

## *Bioethics as Science Fiction*

### *Making Sense of Habermas's The Future of Human Nature*

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#### **Introduction**

There must be few philosophical projects more serious than Jürgen Habermas's lifelong effort to realize the lofty universalist ambitions of the Enlightenment in his communicative theory of rational discourse and deliberative democracy. The result has been a body of work on the possibility of rational agreement that, if not always an unmitigated joy to read, represents a significant contribution to critical scholarship. However, his more recent foray into bioethics with *The Future of Human Nature* (hereafter *FHN*) has left many critics scratching their heads, due to his apparent abandonment of reason, plausibility, and conventions of argument. I have previously tried to find ways of reading Habermas's bioethics that avoid the sorts of wholesale dismissal that has marked much of his reception in liberal bioethical circles.<sup>1</sup> I develop that reading further here, arguing that although *FHN* offers no coherent argument as such, it nevertheless has a positive contribution to make to bioethics in stimulating readers to think critically about the limitations of bioethical argument narrowly conceived. This article does not in any way seek to deny the weaknesses of Habermas's arguments as already identified by his critics. Instead it takes up a critical position on bioethics as a "serious" philosophical discourse, in the sense of a way of using language in which arguments and assertions claim to connect pragmatically with the "real" world of actual facts and actions. Placing Habermas's bioethical writing in the context of criticisms of the speech-act theory that underpins his own idea of communicative action, I suggest here that *FHN* is instructive in some surprising ways, namely regarding the relevance to bioethics of apparently *unserious* fictional writing.

#### **Problems of Meaning and Reference in Habermas's Bioethics**

##### *Habermas's Bioethics as Conservative Consequentialism*

If we read Habermas's bioethics, as many of his critics have done, as a series of claims about the need to restrain the development of biotechnologies such as cloning, pre-implantation genetic diagnosis (PGD), and embryo selection that may be morally harmful to the human species, then we must judge him on the strength of those claims. However, the supporting evidence Habermas adduces exists mostly in his own imagination, as theoretical constructions of possible futures, or else in some form otherwise unobservable or unverifiable. *FHN*

abounds with examples of such impossibly vague empirical claims: that “genetic manipulation could . . . affect the inalienable normative foundation of societal integration”;<sup>2</sup> that it might “undermine our normative self-understanding”;<sup>3</sup> that we may already be experiencing an “instrumentalisation of human nature . . . no longer consistent with . . . self-determination and responsible action”;<sup>4</sup> and that an “egocentric intervention [in the genetic structure of an embryo]” may have “existential consequences for the adolescent,”<sup>5</sup> which may cause degradation of the “self-relation of the person [taking place] in the mind.”<sup>6</sup> Habermas’s liberal use of words such as “may” and his efforts to limit his gloomy forecasts only to “dissonant cases”<sup>7</sup> cannot mask the fact that these are empirical claims without foundation. What is missing from his argument are any reasons as to why these are sufficiently likely or grave dangers that deserve to be weighed seriously against the potential benefits of the biotechnologies to which he objects.

Habermas often seems to sustain his arguments even against his own better judgment. He insists that there are “specific restrictions” on the freedom of a “programmed person” to choose a “life of his own” despite accepting that there will generally be no actual experience of a loss of freedom that distinguishes him from a “naturally begotten person.”<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, despite rightly admitting that once engaged in the democratic activity of the state on an equal footing with other people, such individuals “would no longer need to see themselves as persons confined to dependence,”<sup>9</sup> he nevertheless maintains that there would remain an “irreversible” and “permanent dependence” between maker and made that is inconsistent with the “symmetrical relation of mutual recognition” necessary for democratic participation.<sup>10</sup> *FHN* concludes by speculating that, assuming these dangers manifest themselves (a big “if” in the first place), then the very idea of morality may lose its value.<sup>11</sup> Habermas therefore asserts, on the one hand, consequences that cannot be perceived empirically and, on the other, consequences that he anticipates actually being in contradiction to observable effects. The disjuncture created between word and world thus violates some basic conventions that a consequentialist argument must be verifiable or at least supportable in some observable way. For these reasons, John Harris dismisses *FHN* as “mystical sermonising” that “takes the debate to a depth that neither rationality nor evidence can reach.” In *FHN*, Harris finds no serious engagement with bioethical argument, but rather a “giv[ing] up on evidence and argument altogether.”<sup>12</sup>

