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John Harris: Enhancing Evolution

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For these and many other reasons which we will examine as we proceed, this book defends human enhancement and argues that not only are enhancements permissible but that in some cases there is a positive moral duty to enhance.

If there is a theme which unites all my philosophical work, it is an exploration of the responsibility shared by all moral agents, to make the world a better place. Karl Marx¹ is noted for the idea that the purpose of philosophy cannot simply be to understand the world, but must also be to change it. This thought, however, is not original to Marx; it is implicit in the writings of many philosophers—Plato certainly wanted to change the world for the better and *The Republic* is devoted to systematic ways to achieve a better society. Locke, Rousseau, and Bentham would all have been equally at home with the idea. Indeed, as Bertrand Russell said, talking of Jeremy Bentham:

There can be no doubt that nine-tenths of the people living in England in the latter part of the last century were happier than they would have been if he had never lived. So shallow was his philosophy that he would have regarded this as a vindication of his activities.²

Russell's irony will not be lost on even the most literal of readers. It is a sad comment on the philosophy of the twentieth century that in the four score years since Russell's essay was written, concern with the real world, no less than with attempts to make it better, have continued to be seen as evidence of lack of philosophical depth by the majority of professional philosophers, and Russell's own attempts to make the world better are not, even now, ranked by most philosophers as among his significant philosophical contributions. All these philosophers place philosophy at the service of humanity, for what use is knowledge and understanding without using that understanding to try to change things for the better?

It is significant that we have reached a point in human history at which further attempts to make the world a better place will have to include not only changes to the world, but also changes to humanity, perhaps with the consequence that we, or our descendants, will cease to be human in the sense in which we now understand that idea. This possibility of a new phase of evolution in which Darwinian evolution,

by natural selection, will be replaced by a deliberately chosen process of selection, the results of which, instead of having to wait the millions of years over which Darwinian evolutionary change has taken place, will be seen and felt almost immediately. This new process of evolutionary change will replace *natural selection* with *deliberate selection*, *Darwinian evolution* with *“enhancement evolution.”*

One of the ways in which philosophy can contribute to a better world is to help clear away the bad arguments that stand as much in the way of human progress and human happiness as do reactionary forces of a political and even of a military kind. When new technologies are announced, the first reaction is often either “wow—this is amazing!” or “yuck—this is sick!” This book is about the reasons and arguments that underlie both reactions, and about how it can sometimes be rational to move from “yuck!” to “wow!” In the chapters that follow I present the arguments for human enhancement and analyse human enhancement; the book builds on work of the last twenty years which has at its center the moral responsibility of human beings to make responsible, informed choices about their own fate and the fate of the world in which we live. In the face of threats both to humankind and indeed to the ecosystem which sustains us and all life, this responsibility is nothing short of a clear imperative to make the world a better place.

This is a book of arguments; in the course of it I try to critically evaluate the main arguments opposing human enhancement of all forms and at the same time, through use of real examples and discussion of present and future enhancement technologies, I develop the arguments and the good reasons we have not only to take the possibility of radical human enhancement seriously but also positively to promote it. I point out the continuity that exists between therapy and enhancement, the fact the human enhancement has always been both a conscious and unconscious part of human development and of evolution, and I underline the familiarity of the multifarious attempts we humans have made not only to better our ourselves in the sense of improving our material circumstances and well-being, but literally to better ourselves. In short, I propose both the wisdom and the necessity of intervening in what has been called the natural lottery of life, to improve things by taking control of evolution and our future development to the point, and indeed beyond the point, where we humans will

have changed, perhaps into a new and certainly into a better species altogether.

As the argument develops, a radical thesis outlining the moral, political, and social reasons to welcome the prospect of enhancement is developed, as is a defense of the idea of making people, or rather permitting people to make themselves and their children, longer-lived, stronger, happier, smarter, fairer (in the aesthetic and in the ethical sense of that term) and in finding ways to do this which will protect the safety of the people and of course be consistent with good government and regulation.

The Agenda

In the first three chapters I argue that the opportunity to create healthier, longer-lived, and altogether “better” individuals is one that there are moral reasons to take and that it is an opportunity that is in the interests of the individual, society, and government. Indeed, governments have prudential as well as moral reasons to support parental and individual choice in such matters. It is further argued that the freedom of citizens to do what’s right ethically and what’s right for them personally is not only self-evidently sensible, it is enshrined in our moral and political theory.

Chapter 1 is really a further introduction to and explanation of the themes of this book, but it seeks to do more than to pose questions or to set out the conclusions that are coming: it also begins to argue for these conclusions. Chapter 1 also further explains my own commitment to making the world a better place and how I see philosophy and bioethics as rational ways of attempting to do so.

The three opening chapters examine the various techniques that might be used for enhancement and the various targets of those techniques. Stem cell research and therapy, gene manipulation, selection of embryos, drugs, machines and other mechanical enhancements, and many other enhancement techniques are considered and evaluated. These chapters also advance a new thesis as to how health and disease are to be understood, which replaces and shows the unacceptability of the previous model advanced by Boorse and Daniels.

Chapter 4 considers in detail perhaps the most radical and far-reaching of all types of enhancement, that of the possibility of life

