Film Comparison

Many watching the movie *Gattaca* will see similarities to other thought provoking works. Movies such as *The Island*, or books such as *1984* or Plato’s *Republic* come to mind. There are some comparisons that are easy to recognize between the film *Gattaca* and *The Republic*. One could make the argument that *Gattaca*’s message is one speaking out against the type of civilization, in regards caste system, that Plato or Socrates proposes. In this paper, I will analyze that claim, and then I will show why the comparison between *Gattaca* and *The Republic* is not quite accurate.

One claiming that *Gattaca* is criticizing the ideas of *The Republic* would bring up the following arguments. They would find commonalities between the caste system of valids and invalids in the movie *Gattaca* and the caste system Socrates presents. Socrates states in Book II 374 A,B,C:

“...it’s impossible for a single person to practice many crafts or professions well...But we prevented a cobbler from trying to be a farmer, weaver or builder at the same time and said that he must remain a cobbler in order to produce fine work. And each of the others, too, was to work all his life at a single trade for which he had a natural aptitude and keep away from all the others...”

Many of the in-valids were limited to cleaning bathrooms, conference rooms and that was all their lot in life offered. There was no possibility of doing any kind of work that would require any mental capacity, just as there would be no possibility for a cobbler to become a governor.
The same limitations that were imposed on Ethan Hawke's character, Vincent Freeman, are the same forces that prevent the farmer from becoming a politician.

*Gattaca* presents the concept, it is not always the most qualified person that deserves for the job, but the person who wants it the most, and is going to do the best job. Vincent Freeman made himself one of the best employees at *Gattaca* because he had spent his whole life dreaming of working at *Gattaca* and going to space. The Gattaca program was choosing the most qualified for space flight, just as Plato’s society was choosing the best farmers and cobblers.

And mustn’t the rulers also be the best of them?  
That, too.  
And aren’t the best farmers the ones who are best at farming?  
Yes.  
Then, as the rulers must be the best guardians, mustn’t they be the ones who are best at guarding the city?  
Yes… Book III 411 c

The film showed the problems in this logic. People that could do the job better, slip through the cracks. Vincent Freeman pushed himself to be the best astronaut he could become, and in reaching his unforeseen potential, he became among the best in his field.

One would argue that *Gattaca*’s caste system is frighteningly similar to *The Republic*'s caste system. Socrates describes lie he will propagate to all his people. He will convince them that leading up to adulthood, everyone came from the earth, and they are all children of the earth. Then he will tell them that the god that created them also mixed metals into everyone’s being. Gold into those that are to rule, silver to auxiliaries, and iron and bronze to farmers and other craftsmen. He states “For the most part you will produce children like yourselves.” (415) Socrates is stating essentially, what you are born into is your fate. If you are born of bronze parents, there is no chance you will become of gold.
After having read all the arguments as to why *Gattaca* and *The Republic* are alike and that *Gattaca* is undermining the ideas of Plato and/or Socrates, I will present some ideas that make that comparison much more complicated. In Book II 374e Glaucon summarizes their conversation in this statement "Then our job, it seems, is to select, if we can, the kind of nature suited to guard the city." In 375, Plato begins answering the question, with the question "Do you think that, when it comes to guarding, there is any difference between the nature of a pedigree young dog and that of a well-born youth?" Plato is essentially stating, in his society, guardians will be chosen from the youth of the society, much like one would choose the stud pup of a litter. Later in Book III, around 414, Socrates calls for competitions to sort out those that should be a guardian.

Anyone who is tested in this way as a child, youth, and adult, and always comes out of it untainted, is to be made a ruler as well as a guardian; he is to be honored in life and to receive after his death most prized tombs and memorials. But anyone who fails to prove himself in this way is to be rejected.

A Guardian must earn his position. One’s position as a guardian is not predicated solely on one’s genetics, or parents. Those in Plato’s society, do hold their fate in their hands. In book II 374, Plato begins his reasoning for a society based on specialization. He writes “Though no one can become so much as a good player of checker or dice if he considers it only as a sideline and doesn’t practice it from childhood.” This indicates that Plato plans on beginning training for his guardians “from childhood.”

We can read from these passages that someone will choose from all the children of the city, the best candidates to become guardians, who are to begin being trained as guardians. We find in Grube’s translation the words childhood or youth, indicating they would be chosen at a young age. For these reasons, the comparisons between Plato’s city and *Gattaca*’s society are
not quite the same. One’s abilities are completely discounted in *Gattaca*. One’s caste is dependent on his or her genetic code. In Plato’s city, one carefully evaluates the youth and then decides who will be in the most respected class, of guardians. For this reason alone, it is difficult to equate the *Gattaca* society and Plato’s city.

