compelled to acknowledge its error in public. Merit becomes visible only when it passes as pre-certified worth. What is achieved, then, is survival within the system rather than its dismantling.

Jerome's departure is folded into this resolution in a similarly quiet way. His final act does not confront the system that shaped his despair. Instead, it removes that despair from the film's forward trajectory. As a genetically valid individual who cannot inhabit the expectations of design, Jerome embodies a contradiction the film does not fully address. His disappearance absorbs that tension rather than resolving it structurally. By the time Vincent leaves for space, Jerome has already served his narrative purpose, providing the identity that makes the journey possible. Once that function is complete, he is written out. The system itself is spared the need to account for his failure or reconsider its standards. Responsibility is displaced back onto the individual.

Frank Kermode, in *The Sense of an Ending*, suggests that human beings manage historical and existential uncertainty by shaping experience into narrative form. By aligning beginnings, middles, and endings into what he calls concordance, narrative offers a way of living with contingency. To inhabit what Kermode describes as the "middest" is to require some imagined sense of ending that

makes the present bearable. In this sense, narrative closure does not eliminate contradiction. It arranges it. It provides coherence to disruptive experience and allows a story to feel complete even when the conditions that produced conflict remain in place. Concordance, then, is not the same as moral repair or historical correction. It produces narrative coherence without dismantling what produced the crisis.

Gattaca's ending can be understood in precisely these terms. Vincent's journey is drawn into a coherent arc that culminates in space travel, an achievement that appears to counter the deterministic logic of the world he inhabits. The narrative affirms endurance and aspiration. The institutional framework that initially denied him entry is left largely untouched. The tension the film exposes is not erased. It is absorbed into a satisfying resolution. The story closes without reopening the broader question of how futures continue to be allocated.

Ethical closure, as I am using the term here, should therefore not be confused with an ethical solution. It describes the way critique is acknowledged and made narratively manageable, even as the governing assumptions of the system persist. *Gattaca* does not dismantle genetic governance. It renders its contradictions survivable within the logic of the story.

VI. Conclusion

Gattaca offers a narrative of ethical critique without political transformation, not because it seeks to stabilise or justify genetic governance, but because its concern lies elsewhere. The film foregrounds individual endurance and aspiration within a world that remains structurally unchanged. Vincent's departure does not signal the reopening of futures denied to others. Nor does

it resolve the injustices produced by genetic determinism. Instead, it marks the completion of a personal journey shaped by perseverance rather than recognition.

Read through Frank Kermode's account of narrative endings, the film's resolution can be understood as ethical closure rather than ethical solution. The ending restores narrative coherence by allowing aspiration to reach fulfilment, not by correcting the conditions that made such fulfilment exceptional. In doing so, *Gattaca* remains faithful to its humanist impulse. It affirms the capacity for endurance within constraint, without suggesting that endurance itself constitutes reform. The future Vincent reaches is meaningful because it completes a story. It does not fundamentally transform the system that made the story necessary.

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