Beyond Mankind

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Advocates of human enhancement face many challenges in making their case, not the least of which is that it is still normal to think in terms of what is normal. Therefore the prospect of a "transhuman" world in which our appearance and abilities increasingly become subject to deliberate modification is oftentimes greeted with amusement, horror, or condescension. Consider how commonplace it is today to hear contemptuous laughter at those who subject themselves to the latest plastic surgery, or to arouse anxiety about "playing God" with respect to reproductive choices. Rightly or wrongly, old habits die hard, and being human in the way we are is quite an old habit by now.

Enhancing Evolution: The Ethical Case for Making Better People
By John Harris
Princeton ~ 2007 ~ 242 pp.
$27.95 (cloth)

John Harris, the Sir David Alliance Professor of Bioethics at the University of Manchester School of Law, must have a strong sense of this problem, for *Enhancing Evolution* is an extended effort to overcome just this kind of prejudice (as he would regard it). His book reminds of nothing so much as that clichéd moment in a police show when the beat cop, standing in front of the yellow tape and bloody bodies, says to the bystanders, "Move along folks, there's nothing to see here." Harris makes a relentless effort to undermine any distinctions that would make human enhancement anything other than business as usual, to convince us that while redesigning ourselves will be very nice, it is really no big deal after all. He delights in pointing out that what with things like books or glasses, let alone pacemakers or prosthetics, we are *already* enhanced; that enhancing ourselves is just what we do as human beings. So *not* to seek to transcend our humanity would be a denial of our humanity. Hence he can adduce the "conservative" principle that in order to preserve the essence of what we value, we will have to accept change.

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The heading for the first section of Harris's introduction could have been the subtitle for his book: "From 'Yuck!' to 'Wow!' and How to Get There Rationally." He begins by arguing that the goal of enhancement is no different from the goal of education; if one is good, so is the other. Likewise, the goal of enhancement is the same as the goal of political philosophy, which is to improve the world. He concludes the book by asserting that research of the sort necessary for further human enhancement has since Plato and Aristotle been "the birth, basis, and backbone of the life of the mind." Further attempts to improve the world will "have to" involve "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." Not only is there no reason to shrink from that goal, Harris argues, but there is a moral obligation to pursue it.

Harris charts his "rational" course from yuck to wow in chapters discussing topics like life prolongation, and genetic modification to treat disability or create "designer children." He only rarely meets a technology he does not like, and when he does his argument is quite charming in its simplicity, if hardly serious. He mentions the "Experience Machine," the possibility of complete virtual reality via direct brain stimulation (an idea he mistakenly attributes to Jonathan Glover rather than the earlier work of Robert Nozick). Because Harris does not like it, it is not enhancement; as he points out, when we call something an "enhancement" we mean that it is an improvement. If some change to human beings were bad for them, clearly that would not be an enhancement. Q.E.D.! This argument, which to his credit Harris at one point admits is "trivially true," has the added benefit of meaning that to be against human enhancement is to be against good things.

In more sober moments, Harris shows that he understands that what is genuinely at stake is the question of what is a good thing in the first place. But he is less interested in this philosophical question than one might expect because he adopts a view that in practice makes debate about that question pointless. "The [democratic] presumption is that citizens should be free to make their own choices in the light of their own values, whether or not these choices and values are acceptable to the majority. Only serious real and present danger either to other citizens or to society is sufficient to rebut this presumption. If anything less than this high standard is accepted, liberty is dead." This democratic presumption is not to be confused with egalitarianism; while Harris fully acknowledges that the ability of some to afford enhancement will give them significant advantages over others, he believes that there is nothing that can or should be done

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about that. "When enhancements make life or lives better they are justified if they do just that," whether for a lucky few or many.

Harris's democratic presumption amounts to a radical individualism that makes the first, most serious, and frequently *only* question of the good, "Is it good for me?" It allows Harris to distinguish when convenient among three questions: Is something an enhancement or not? Are there moral reasons to adopt it or oppose it? Should we adopt policies that enforce, regulate, or prevent based on those judgments? His radical individualism means that answers to the latter questions do not necessarily follow from the former. Thus, while the Experience Machine is "no sort of enhancement of life or of people," Harris asks, "Is it unethical? Should we prevent others from accessing it if they could pay for their infinite experience? A different question!" This drawing back from moral and policy judgments not only provides the maximum freedom for the individual chooser, it allows Harris to develop another theme: that those who make different enhancement choices, or choose not to enhance at all, need not be thought of as being less worthy or living less worthy lives. Harris is confident that a preference for non-disabled children, or for enhanced children, when allowed to find expression via embryo selection, need not lead to a judgment that those who are disabled or un-enhanced "have lives that are not worth living or…are of poor quality."