### *Communicative Action and Speech Act Theory*

This criticism must be especially hurtful for Habermas given that his work previous to *FHN* has been committed to establishing the potential for practical communicative “action,” that is, for language to be used pragmatically for achieving rational consensus in actual debate. Habermas’s discourse theory on how public agreement on questions of morality or law can be possible depends on all parties implicitly and necessarily making claims to truth and sincerity with their arguments, which are tested according to the acceptability of the supporting reasons offered.<sup>13</sup> What counts in communicative action as a valid reason can be anything that is “acceptable to all members sharing ‘our’ traditions,” but in order to be meaningfully raised at all it must use words with an “identical meaning”

for both speaker and addressee.<sup>14</sup> Thus, communicative action presupposes a linguistic theory, and Habermas finds this in John Searle's notion of the "illocutionary obligations" that necessarily attach to meaningful speech-acts.<sup>15</sup> Searle argued that all types of ordinary utterances could be pragmatic speech-acts, that is, utterances that by being understood to create a certain fit between words and the world could actually perform actions in the world.<sup>16</sup> Arguments, assertions, predictions, descriptions, warnings, and so on may all be successful "illocutionary acts" with practical "illocutionary force" in the context in which they are made, so long as they satisfy relevant conditions of felicity.<sup>17</sup> For example, to make a meaningful assertion, a speaker "commits himself to the truth of the expressed proposition [and] must be in a position to provide evidence or reasons for [it]."<sup>18</sup> If these conditions are satisfied, and the utterance is understood, then the speech act is constituted and performed successfully, even when the speaker is secretly insincere.<sup>19</sup>

Habermas's theory of communicative action likewise depends on people making speech-acts with these illocutionary commitments and turning the resulting illocutionary force toward the shared goal of rational agreement.<sup>20</sup> Adopting the jargon of speech-act theory, it is easy to see that, as arguments for the prohibition of certain biotechnologies, the assertions in *FHN* fail to assert the illocutionary force necessary for rational argument. Even if we accept that he intends fully to commit himself to the truth of what he says, the difficulties of determining what "in the world" Habermas is actually referring to makes it impossible to locate supporting reasons or evidence that can be recognized as such, let alone to find agreed meanings for the concepts used. Moral assertions, based on theoretical idealizations rather than empirical evidence, *are* capable of illocutionary force according to speech-act theory, provided that the concepts or ideals invoked can be understood given relevant conventional understandings. Like the discourse theory of *Between Facts and Norms*, the moral assertions in *FHN* rely on invoking a presupposed moral community, and *FHN* refers to the "vertigo [of] *our* emotional reactions . . . [and] the very concept *we* have of ourselves as cultural members of the species of 'humanity.'"<sup>21</sup> Habermas gives no detail on the composition of this implied moral community, but it is likely that he is referring to what he has previously described idealistically as "humanity or a presupposed republic of world citizens."<sup>22</sup> However, such an appeal to humanity as a whole is problematic in the case of *FHN*. For despite giving no clues as to the precise size and shape of the community he refers to, Habermas seems nevertheless to accredit it with actual emotional and physical reactions.

### **Serious Assertions, Interpretation, and Fiction**

It is clear that, if Habermas is committed to making meaningful consequentialist bioethical arguments, then by his own understanding of what it means practically to perform the act of making assertions, there are some serious problems with the way he goes about doing so in *FHN*. But what if Habermas were *not* so committed in this way? In speech-act theory, the normal illocutionary rules of language are suspended in fiction, because fictional utterances are not expected to perform the same pragmatic "acts" in the real world as ordinary ones.<sup>23,24</sup> A writer of fiction is released from the usual illocutionary commitments to the truth and sincerity of their assertions. Instead of actually performing speech