Another complication to the equation is the “myth of the metals.” Plato seemingly takes into account genetic factors to children’s futures before the discovery of the human genome; however, he does not pin his whole caste system of metals on one’s heredity or genetics, such as seen in *Gattaca*. Socrates states in book III 415

> For the most part you will produce children like yourselves, but, because you are all related, a silver child will occasionally be born from a golden parent, and vice versa, and all the others from each other... If an offspring of theirs should be found to have a mixture of iron or bronze, they must not pity him in any way, but give him the rank appropriate to his nature and drive him out to join the craftsmen and farmers. But if an offspring of these people is found to have a mixture of gold or silver, they will honor him and take him up to join the guardians or the auxiliaries...

It is clear that Plato leaves room for a child to prove his or her abilities to those that are evaluating them.¹

One problem I have with Plato’s “myths of the metals” is that the concept seems to be based on our type of society, of children being born by the same set of people that raise them.

We have never seen a society:

> That all these women to belong in common to all the men, that none are to live privately with any man, and that the children, too, are to be possessed in common, so that no parent will know his own offspring or any child his parent. (457c,d)

¹ One may raise the question, who are these evaluators? One might assume they are among the guardian ruler class.
I believe if this were the case, children being raised by a community rather than parents, two parents' would obviously have far less influence on the child's future. If two gold people come together on a festival, the female becomes pregnant, and gives birth, and the child is then raised by the "officials appointed" (460b), I would argue that that child will be impacted more by the official(s) appointed then the genetics of the parents or the "metals". Plato seems to believe the greatest impact would be from the parents that came together on the festival, or in other words, from genetics. It comes down to a nature vs. nurture debate, but unlike a normal child being raised by his or her parents, the child is being raised by a randomly appointed person(s).

Nurturing responsibilities are taken into the hands of a stranger, and away from the "natural" parents. I believe this factor would undermine the philosophy behind Plato's "myth of the metals." In a normal situation, Plato's myth of the metals could hold true. Two great farmers have a child, there is a greater likelihood their son or daughter will be a better farmer then they are a strong warrior. However, in a situation where the rearing or nurturing component of the nature vs. nurture debate is handed to another person, then the influence of the parents on a child is only in genetics. I would argue the official(s) appointed would have a much greater impact on the child's life than the personality traits and physical characteristics of the parents. If the official(s) are of higher standing in the community, I believe they would hold their child to a standard similar to their own and therefore would be evaluated better in Plato's society. Same if a child was reared by a bad official, that child would have a negative influence at home and would not evaluate well. Perhaps Plato had not thought out these theories thoroughly enough.

In the end, the claim Gattaca undermines Plato's Republic is an argument filled with holes. Plato’s city is living under a different set of rules and circumstances. One’s future is in the hands of an evaluator, looking at the best interest of the city, analogous to a military recruiter.
There are x number of positions or jobs available, certain needs to be filled, and one person making a judgment on what is optimal for the individual but primarily looking at the best interests of the whole. *Gattaca* presented a society that used a caste system of valids and invalids. The in-valids were limited only to the worst of jobs, and their fate sealed at the moment of conception.

One theme that could be explored between the two works is the concept of a glass ceiling imposed on people. *Gattaca* shows why we should not impose a glass ceiling on those that are able, such as Vincent Freeman. Plato presents a society where one is fixed in their occupation, and specialized to the point of zero mobility in work. If one was deemed to be a cobbler at the age of ten, that person will never have the opportunity to become a ruler. Even if they are a late bloomer, possess excellent leadership skills, have the strongest desire to be in authority and would excel at the position, there is no possibility of them changing occupation. “And each of the others, too, was to work all his life at a single trade for which he had a natural aptitude and keep away from all the others…” (Book II 374b) I strongly disagree with this line of thinking. How is an evaluator to know a child’s “natural aptitude”? Is one’s strengths and passions evident as a seven year old? Were my abilities evident at the age of six?

I know for my own life, I have dabbled in a variety of different interests. When I was younger, I was involved in martial arts and football. I was taller and bigger then my playmate, I excelled in football, and earned a junior black belt. Plato’s evaluators would have begun training me as an auxiliary. In high school, I was no longer involved in martial arts, but I still had a passion for football; However, as my body matured, I became about an average build compared to my teammates. I never developed into a good football player, as much as I loved the game. If I were in warrior training, I may have been failing during my high school years. Also during
high school, my academics became very important to me and that was an arena I was excelling in. If I had been observed from my “natural aptitudes” during high school, I would have been chosen to become an academic, a philosopher or mathematician/engineer. However, since my tenth birthday, I had been taking violin lessons. APU school of music evaluated me, and choose me to become a musician (by way of offering scholarship). If I was in Plato’s city, I may be kicked out because “we’ll have no need for polyharmonic or multistringed instruments…” (399c) or perhaps I would have been chosen to train with the lyre or cithara to become a musician. For my future, I am considering earning an MBA degree, so perhaps if I was evaluated at the age of 28, I would be chosen to become a merchant or even possibly guardian ruler. I am thankful for the many experiences I have been able to have. One can see the flaws in Plato’s city just in my personal example. I much prefer the society that we live in, and I am offended and disgusted by the society Plato desires. I am not forced to be “specialized” by evaluators and I am able to enjoy all the things life has to offer.