No doubt such arguments allow Harris to consider himself a model of libertarian tolerance, but it is not just his dismissive and contemptuous treatment of those with whom he disagrees that creates doubt on this point. First of all, there is reason to wonder whether in practice the democratic presumption will be nearly enough to protect the un-enhanced from the enhanced. In order to understand the kind of pressure that enhancement is likely to put on the un-enhanced, we need not turn to science-fiction dystopias; we simply need to recall some history. It seems fair to say that in the past, we in the West for the most part lived under conditions that today we would consider unacceptably squalid. In particular, the standards of personal and communal cleanliness were more often than not very low. What must it have been like, in the Globe Theatre, say, to stand in a noisy crowd of long-unwashed bodies wearing long-unwashed clothing, with a good many of one's fellows in one phase or another of having their teeth rotting out? To walk in city streets that doubled as sewers? Presumably there was a certain desensitization to such smells from habitual exposure, but the stench must have been extraordinary by our standards.

Just as Harris suggests, we might see ourselves as significantly

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enhanced in relation to this baseline. And of course along the way there were certainly people who were suspicious of the developing fetish about cleanliness. That it was such a good thing was not self-evident—and indeed, it required a rather impressive effort to change habitual behaviors, an effort that survives today in the resurgence of signs in washrooms urging the washing of hands. What is the result? Being habitually dirty in a way that was once perfectly normal now courts complete social ostracism and could easily serve as grounds for losing a job or for psychiatric concern. If it extends to one's dwelling place, it can invoke the police powers of the state, and can be grounds for the removal of children from parental custody.

Here is a case, then, where something Harris would surely call an enhancement has led to broad acceptance of social and legal norms that do as much as they can to suppress once-normal conditions. While there are probably cases where Harris could find a "serious real and present danger" based on uncleanliness, such cases hardly define the full space of social unacceptability. Does the democratic presumption mean we should back off from our concern about cleanliness? Or is Harris unwilling to face up to how, in the real world, law, regulation, and social norms regularly enforce moral judgments? Or is he not as concerned about suppression of the once-normal as he would have us believe?

The second strike against Harris's pose of genial libertarian tolerance is his argument that, lest we be free riders, we have a moral obligation, conceivably enforced by law and policy, to participate as human subjects in the research necessary to produce enhancements. This stance leads him to be quite critical of current standards with respect to the protection of human subjects; he believes they too much equate experimentation with exploitation. Here as elsewhere Harris backs away from making specific recommendations that would restrict one's freedom (in this case, to say no to experimentation), purporting only to make moral arguments, not propose policies. But he concludes that we should shift the default assumption away from experimentation being exploitation, and assume most people would consent because most people want to do the right thing. That shift seems to have very practical results, as the following remarkable passage suggests (emphasis added throughout):

> However, because of the primacy of autonomy in the structure of this argument we should be *cautious* about enrolling those who cannot consent in research and should never *force* resisting incompetent individuals to participate. It also follows…that those who are not competent to consent should not be exploited as *prime* candidates for research. We should always therefore *prefer*

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> autonomous candidates and only use those who cannot consent when such individuals are essential for the particular research contemplated and where competent individuals cannot, because of the nature of the research, be used. In those extreme cases in which we might contemplate mandatory participation, the same will hold.

Beyond the highly qualified language (prefer, not require; caution, not prohibition) what is Harris saying? That it is acceptable to use the incompetent as experimental subjects without their consent so long as the research in question revolves around the source or nature of their incompetence, such as research in fetal engineering or Alzheimer's disease. How convenient that in many such cases the incompetence itself will make the issue of resistance moot! How convenient too that a good deal of general interest to the autonomous might be found out by research aimed nominally at the incompetent. Harris may not eliminate, but he certainly reduces any scruples the presently autonomous might have about treating the formerly-autonomous or the autonomous-to-be as moral equals. He likely does not see this conclusion as a violation of the democratic presumption because it does not apply to those so situated; an embryo for Harris has no "significant moral status." The democratic presumption remains absolute; Harris makes a nominally more consistent, and more chilling, argument that simply reads out of the realm of moral concern certain existing persons in the name of inclusion with respect to hypothetical new kinds of designed persons.

