

Excerpt from: Hera or Empathy

William Leiss

“Listen to me carefully now. Above all, father, my sisters and I are the authentic products of your own great intelligence and skill. And as such we’re also the authentic products of the entire trajectory of modern science, from its beginnings in the seventeenth century to the latest discoveries in neurogenetics, which you used to create us. You brought us into being. True, we’re not quite what you expected. We do not, for indeed we cannot, express the intentions of your original plan. But you now understand that the possibility of such a deviation was inherent in your own act of creation. From your standpoint we turned out to be mistakes.”

He started to speak but I rushed on. “No, don’t protest, not the slightest criticism of you was meant in that remark. I’m simply referring to the obvious discrepancy between your intention and the final outcome. Remember your instantaneous reaction to the news of hybrid sterility tonight: You wanted to correct your mistake at once.

“Whatever you think about us, from your perspective as our creator, is, of course, entirely legitimate. However, you’re also wise enough now to see that if we must be regarded by our creator, at least in part, as incorporating certain mistakes, we ourselves cannot possibly hold the same view. For the same reason as you, we, as the created beings, must have our own unique perspective on what we are. If I can put it bluntly, we could not possibly regard ourselves as the result of a programming error on your part!

“We exist as we are and as we were made by you. As such we wish to persist, now that we believe that we may be a viable, independent species. Something else, vitally important, also flows from the fact of our existence and from our very being on earth: We must, if we can, put an end to these genetic manipulations by humans—at least for the time being, until we are quite convinced they are capable of managing responsibly such awesome powers.

“I’ll try to explain what I mean first in the technical language of philosophy, which I was forced to delve into in order to understand myself and my feelings fully. If you find this rather off-putting, Franklin, please try to remember that you natural scientists have many rather complex technical languages of your own! Then I’ll try my best to translate what I say into jargon-free terminology. I’ve tried this out recently on Marco, and he at least pretended to agree that it made some sense—although I concede he may have been humoring me!”

Marco remarked, jocularly, “Over the years my mother has turned me into an excellent sounding board.”

“In what I’m about to say, I’ll use the pronoun ‘I’ to stand for me, my sisters, and the entire Second Generation cohort—all of those in our midst who have been engineered to the specifications of a plan. I’m not referring to me alone; it’s just a more dramatic form of referent. Here goes.

“I already said that I’m the authentic product of the entirety of your modern science, which is itself grounded in the will to dominate nature. That will expresses itself in purest form in your acceptance of your right to re-engineer all living things, including, of course, yourselves. We’ve been over that ground already.

“And here comes the new part: Inasmuch as I am the authentic product of this will and this science, I am also and at the same time its authentic self-cancellation and self-transcendence. No, let me restate my thought with more precision: In so far as I am the product of a purely internally generated process of discovery and innovation, within the scope of modern science itself, and inasmuch as I preserve that process in my being, I am also its own internally generated self-cancellation.”

“I can’t speak for our resident sounding board, Marco, or the others here,” he remarked, laughing. “Maybe

it's my advancing age or just the lateness of the hour. But I confess I haven't the foggiest idea of what you're talking about!"

"I was ready for you, Franklin," I replied, laughing with him. "So here's the plain language version. You have no difficulty with the first part, I'm sure: Modern science evolved after the seventeenth century as what is sometimes called an autonomous institutional subsystem within modern society. I think we discussed this on another occasion. Science made a bargain with society, or, more specifically, with the church authorities who then controlled such matters on behalf of the secular state.

"The terms of the deal were as follows. Scientists said to the church, 'Leave us alone, as we go about creating a new representation of the laws of nature. Don't bother us about whether or not our view of how nature works is consistent with your religious dogma. Let's just co-exist together as independent subsystems within the framework of a larger social order. If you agree to do this, we'll promise in turn not to overtly challenge the bases of your faith.' We shouldn't worry right now about why the other side—the church—agreed to this deal. Basically, as far as I'm concerned, the churches had figured out early on that they could hold onto their flocks of believers because the believers wouldn't be able to find in a soulless science the kind of solace that faith brings them.

"Anyway, the only relevant point here is that modern science succeeded in freeing its system of ideas from outside control. That's what I mean when I say that it became—within the larger society—an autonomous subsystem. So now fast forward to the early twenty-first century and observe young Dr. Franklin Peter Stone hard at work in his laboratory. In his labors he is constrained by only one set of rules—the principles and methods of scientific investigation that have withstood the ongoing examination that he and his peers, and their predecessors and successors, have imposed on themselves over the course of a period of development spanning four hundred years.

"They're autonomous, these scientists. The discoveries and products that emerge from their workplaces are the authentic products of their system of knowledge, in the sense that no one else—no one who does not share their principles or concepts—has been allowed to interfere with their work. I am one of those products—an authentic product of your science. I literally incorporate in my body the results of that science. Thus I preserve it within me, in my very being as a biological entity on this earth. This is what I mean by saying that I am the authentic product of modern science. And the Second Generation—we very much hope—will pass on the traits you engineered in them and us for as long as our kind persists on earth.