acts, he or she merely “pretends” to do so, “parasitically” using the linguistic architecture without establishing any particular practical effect in the world beyond the text.<sup>25</sup> On this view, fiction and nonfiction have very separate roles, with only the former standing to be tested according to its success in connecting usefully with the empirical or “real” world. Richard Ohmann agrees with Searle that “imitative” or “pretended” speech acts that deal in imaginary rather than real effects are distinguishable because they aim to produce only an emotional response, described by Searle as *perlocutionary* effect.<sup>26</sup> Whereas *perlocutionary* effect may be a characteristic of fiction that stimulates pleasure in readers that is not generally stimulated in readers of nonfiction (or at least not as intensely or deliberately), it is separate from the serious, productive work done by *illocutionary* speech-acts and thus is divorced from rational discourse. Jonathan Culler warns of the lack of a “pragmatic context” to works of fiction, and thus for the reader of fiction a lack of any means to “readily justify a confident distinction between the literal and the figurative and the referential and the non-referential.”<sup>27</sup>

In an earlier essay, Habermas himself argues for maintaining the conceptual separateness of serious language use from fiction, and in doing so implies further criticism of his own later bioethics. In this earlier essay, Habermas insists that the real, productive power of serious speech lies in its opposition to the lack of pragmatic force that characterizes fiction, and in the prioritization by serious language use of the logical over the rhetorical.<sup>28</sup> Other than as a tool for illuminating arguments more vividly, there can be no role for what he calls “world-generating”<sup>29</sup> fictions in philosophical or scientific writing that is primarily concerned to give “reference to an object, informational content, and the truth-value-conditions of validity in general.” Not being directed to establishing a “state of affairs” in the world, or the truth of “interpersonal relations,” fiction is merely inward looking<sup>30</sup> and thus an “impairment of speech.” Having no verifiable connection to actual things or processes in the real world, it is thus free to engage in “playful creation of new worlds . . . [and] innovative linguistic expressions.”<sup>31</sup> These comments are consistent with the weight Habermas places on the necessity for language used in debate to carry serious *illocutionary* commitments to truth and sincerity, and they furthermore suggest that the assertions of *FHN* belong not to the realm of serious moral philosophy or bioethics at all but to that of fiction.

### The Possibility of *The Future of Human Nature* as Science Fiction

Searle himself would object to such a classification of *FHN* on the basis that, because it is only the pretense to make *illocutionary* acts that distinguishes a work as fictional, and because pretense necessarily implies an intentional state, a text cannot be treated as fictional unless the author intended to write fiction.<sup>32</sup> Therefore, although fiction will often contain serious assertions with *illocutionary* force about the real world, and likewise serious works of nonfiction will often use fictive strategies such as metaphor, figurative language, stories, and so on, we will generally know what is meant to be read as fictional and what is meant to carry *illocutionary* force. Unlike the clearly deliberate deployments of fictional devices by, say, Rawls (the Original Position) and Dworkin (Hercules as judge), Habermas gives no explicit indication at any point in *FHN* that he intends his imaginings on the potential consequences of biotechnologies to be regarded in this way. However, we may justifiably ignore Searle on this point, because to

focus on a speaker or writer's psychological or private intention would be to contradict the idea, common to both speech-act theory generally and Habermas's discourse theory, that successfully completed speech-acts are *necessarily* committed to where the relevant felicity conditions are fulfilled. No matter what the private thoughts of the writer or speaker, the rules of illocution are constitutive of their successful completion, because it is the following of these rules itself that makes meaningful speech-acts possible.<sup>33,34</sup>