Nowhere are the results of this preference for future possibles over present actuals clearer than in Harris's account of the quest for immortality, "the Holy Grail of enhancement." But the closer we look at what Harris has to say on this topic, the stranger it becomes. First off, he rightly notes that immortality is not to be confused with invulnerability. That observation leads him to the thought that in the future, immortals may find that "human vulnerability" to disease has increased. That would be a cruel joke, for one can readily imagine how those who had so much to lose may take extreme steps to avoid risks, thus limiting the sort of experiential variety that one might have thought was a key benefit to a far longer life.

Second, Harris admits that "for the foreseeable future" there are likely to be "parallel populations" of mortals and immortals, but argues (as per the democratic presumption) there is nothing we can or should do to prevent that. My freedom to choose immortality is the trump card. Besides, he notes, the "poetic imagination" has long prepared us for this situation. Unfortunately, he does not pause to examine how often in such

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stories the mortals are playthings of the immortals. At what stage might the unenhanced start looking like they lack true autonomy to the enhanced? Nor does Harris ask himself the obvious question: what would the Greek stories of gods and men, for example, look like if the gods were not invulnerable (to men, anyway) as well as immortal? How long would they have been tolerated by the mass of mortals if Olympus could have been stormed by some band of heroes?

Third, Harris admits that over the course of a much extended life, the personal identity that originally sought immortality will likely be lost, that there is likely to be bodily continuity with multiple personalities over time. (What a curious kind of dualism Harris is implying here. And in passing, one might well wonder why, given the aspirations of some of today's "transhumanists," there would even be bodily continuity.) In and of itself, this admission gives the lie to the initial promise of immortality—if *I'm* not there to enjoy it, the one who so desperately seeks to cheat death, what's the point? But then Harris continues in such a way as to suggest that there might be more rather than less continuity. Traditional modes of reproduction result in "fresh people, fresh ideas," and there are "powerful" reasons to worry that the disappearance of those modes might lead to staleness. So though he is against any "nonconsensual form of generational cleansing," we may have to make collective decisions that would "ensure" that those who have had "fair innings…died at the appropriate time." This agreed-upon mutual coercion is certainly a very different sense of the democratic presumption.

How much time might we be talking about? Harris quotes with apparent approval an estimate that practically speaking, the life expectancy of an average immortal might be just shy of 5,000 years. That sounds like "fair innings," right? But Harris would have done well to consult Anthony Trollope on that point, whose too-little-known 1882 book *The Fixed Period* amply illustrates the problem of such public-spirited efforts when push starts coming to shove. In his story, the first man eligible for the happy release turns out to be strangely unwilling. What looks like fair innings to the mere youth of 1,250 years when he is part of a "collective decision" to terminate at 5,000 may look like an infringement on liberty at 4,922. Or perhaps the last new personality to inhabit a body will regard it as a raw deal if by some arbitrary standard its time with that body is up.

If we just look around us, we observe that in many parts of the world there has been something like a doubling of average life expectancy, and we still want longer lives. Let us double it again—will that be enough? Not

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yet, by Harris's imaginings. Again, or again, or again? Why does he think there will be *any* point where we should say "enough," particularly if, as he imagines, there is limited continuity of personality? In fact, is not Harris drawn to democratic coercion here because he is implicitly thinking that there is some point at which one tires of life, or should for the sake of others tire of it? But he gives not a hint of why that would be true. Perhaps he could learn something from Leon Kass on precisely that point were he not so dogmatically dismissive of Kass's arguments, merely asserting that all of them "fail disastrously" prior to a brief critique of one.

In sum, Harris provides a variety of cogent reasons why immortality as he imagines it would be extremely unlikely to satisfy the desire for indefinite personal continuation that drives the quest for immortality in the first place. It is less odd than it may at first appear that Harris fails to see the clear implication of his own argument, for as he tells us proudly, he "[does] not recognize finitude, only the limitless possibilities of the human spirit and of human ingenuity." This is suitably stirring stuff for one who seeks to deploy philosophy to change the world. But as for so many others who have done so, for Harris that use of philosophy comes at a price—because finitude is, of course, all around us. Harris can only fail to recognize it on the road from yuck to wow because like a draft horse he wears a set of blinders. He does not want to catch sight of some inconvenient nearby fact, lest he be started out of his complacent contemplation of the far horizon of limitless possibilities.

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