Enhancing evolution: the next step?

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Enhancing Evolution: The Ethical Case for Making Better People

by John Harris

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"If it wasn't good for you, it wouldn't be enhancement," writes John Harris in his new book, *Enhancing Evolution: The Ethical Case for Making Better People*. He is well known for his liberal views

and generally permissive approach to new technology, and this latest work is no exception. The premise that human enhancement is good for us is therefore familiar territory and this volume provides a comprehensive exploration, and rigorous philosophical defence, of human enhancement.

As one of the most influential figures in the field of bioethics, Harris has written much about the ethics of human genetics and biotechnology. He first suggested human enhancement more than a decade ago in his book *Wonderwoman and Superman*—a work to which *Enhancing Evolution*'s rather striking 'Pop Art' cover perhaps alludes. *Enhancing Evolution*'s 11 chapters cover a broad range of technologies and consider diverse philosophical arguments in support of an ultimately clear message: human enhancement is a good thing and, as such, is morally permissible—perhaps even obligatory.

Harris begins by laying the foundations of the argument in favour of human

enhancement: how can we reject something that is so evidently good? This neatly sidesteps some of the practical difficulties associated with the potential use of enhancement technologies—such as possible harm or unforeseen adverse consequences—but, as Harris notes, these objections are not unique to enhancement. Indeed, philosophical arguments against enhancement have sought to find reasons beyond potential risks or practical difficulties. Thus, although this overtly positive definition might have limitations, it is a justified starting point from which to engage the philosophical debate.

Harris goes on to expound the definition by giving examples of possible enhancements—genetic, mechanical and chemical—and argues in each case for the permissibility of those that make our lives better, while considering the many arguments that have been raised against them. In particular, he rejects traditional definitions of enhancement as distinct from therapy and the idea of species-typical or normal function. Instead, he argues, moral judgements should be based on "a rejection of harm and an acceptance of benefit whether called therapy or enhancement". This, of course, might be far from simple in practical terms, but it remains a sound philosophical approach.

A similar principle provides a starting point for Chapter Four's discussion of immortality. Although Harris is cautious about the possible consequences of indefinite life extension and immortality, he remains firm on the need to recognize and embrace the benefits that might accrue on the path to achieving them. A giant leap on this path is the idea of reproductive liberty—the right of parents to choose enhanced children—which is related to Chapter Six's coverage of disability, and whether discrimination against the disabled is a reason to limit our freedom not to have disabled children. In fact, it is not, if one agrees with the argument that preferring ability to disability is not the same as preferring non-disabled people over disabled ones, and Harris tackles this difficult and emotive topic with logic and compassion.

Chapters Seven and Eight grapple with perhaps the most abstract philosophy in the volume: examining the arguments of Michael Sandel, Leon Kass and Jürgen Habermas against enhancement. Here again, Harris mounts a sustained defence of enhancement that, although it might not convince those who shun the "hubris of mastery" and embrace the "wisdom of repugnance" espoused by these writers, provides a logical rebuttal of such rhetoric.

The final two chapters examine a wider range of ethical issues in science and research: the use of embryos for purposes such as embryonic stem-cell research and the duty of all citizens to participate in scientific research. These are subjects on which Harris has written extensively in the past and their inclusion in this volume provides a perspective on issues of practical ethics relating to the science of enhancement.

Enhancing Evolution represents something of a landmark volume in its systematic consideration of human enhancement both as a philosophical concept, and in terms of the emerging technological possibilities and consequences. It has at its heart some unashamedly utilitarian assumptions, with the aim of "making the world a better place". If one accepts this, the book undeniably succeeds in presenting the "ethical case for making better people". In the process, it lays the foundations for new lines of bioethical inquiry beyond merely 'human' enhancement. It touches on the idea of transhumanism and proposes that 'enhancement evolution' might replace Darwinian evolution as the process that shapes the human race in the future. What ethical issues might we encounter as enhancement technologies start to stretch the boundaries of humanity? *Enhancing Evolution* makes the sustained case for allowing these technologies and, in so doing, has opened up new and intriguing ethical horizons that beckon to be explored.

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