Even if it is generally possible, as Searle confidently asserts, to determine when an author intends his or her writing to be treated as fictional and when as factual, relying on authorial intention in any case fails to account for a number of works, of which I suggest *FHN* is an example, that (whether by accident or design) challenge received conventions relating to the classification and interpretation of texts. An example much debated by speech-act philosophers is Truman Capote's novel *In Cold Blood* (hereafter *ICB*), a carefully researched and apparently faithful account of a murder in rural America and the fate of the murderers at the hands of the law. In the essay "Excursus," Habermas argues that, despite Capote's own assertion to be giving a "true account" based on his "official records" and "interviews with the persons directly concerned,"<sup>35</sup> the author's primary purpose in writing *ICB* was not simply to report on a crime and its punishment but to produce a work of literature. Consequently it is the novel's rhetorical and pleasure-inducing character rather than its claims to truth by which it is properly understood and judged critically.<sup>36</sup> However, using the same method of analysis, Searle and also Ohmann both read *ICB* as a work of nonfiction, because, notwithstanding the presentation of the book as a novel, it does in fact represent itself as a truthful account of real events, verifiable by witnesses and documentary evidence, and therefore composed of serious assertions that stand to be judged as such.<sup>37,38</sup> So, is *ICB* fiction or nonfiction? It seems that whether a reader is supposed to understand particular assertions to be serious references to the real world or else as rhetorical flights of the imagination is not always straightforward; it depends on what sort of reading we bring to the text, and what we want to achieve by our reading. Habermas's *FHN* is ambiguous in the opposite way to Capote's *ICB*. Whereas *ICB* is apparently a novel containing assertions so strongly supported by empirical evidence that they may be treated as serious and nonfictional, *FHN* is apparently a serious nonfictional work of philosophical bioethics containing assertions so divorced from the very idea of verifiable evidence that they lack illocutionary force in the same manner that speech-act theorists perceive in fiction.

#### *FHN as a Fictional Imitation of Serious Philosophical Bioethics*

Even if it were possible to read *FHN* as fiction, what profit for the interests of bioethics might there be in doing so? After all, if Searle is correct that in fictional works the illocutionary rules are necessarily suspended, and if the Habermas of *Between Facts and Norms* was correct to find the very possibility of rational argument in these rules, then we would have to exclude *FHN*'s claims altogether from the realm of rational argument. We would have to focus instead on their perlocutionary effect (emotional impact), which in the context of bioethics is not necessarily at all productive or useful. Public revulsion and hostility toward biotechnologies generated by unfounded worries about their possibly dire consequences may actually make reasoned debate more difficult. Indeed *FHN*,

with its visions of autonomous robots and enslaved (or at any rate politically excluded) humans,<sup>39</sup> may be accused of descending into the sort of scaremongering that liberal consequentialists deem unworthy of serious or rational discussion.<sup>40</sup> Mary Louise Pratt notes that, although we tolerate the sort of “exaggeration, embellishment, and even certain kinds of implausibility” commonly found in fiction, there are often good reasons to be intolerant when it occurs in works of nonfiction, especially when it might influence public policy.<sup>41</sup> We have already noted that Habermas himself has previously expressed intolerance of any blurring of the distinction between fiction and nonfiction for this very reason—that language that claims to affect the world beyond the text must be judged according to the acceptability of its reasons and commitments to truth and sincerity.

Although I do not deny these concerns, it should also be conceded that there are passages in *FHN* that may be read not merely as bad consequentialism or simple scaremongering but as attempting to use fiction as an argumentative strategy for achieving positive and practical perlocutionary effects. For example, Habermas refers to moral rules as “fragile constructions” that guard against “inner or symbolical injuries” to the person; to parents who “in a certain sense already communicate with” their child while it is still a fetus; and to the idea that a fetus occupies an “ascribed role” as an addressee of such communication;<sup>42</sup> as well as stating that these pictures of the possible effects of biotechnology are an “imaginary dramatisation.”<sup>43</sup> These passages prompt questions for which there is not the slightest hope of discovering a referent outside of the imagination; therefore, as descriptions of the interpersonal relationships, moral status, and effects in which bioethicists would be interested, they cannot be read as intended to carry any practical illocutionary force. For what reason, then, did Habermas include them? Many bioethicists critical of Habermas will naturally read these quoted remarks of Habermas in the same consequentialist light as those quoted in the first section, and hence merely as yet more evidence of a failure to offer a coherent argument. Indeed, I would agree that to read *FHN* as fiction in the pejorative sense of “parasitic” language use cut off from rational argument does add weight to the argument that *FHN* is not a serious work of bioethics. However, in my view, these most obvious deployments of fictive strategies do suggest the possibility for a productive potential in perlocutionary (emotional) effect, even in the absence of illocutionary (pragmatic) force.

