

“THE GOLDEN MAN” / JEREMY PIERCE

Imagine being able to predict the future to anticipate any eventuality. No one could surprise you. You could prevent any attempt to harm you, knowing the consequences of any possible action. In several Philip K. Dick stories, people or machines are described as predicting the future. In “The Golden Man,” it’s a mutated human being named Cris Johnson, living in a post-nuclear United States where many people have mutations that usually just leave them labeled as freaks. “Paycheck” has a machine doing the same thing, and “Minority Report” has precogs. All are described as predicting the future, but in all three cases “the future” predicted can be prevented if the person seeing that future does something that changes the outcome.

A more precise way of describing these predictions is that they allow the viewer to see what *would* have happened had the *prediction* not occurred. Once the prediction occurs, the viewer can do something to lead to a different outcome. In “Minority Report,” Precrime prevents the predicted deaths. In “Paycheck,” Jennings anticipates how he’ll respond once his memories are erased and gives himself clues to stop the machine’s original predictions from happening. In “The Golden Man,” Cris Johnson can pursue the consequences of any course of action he might take, allowing him to opt for the path that he most prefers.

Cris has a covering of fine, golden hair. Most mutants in this post-nuclear world are seen as freaks, referred to as “deeves” (short for deviants). Most mutations are harmful or unattractive. Cris is beautiful and has an advanced ability that allows him to

evade the DCA (a government agency hunting down and “euthing” those with mutations). He seems superhuman, not a mere freak. Several characters describe him as godlike, the next step in human evolution.

But then they discover that he’s also less than human. According to George Baines, “It doesn’t think at all. Virtually no frontal lobe. It’s not a human being—it doesn’t use symbols. It’s nothing but an animal.” Ed Wisdom responds, “An animal with a highly-developed faculty. Not a superior man. Not a man at all.” He chooses options, suggesting a human-like agency, but that choice is instinctual, like an animal, lacking reflective thought about its choices, without no consideration of moral reasoning. He acts on reflex informed by an amazing ability to predict his actions’ consequences.

Cris impregnates a character in the story and escapes to impregnate more. We’re left wondering how many offspring he’ll be able to create and how quickly his genes will be passed on to create more animal-like humans—who will, it seems, eventually replace humanity because of their greater fitness, despite their devolved level of inner life.

How should we think of this Golden Man? Some actually-occurring conditions have similar features. Autism, for example, often involves heightened and diminished cognitive abilities, sometimes severely diminished. Dick’s novel *Martian Time-Slip* treats autism-schizophrenia¹ as distortions in time-perception. A psychiatrist in the story proposes that Manfred Steiner, an autistic child, perceives the passage of time at a different rate. By the end of the novel Manfred turns out to have access to the future and

¹ Autism and schizophrenia have now been shown to be distinct conditions with unique sets of symptoms, even though they have now also been shown to have related genetic causes. In the early 1960s, when *Martian Time-Slip* was published, the connection between the two was exaggerated, and the distinction between the conditions was not well understood. Dick seems to treat schizophrenia as the adult version of autism and autism as the childhood manifestation of schizophrenia, while sometimes calling an autistic child’s traits schizophrenic and a schizophrenic adult’s traits autistic.

the past in a way that we normally don't. But even in actuality, it's pretty clear that autism can lead to greater abilities in certain domains and cognitive difficulties with other skills. So the general features of Cris Johnson's case are not purely fictional, even if the particular ways those features appear in Cris are pure science fiction. So we might then ask if the similarities are close enough to have ethical significance. Should our attitude toward autistic people be anything like our attitude toward Cris Johnson?

Aristotle (384–322 BCE) considered it natural, healthy, and appropriate to have certain abilities as humans. Certain abnormalities are contrary to natural human development. There's something unfortunate and deficient about growing only one arm to full length or having only one working eye. For Aristotle, there are purposes in nature that are part of what it is to be human. It's in our best interests to develop within certain parameters, and things normally do develop within those parameters. Anything below that zone of normal, healthy development is therefore a deficiency. Anything above it would be superhuman.

Lucretius (99–55 BCE) disagreed. He didn't think it made sense to speak of having a purpose unless a conscious being designs it or puts it to a purpose. He didn't believe in a divine creator, so he concluded that any element of human makeup is neither natural nor unnatural in itself. There are no purposes in nature apart from the purposes we put ourselves to. Some people have two arms. Some have only one. There's nothing bad about that except that there are some things someone with two arms can do that someone with one arm can't do.

If Lucretius is right, then it's impossible to speak of deficiencies or superhuman capabilities unless you just mean that someone's level of ability is atypical. The autism

community has largely adopted this view in contrasting people on the autistic spectrum with “typical” kids. There’s strong resistance to speaking of dysfunction, malformation, abnormality, or deficiency, because such notions presume a negative attitude toward someone. Aristotle, however, conceives of normal development as typical development that suits what’s objectively good for a human being, and it follows that conditions like autism involve aspects that are sub-normal or deficient and some that are super-normal. If Lucretius is right, we shouldn’t think of autism as unfortunate except that some people can’t do certain things others can do (and can do other things most people can’t). But if Aristotle is right, it makes perfect sense to classify autism as a disorder involving cognitive delays and deficiencies, even if it also involves traits that he would see as atypical in the opposite direction. It’s important to accept people with disabilities for who they are, but that’s compatible with identifying unfortunate disorders as deficiencies falling short of normal and healthy development.

Baines and others in “The Golden Man” initially approach the question from the other end. Cris’s heightened ability creates optimal reproductive conditions. A species of beings like Cris would overwhelm and replace humanity. We wouldn’t stand a chance. But when they discover the deficiency, their attitude changes from fear to horror. Humans will be replaced by creatures with almost no higher-level cognitive functioning except reflex-based evaluations of possible outcomes. Mere animals will eliminate humanity by impregnating human women and spreading their mutation to the next generation. It’s hard to explain the horror without the idea that this new species isn’t just *different*. Something is *missing* that’s natural and healthy for human offspring to have,

and something is *present* that's in one sense better, but in another sense no longer human..