

“Faster, Taller, Stronger, Smarter ... Better?”

Review of *Enhancing Evolution: The Ethical Case for Making Better People*. By: John Harris. Princeton University Press. 242 pages. Price listed on the dust jacket: \$27.95 US.

It is a commonly observed fact that, as we age, telephone directory print comes to seem microscopically tiny. People cope with this inconvenience by resorting to reading glasses. Although we don't usually think of them in this way, reading glasses, along with hearing aids and anti-wrinkle creams are enhancement technologies as are anti-inflammatory drugs which help us to cope with arthritic pain and coffee which improves our concentration.

It's natural that our physical and mental abilities deteriorate in old age. Thus, all of the above mentioned technologies could be described as “unnatural”. They are unnatural but not, on that account, morally objectionable. It's fallacious to equate what's natural with what's good. Sometimes they coincide; often they diverge. For example, painless childbirth was regularly denounced as a blasphemy against God until, in 1853, Queen Victoria set an example by delivering a child under chloroform. Only then did religious opposition fall silent. Today no one worries much about the ethics of analgesia or eye glasses. Quite the opposite: you'd seem a complete idiot if you rejected all artificial aids to better living.

So why is there so much fear and fretting about the present and future use of biotechnology to make ourselves healthier, stronger, smarter and longer-lived?

John Harris, a leading British bioethicist, believes that the ethical controversy swirling around such new technologies as pre-implantation genetic diagnosis, embryonic stem cell cloning and regenerative medicine is the product of ignorance, prejudice and bad reasoning. Much of his book is given over to exposing the anti-enhancement arguments of prominent philosophers, such as Francis Fukuyama, Michael Sandel and Jurgen Habermas. By the time Harris has finished his demolition job there are more defunct arguments littering the page than there are dead bodies in the last scene of Hamlet. Those who like their philosophy dark-roasted, robust and slightly bitter will find his combativeness very good fun. Those who favour a weaker brew may find themselves awake in the middle of the night. You've been warned.

The primary goal of *Enhancing Evolution* is to present “the ethical case for making better people”. Harris offers a powerful and, incidentally, a powerfully entertaining case in favour of using medical science to enhance both ourselves and our children. As he points out, the quest to improve ourselves is as old as human history. We should welcome enthusiastically the possibility that regenerative medicine might soon be able to make our bodies resistant to heart disease, cancer and senile dementia. This would, of course, dramatically expand both the quality and the length of human lives. That's something else we should welcome.

More than this, however, Harris defends the individual's right to use biotechnology in order to improve memory, intelligence, height and physical strength. He wants us to move from chance to choice, from Darwinian evolution to enhancement evolution. Instead of blindly accepting our fate in the natural lottery of life we should opt to enhance ourselves and our children, both physically and cognitively. In short, he urges us to become *Wonderwoman and Superman* [the title of an earlier Harris book].

Accept for the sake of argument that these are worthwhile goals. They are certainly the goals at which many of us aim, both as individuals and as parents: We want the best possible education and health care for our children and for ourselves. So why not, also, the best genes, when technology offers this possibility?

If we strive to eliminate genetic impairments, the critics say, we are thereby expressing contempt for people who must live with physical and cognitive disabilities. Harris responds by asking: When the orthopaedic surgeon re-sets a person's broken leg does she thereby show disrespect for people born with an incurable limp? The objection is raised that we should beware of "playing God" or falling victim to "hubris". Harris dismisses such arguments as quasi-religious claptrap and insists that striving to better ourselves is part of what defines us as human and humane. Some claim that deliberately to modify the genes of our children is to deny these children their autonomy as human beings. He replies that choosing better genes for one's children does not in any way impair their autonomy. Moreover, the genetic lottery can be deeply cruel and unfair. Almost everything we do in life is an attempt to avoid the worst effects of Fate.

Another argument claims that Harris' enhancement agenda would, if adopted, lead ultimately to the creation of a new species - "post-humans". Critics worry that such enhanced human beings might feel little or no sense of common humanity with those of us who are unenhanced. He replies, in essence: So what? The wealthy and privileged are already healthier, longer-lived and better educated than the poor and unprivileged.

Harris agrees that equality of life opportunity is an important ideal but insists that we shouldn't promote human equality by reducing the advantages of the privileged. Instead, we should strive to make genetic enhancements available to everyone. Initially, these technologies will be priced beyond the range of most people, even in wealthy countries. Eventually, however, the enhancements enjoyed first by the rich will become available to the poor. In the long run everyone will benefit.

I'm not entirely persuaded by this trickle-down argument. As the British economist John Maynard Keynes famously observed: In the long run we'll all be dead. , *Pace* Professor Harris, it seems entirely reasonable to worry that the technology he favours might dramatically and, perhaps permanently, aggravate the already worrying gap between Haves and Have-Nots.

Harris is also too dismissive of the precautionary principle. He concedes that before tampering with the genes of healthy people we need to ensure a favourable risk-benefit

ratio. He seems to forget, however, that the enhancements he enthusiastically welcomes will be brought to us by the same industry which (in the 1950s) sold women thalidomide “for stronger, healthier babies” and, more recently, Vioxx for arthritic pain. When we remember that the power of man over nature is often, in practice, the power of one man to exploit another, then the maxim “First of all do no harm” seems eminently sensible.

Caveats aside, Enhancing Evolution makes a fine contribution to clear-thinking and cogent argument in a field where these commodities have been in short supply. It should be on the must-read list for citizens and politicians alike.

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