Compare *FHN* to, for example, the film adaptation of Kazuo Ishiguro’s novel *Never Let Me Go* (directed by Mark Romanek, 2010), which imagines a future in which people are cloned to be donors of vital organs that are then harvested from them so that the donors never live to be middle aged. As clones and donors, the central characters are all brought up to regard their sacrifice as their inevitable fate. The warning of their schoolteacher—“None of you will do anything except live out the life that has already been set out for you”<sup>44</sup>—turns out to be true, despite there being no obvious signs of coercion on them ultimately to comply. Despite being normal people in every other respect, their apparent incapacity even to consider the possibility of resistance makes them a different moral species. Because *Never Let Me Go* is “just” a fiction, we may not bother to point out that there is absolutely no evidence that cloned people would see themselves as any less worthy of basic human rights to bodily integrity or an open future than “naturally begotten” people. Could such a nonchalant attitude to the dissonance between world and text have any impact on our reading of *FHN* other than to

condemn it even more hopelessly to irrelevance as a philosophical bioethics? After all, without the pragmatic commitments attaching to illocutionary force, any resemblances between the text and the world would be merely private matters for individual readers to find if they care to, and their effects merely perlocutionary (emotional). But accepting this point does not commit us to concluding that such a text cannot have any “real” effect. For example, although *Never Let Me Go* makes no rationally justifiable case for why anyone should be worried about cloning or its impact on human rights, it is a fact that the film nonetheless generated public debate about these issues.<sup>45</sup> Similarly, it may not matter whether Habermas’s assertions about “programmed” people regarding themselves as less responsible are true or false or impossible to prove either way. The more important matter is the undeniably real and productive perlocutionary impact that these imaginings may have on public discourse. The fact that liberal consequentialists have felt moved to show the assertions in *FHN* to be baseless is arguably evidence in itself of such effect. For example, in his critique of Habermas in the *Journal of Medical Ethics*, Mameli argues that future generations may be prevented from developing beliefs about their lack of moral responsibility by being educated to understand that such beliefs are untrue, and that genetic programming has no impact on moral responsibility. In other words, it does not matter whether such beliefs are true or false, or even whether or not it is possible for Habermas to show how likely it is that such beliefs will be held. What is important is that liberal values about equality, moral responsibility, and participatory democracy are encouraged and energized in public debate. After all, this encouragement to participate in public discourse is central to the larger aim of Habermas’s contribution to the “unfinished project” of the Enlightenment, even if the arguments offered in *FHN* about biotechnology are themselves incapable of withstanding critical scrutiny.<sup>46</sup>

#### *FHN as Serious Fiction in a World of Shared Pretense*

The reading given above of *FHN* as fiction is limited by accepting that fictional utterances are fundamentally different from serious ones insofar as they are not speech-acts in the ordinary sense of making illocutionary commitments to truth or sincerity or to rational agreement. An alternative (and in crucial ways preferable) approach contends that, instead of two distinct types of language use, nonfiction and fiction are both made sense of according to broadly the same kind of felicity conditions, albeit drawn from different conventions of reading. On this view, we would say that *FHN* can be made meaningful, not by suspending the ordinary illocutionary rules and commitments of language but by reading it in the light of the different conventions of interpretation used by science fiction readers rather than those of bioethical philosophers. This sort of reading is informed by the critique of the speech-act philosophers’ distinction between serious and parasitic uses of language, notably by Stanley Fish. Fish questions the commitment to truth and reference that speech-act theorists claim is reserved for serious speech, and how this comes to be suspended in fiction, given that conventional context is crucial to guaranteeing illocutionary force in speech-act theory,<sup>47,48</sup> and also given that in communicative action meaning arises only within limited contexts of language use.<sup>49</sup> For Fish, the world of empirical objects, relationships, and so on is itself only accessible through conventional assumptions, themselves determined creatively by particular communities of interpreters. Our understanding of the

“real world” is, no less than fiction, the product of interpretive work that leads to a “shared pretense” that what we understand to be true *is* true by reference to something beyond text.<sup>50</sup> In other words, there is no suspension of the normal rules of meaning when we read fiction, and no especial suspension of disbelief. Therefore whether or not we read either Capote’s *In Cold Blood* or Habermas’s *FHN* as fiction, the things each author describes exist for the reader only as textual constructions requiring interpretation in the light of conventional assumptions, and the same holds whether or not we think an author wants us to believe what he or she says is really true or is intended to have some other effect. In either case, the reader must use imaginative and interpretive faculties to complete the world conjured by a description.<sup>51</sup> In other words, both fact and fiction aim to produce in the addressee of speech-acts “an imaginative and affective involvement,” and a claim to both plausibility and “tellability.”<sup>52</sup>

