

*Genes: A Philosophical Inquiry*, by Gordon Graham (Routledge, 2002)

Reviewed by Richard Joyce for *Philosophical Books* 45 (2004)

[penultimate draft]

Philosophers often like to think that their characteristic skills can be usefully contributed to just about any field of human inquiry. Maybe they are right. But when a philosopher publishes a book with a title of the form “X: A Philosophical Inquiry,” and his or her grasp of X is shallow and error-laden, then serious practitioners of X will feel quite justified in judging that philosophers should mind their own business. This is how things stand with Gordon Graham’s *Genes: A Philosophical Inquiry*. One suspects that his grasp of the relevant empirical material has been gleaned from a few textbooks and popular writers. He as much as admits this in the preface, but the disclaimer hardly excuses what follows (or excuses Routledge for publishing it).

There are just four chapters to this concise and readable little book. The first is short and scene-setting—clarifying a few key concepts like ‘technology’ and ‘science,’ and drawing attention to the modern ambivalence towards science: rational savior versus progenitor of immoral abominations. The second chapter is the longest and by far the most problematic. Here Graham discusses ‘Darwinism,’ creationism, the selfish gene, Michael Behe’s well-known but widely rejected attacks on the theory of natural selection, sociobiology and evolutionary psychology, and memes. His general thesis is that Darwinism is not the all-encompassing, universal principle that thinkers like Dawkins and Dennett have, in their enthusiasm, claimed it to be. Graham’s tone is generally critical of Darwinian thinking, though he certainly never approaches the lunatic fringe. In fact, the moderate position he ultimately prefers is not at all a silly one—it is just that the quality of the discussion and argumentation is extremely ham-handed. A glance at the slender bibliography raises one’s eyebrows, and the text gives no hint of a wealth of background research unmentioned in the interests of brevity. Even when describing straightforward matters Graham makes numerous puzzling remarks and flat-out blunders. To give just one example: in arguing for the limited explanatory power of the Darwinian’s all-important concept of *fitness*, Graham argues that the reason that dinosaurs are not longer around “cannot be accounted for exclusively in terms of ‘fitness’ ... Crucial to the explanation is a factor that has nothing to do with genetics, namely geological and climatic history” (p. 48). This is just baffling. Fitness is, of course, an essentially relative notion: an organism can be deemed fit only relative to other organisms and relative to a type of environment. Far from *fitness* failing to take into account the environment, it makes no sense without it!

Thankfully, things improve somewhat in the second half of the book, when Graham gets on to topics to which he really has something worthwhile to contribute. In chapter 3 he discusses a range of objections to genetic engineering and finds none of them compelling, concluding that modern genetic technologies pose no new or unique moral questions. Chapter 4 is a fairly thoughtful and sensitive attempt to get at the literal issues lying behind that metaphor so often voiced concerning modern genetic technologies: “playing God.” Rightly rejecting harebrained or hopelessly vague secularized versions of “life’s sanctity” or “genetic trespassing,” Graham rests his case on a principle of

“procreative responsibility”—the ethical foundation of which is the axiom that all humans are fundamentally equal, something curiously interpreted here as “no one is in a position to decide that the life of another is not worth living” (p. 151). On this basis he concludes that “designer babies” are something that should be eschewed, since we can never be in a position to know for certain that “the life we ‘design’ is more worth living than the life that would emerge without our designing intervention” (p. 176)—the reasons including epistemic fallibility concerning consequences and the incommensurability of values.

Graham has pitched the whole book low, striking a tone that one might be glad to encounter over breakfast in the book review section of a respectable newspaper. There is not much serious philosophy accomplished, and certainly no contributions to science. He does have interesting and valuable things to say, but by presenting his case in such a non-rigorous manner—and, more importantly, having first revealed a superficial and often erroneous grasp of the empirical material—he does himself no favors. By my reckoning, Graham has written thirteen books since 1990, and after reading this effort one cannot help but wonder if less would be more.