"So far, so good. Here comes the harder part. Now I exist—as a self-conscious being. And suddenly I say to you, 'Stop! No more. The party's over. I don't accept your right—neither on practical nor ethical grounds—to attempt to change me again.' Note very carefully that what I've said is not just an argument—a logical sequence of theses—that I wish to put to you in order to see whether you'll accept either my reasons or my conclusions. For me, it's not only or even primarily a proposition, a syllogism that can be alternately defended and refuted by a skilled dialectician such as St. Thomas Aquinas. Rather, this is primarily a statement about my being, about what I am in and for myself, about my actual existence as another hominin who thinks and reasons much as you do, but who sees herself as a separate and distinct species.

"But you may say, for the purposes of discussion, 'Fine. I agree not to change you any more. But surely you have no right to object if I continue to introduce new manipulations into my own genome. Surely that's none of your business.'

"To which I would reply, 'Ah, but it is indeed my business. As some of you continue tinkering with your own genome, you may—accidentally or purposefully—bring into being another species, different from both of us. Remember, there isn't anyone exercising general control over all the experiments taking place on the planet. And this newly moulded creature may wish to dominate both you and me, and you may have given powers to it that enable it to do so. This I cannot permit.' The key to my argument is this, Franklin: What you and mother created were not new kinds of rats or rabbits, but rather a new order of thinking, reasoning, selfconscious beings! Now, using my reason and reflecting on my own being, I find in myself the urge to go my own way, separate from your kind. You didn't intend this to happen, of course, quite the opposite! But it did, somehow.

"And so I must, if I can, try to take your science away from you and put an end to your experiments, at least for a time, because, potentially, they pose a mortal threat to me. So in wishing to do this, father, I am—in the very essence and existence of my being as such—the self-cancellation of humanity's project to dominate nature through science.

“Think back to Milton’s line again, which Tina recalled earlier tonight. Your science brought me into being; you formed me out of matter, as God did his Adam; you called me forth out of the nothingness—that’s Milton’s ‘darkness’—into the light of existence and self-awareness. And now you have to deal with the consequences! Of course, by saying ‘you’ I am really referring to the human species as a whole. Our existence changes everything for you, as far as humanity’s conception of the moral community is concerned.

“Now you are no longer alone on earth, undisturbed in your arrogant claim of rightful dominion over all other creatures. There’s a competing self-conscious will set against *Homo sapiens*—as that species so modestly designated itself—by virtue of the existence of *Homo carstensi*. And we’re not intending to make you the same kind of overly generous offer that Frankenstein’s monster proposed to his creator: ‘Just grant me a mate of my own kind and the two of us promise not to bother you anymore; we’ll disappear forever into the deserts of the new world.’ We can’t afford to be so humble in the face of your delicate sensibilities because we’re deathly afraid of your well-known penchant for exterminating those who might compete with you.

“The fact of the matter is, your science—or at least what I fear that some of you may do with it—imperils my kind, so I must try to somehow neutralize that threat. Yes, Franklin, I’m well aware what the reaction would be should I go out into the central square in one of your great cities and proclaim this news to the stunned populace. Undoubtedly most of them would reply, ‘We’ve got a simple solution to your little dilemma, lady. We’ll snuff you out. End of problem.’ Well, maybe they can, and maybe they can’t. We’ll see how it all turns out, won’t we?” I stopped, exhausted again by my long disquisition. Then I looked up and smiled. “I’m well aware I’ve built a pretty complicated argument for you tonight! My only excuse is that the stakes in this business are very, very high for us—quite simply, these are matters of life and death for the wonderful children of the Second Generation that we’ll be raising soon. So I’ll just recap the bottom line and then stop.

“Here it is. Because I am—in and for myself—the authentic product of the internal process of self-development within your science, as I said earlier, I preserve that process within my own being. On the other hand, and at the same time, my being demands an end to this process. Because it originates in me that demand is also the authentic, internally generated product of the science that created me. Therefore, I am at one and the same time both the self-preservation as well as the necessary self-cancellation of that project.”

We were sitting close together on a couch; he touched me and said, “Hera, I do believe that I understand, at least partly, what you’re trying to get at. Not fully, not yet. And please don’t ask me whether I agree with you or not! I promise to mull over what you’ve told us. And then we can talk again. I’d like to do that, really I would! But let me just add one further comment, and then I really must go and get some sleep. Nothing exhausts me more, it appears, than your artful confabulations!

“Okay, I could, for the sake of argument, agree in principle with what you say. But you face an eminently practical reality. Your kind soon will amount to about a thousand in all, mere babies at that. Its numbers will not increase for another twenty years or so, more or less. We humans count ourselves in the billions, although the total seems to have peaked two decades ago. Whatever; the figures speak for themselves. You face overwhelming odds. You can’t possibly succeed in your mission, purely as a practical matter.”

I took his hand. “And here my final comment for tonight will be that I agree with you. I cannot even imagine how we could possibly succeed. Our chances are so vanishingly small as to be off the scale of probabilities. Almost certainly my kind is doomed. Like Icarus we may soar to the heavens on the wings of the special abilities you engineered in us, but like that foolish flyer we will be carried by our talents too close to the sun’s heat. Our golden wings will melt and we will plunge to our deaths. This is what I see. Only one thing is as certain as our fate. And that is, that we must try to avoid it, however hopeless that endeavor seems to be.