Fish and Pratt want to challenge the commonly asserted distinction between “real” illocutionary assertions and “fictive” ones, in terms of both certainty and productivity.<sup>53</sup> A Fishian critique of Searle’s view insists that in order to enter into any meaningful discourse about what is true and what is false, we must accept the conventions of judgment and interpretation that we presume to share with the people with whom we debate, and at the same time we must suspend our disbelief that these conventions can give us access to the “real” facts about the world. To badly misquote *Hamlet*, “There is nothing either real or fictional, but reading makes it so.” Reading *FHN* as a series of consequentialist claims is certainly a frustrating experience because of the impossibility of verifying those claims with reference to external evidence. But does that make Habermas’s bioethics so very different from ostensibly more successful appeals to the empirical world beyond text? The way in which Fish draws attention to the importance of conventions of reading—and thus to a denial that such appeals ever fully manage to avoid being in some sense fictional—suggests that these frustrations may have a more general significance that relates to the relationship between theory and practice. There are some obvious objections to Fish’s view that all textual interpretation may be governed by a “shared pretense.” For instance, following Fish’s approach threatens to take us further away from a rational, evidence-based bioethics and arguably implies that there is no qualitative difference between empirically grounded scientific research and science fiction. Whether this criticism is justified is not something that we can explore in any depth here, although we can note that it is strenuously denied by Fish himself, who replies that generalizing the shared pretense that Searle sought to contain as an exclusion from speech-act theory leads not to all discourse being equally trivial but rather to all discourse being analyzable in a serious fashion.<sup>54</sup> I would only add here two points. First, it is important that we do not efface or seek to deny the obvious differences between these types of writing in terms of aim, method, and achievement, because this really would be counterproductive.<sup>55</sup> Second, however, blurring Searle’s sharp boundary between serious and nonserious speech does allow for a more plausible and satisfying account of texts like *FHN* that provoke critical responses by violating felicity conventions and challenging classificatory distinctions.

Reading and rereading works like *FHN* in terms of the interpretive assumptions that might be brought to the text, rather than the objective validity of the “thing in the world” to which it seems to refer, may be an unfamiliar approach

for many bioethicists. We must not deny the importance of genuinely consequentialist bioethical projects that use ordinary language simply to represent as convincingly as possible the available evidence relating to the potential harms and benefits of biotechnologies. However, these projects are themselves presupposed by an attitude toward the relationship between text and the world inherited from speech-act theory that is an appropriate object of criticism. This is especially so when, as is the case in the context of the liberal consequentialist reception of *FHN*, the weakness of an opponent's argument is identified as a failure meaningfully to represent things properly. Following Fish's critique, all claims to represent in argument concepts, objects, and interactions in the world may be analyzed in terms of the assumptions and conventions they bring to the particular fit (as Searle described it) between word and world. Habermas's bioethics may be a particularly conspicuous example of a text for which the appropriate set of conventions of interpretation are not clear from the style or content of the writing. But instead of rejecting it as failed consequentialism or excluding it as a trivial fiction, Fish's rhetorician approach invites us to pay close attention to the effects of the assumptions we bring to reading.

Fiction, including science fiction, tends to be so characterizable because it uses imperfections strategically—for example, an imperfect or unreliable narrator, or characters that draw mistaken or unjustified conclusions—to bring into relief some broader claim about the real world. Science fictions present futuristic or parallel world settings that bring their dramatic themes into focus. For example, at its most abstract level, the film *Never Let Me Go* may be viewed as a claim about the passivity not of clones living in a purely fictional world but of people in the real world, the inability or reluctance to question assumptions that form the limitations of our lives. In an early scene, we see the children who eventually grow up to fulfill their destiny as organ donors for “normal” people in conversation with a new teacher at their school. Their obedience is ensured by their belief in stories they have heard, such as that of a pupil who had run away and later was found tied to a tree with his hands cut off, and that of a pupil apparently left to starve outside of the gates. The scene draws our attention to the fact that here are children who are not accustomed to questioning certain crucial “truths”:

Miss Lucy: Who told you these stories?

Ruth: Everybody knows them.

Miss Lucy: How do you know they are true?

Ruth: Of course they're true.

*Ruth glances to Kathy, as if for confirmation.*

*Kathy is tying her shoelaces.*

Who'd make up stories as horrible as that?<sup>56</sup>

By forcing viewers to reflect on these characters who so demonstrably fail to question the myths by which their lives in this parallel world are limited and eventually determined, the film uses a patently (science) fictional context to make a claim about the horizons and expectations of people living in the real world. The science fiction context provides the means by which these claims are brought into relief, but it would do no good to speak of illocutionary force here, because there is no straightforward match between the utterances made in the film and the world about which the claims are made, except in the imagination. Felicity is

here a matter not of factual verification or universal or rational agreement, but of creative participation by the viewer, suspending disbelief both in the existence (including the future existence) of such cloning-induced passivity and also in the unverifiability of the real-world claim. As Wolfgang Iser has argued, serious and fictive texts can be distinguished, but only to the extent that the reader of fiction generally has more interpretive work of this kind to do. Science fictions “require the creative imagination of the reader to put it all together” and thus fill in the gaps left by unreliable narrators, imperfect characters, and (we might add) unfamiliar contexts.<sup>57</sup> Likewise, *FHN* may be read as placing the familiar concerns about the challenges to liberal democratic values that have always occupied a central place in Habermas’s work within a fictional context in which these challenges can be seen yet more clearly. It is for the reader to fill in the gaps that Habermas as an imperfect character-narrator leaves open. This is the meaning that we can find in *FHN*, not by bracketing it off from serious philosophical bioethics along with other trivial nonserious writings but by drawing connections between the ways in which we as readers approach bioethics and science fiction respectively.

## Conclusion

Statements that invoke metaphor, allegory, or figurative speech may lack illocutionary force in the sense of empirical verifiability, and yet they are commonly directed in a perfectly meaningful way to concrete practical action or influence, both in fiction and in nonfiction. To exclude these from our general understanding of pragmatic language use underestimates their contribution to practical, critical debate.<sup>58</sup> As Christopher Norris has argued, fiction and literary theorists should not simply “keep out” of scientific or bioethical discourse, and I would agree furthermore that, to the contrary, “there is always room for a degree of productive friction, especially in areas like these where debate has to do with crucial issues concerning the scope and limits of attainable knowledge.”<sup>59</sup> Although this approach may not have been intended by Habermas himself, it is in focusing attention on the conventional strategies of reading as between the interrelationship between fiction and nonfiction that I see a positive contribution from Habermas’s bioethics. *FHN* has been rightly criticized for its failure to make any valid arguments for prohibiting biotechnologies. However, read in the light of critical theorists’ engagements with speech-act theory and in particular criticisms of the distinction between serious language use as fiction, *The Future of Human Nature* may be regarded as a call to bioethicists to reflect self-critically on what is involved in making a commitment in debate to pragmatic action in the real world.

## Notes

1. Gurnham D. *Memory, Imagination, Justice: Intersections of Law and Literature*. Farnham: Ashgate; 2009.
2. Habermas J. *The Future of Human Nature*. Cambridge: Polity; 2003, at 26.
3. See note 1, Gurnham 2009, at 29.
4. See note 1, Gurnham 2009, at 41–2.
5. See note 1, Gurnham 2009, at 51.
6. See note 1, Gurnham 2009, at 53.
7. See note 1, Gurnham 2009, at 61.
8. See note 1, Gurnham 2009, at 61.
9. See note 1, Gurnham 2009, at 66.

## Bioethics as Science Fiction

10. See note 1, Gurnham 2009, at 65.
11. See note 1, Gurnham 2009, at 73.
12. Harris J. No sex-selection please, we're British. *Journal of Medical Ethics* 2005;31:286–8.
13. See note 2, Habermas 2003.
14. See note 2, Habermas 2003, at 108, 4.
15. See note 2, Habermas 2003, at 18, 107–8.
16. Searle JR. Austin on locutionary and illocutionary act. *The Philosophical Review* 1968;77(4):405–24, at 406, 408–9.
17. Searle JR. A classification of illocutionary acts. *Language in Society* 1976;5:1–23, at 2–7.
18. Searle JR. The logical status of fictional discourse. *New Literary History* 1975;6(2):319–332, at 322.
19. Loxley J. *Performativity*. Abingdon and New York: Routledge; 2007, at 56–8.
20. Habermas J. *Between Facts and Norms*. Cambridge: Polity; 1997, at 226.
21. See note 2, Habermas 2003:39–40.
22. See note 2, Habermas 2003, at 108.
23. See note 18, Searle 1975, at 326.
24. See Austin JL. *How to Do Things with Words*, 2nd ed. Oxford: Clarendon Press; 1975, at 21–2.
25. See note 18, Searle 1975, at 325, 326.
26. Ohmann R. Speech acts and the definition of literature. *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 1971;4:1–19, at 14.
27. Culler J. *On Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism After Structuralism*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul; 1983, at 81.
28. Habermas J. Excursus on levelling the genre distinction between philosophy and literature. *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity: Twelve Lectures*. Lawrence F, trans. Cambridge: Polity; 1987:185–210, at 188, 195–9, 205, 207, 210.
29. See note 28, Habermas 1987, at 201, emphasis in the original.
30. See note 28, Habermas 1987, at 200, emphasis in the original.
31. See note 28, Habermas 1987, at 201, emphasis in the original.
32. See note 18, Searle 1975, at 327.
33. See note 19, Loxley 2007, at 58.
34. See note 20, Habermas 1997, at 18–19.
35. Capote T. *In Cold Blood: A True Account of a Multiple Murder and Its Consequences*. London: Penguin Classics; 2000. Quoted remarks made on Acknowledgements page.
36. See note 28, Habermas 1987, at 203.
37. See note 26, Ohmann 1971.
38. See note 18, Searle 1975, at 319.
39. A prospect that Habermas (2003, note 2) himself alludes to at 41–2.
40. Particularly irritating for many bioethicists are the headlines that occasionally appear in tabloids such as the *Daily Mail*.
41. Pratt ML. *Toward a Speech Act Theory of Literary Discourse*. Bloomington and London: Indiana University Press; 1977, at 97.
42. See note 2, Habermas 2003, at 33–5.
43. See note 2, Habermas 2003, at 54, emphasis added.
44. Garland A. *Never Let Me Go: The Screenplay*. London: Faber & Faber; 2011, at 41.
45. See, for example, Tsitas E. *Never Let Me Go: The organ donation debate*. *Scoop Culture* 2011 Jan 31; available at <http://www.scoop.co.nz/stories/CU1101/S00297/never-let-me-go-the-organ-donation-debate.htm> (last accessed 19 May 2011).
46. Mameli M. Reproductive cloning, genetic engineering and the autonomy of the child: The moral agent an the open future. *Journal of Medical Ethics* 2006;33:87–93, at 89–90.
47. See note 24, Austin 1975, at 15.
48. See note 19, Loxley 2007, at 52, 70.
49. Fish S. *Doing What Comes Naturally: Change, Rhetoric and the Practice of Theory in Literary and Legal Studies*. Durham and London: Duke University Press; 1989, at 454.
50. Fish S. *Is There a Text in This Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press; 1980, at 242–3.
51. See note 41, Pratt 1977, at 94–5.
52. See note 41, Pratt 1977, at 136, 143–9.
53. See note 41, Pratt 1977, at 54–6.
54. See note 50, Fish 1980.

55. Norris rightly warns of the dangers of embracing the “extreme scepticism” of postmodernism’s reduction of all writing to “textual practise.” Norris C. *Fiction, Philosophy and Literary Theory: Will the Real Saul Kripke Please Stand Up?* London and New York: Continuum; 2007, at 118, 112.
56. See note 44, Garland 2011, at 31.
57. Iser W. *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press; 1978, at 142.
58. See note 49, Fish 1989, at 50.
59. See note 55, Norris 2007, at 124.