
Review

Enhancing Evolution, Transcending Human Nature

Evrimi Geliştirmek, İnsan Doğasını Aşmak

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Enhancing Evolution: The Ethical Case for Making Better People

John Harris

Princeton, 2010 (Kindle Ed.), Princeton University Press, 261 pages

What is “human nature”? While discussing human dignity and rights, what is the nature of the being that we have in mind? Anthropology seeks to address the ancient foundational question of philosophy: “Who are we?” With all its variety, the human species, at the current point in time, is usually considered to be stable. It consists of a gene pool that produces phenotypes that vary but is not moving in one specific direction. Biomedical interventions into human bodies and minds are assessed on the basis of this common humanity – however differently abled individuals can be perceived among them.

John Harris, a doyen of bioethics at the University of Manchester (U.K.), challenges this widely held consensus. Over hundreds of millennia, the succession of populations leading to our current human community underwent momentous changes. Had it not, “we” would still be living in the guise of

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humanoid organisms. Had we gone down a different route of changes, “we” would be bonobos or chimpanzees. If this is true of our past, Harris argues, then how can it not be true of our future? Why should we assess possible modifications of “human nature” by the yardstick of today’s physiology and psychology? Harris doubts that current humanity is ethically more valuable than potential descendants diverging significantly from our present form and function. He discusses the future of humankind, not with an apocalyptic view in which today’s *Homo sapiens* struggles for survival but with a vision of a different humankind benefiting from all sorts of enhancements; genetic, pharmacological, etc. Harris’s perspective is one in which humankind reaches a state of bodily immortality or at least achieves a lifespan of five hundred to one thousand years. He considers this aim to be attainable even with today’s state of technology and to be ethically desirable, brushing off common reservations, be they egalitarian or ecological. Harris suggests a pilot project enabling a small number of individuals to undergo life-extending treatments to monitor these effects on society. Given the possibility that few people would even volunteer for an untested modification, he does not anticipate major conflicts over access to life prolongation. Eventually, he argues that participation in this line of research will become a moral obligation, if not to ourselves, then to future generations.

It is common to find philosophers feeling more confident vis-à-vis technological possibilities than scientists themselves. Though risk assessment is not the topic of Harris’s book, we should not forget that even modest advances in biotechnology have revealed major flaws; the cloned sheep Dolly died young and in pain. However, even the ethical perspective seems strangely underdeveloped. At the current state of this debate, it might be more useful to explore societal scenarios through science fiction, a genre that provides a wider range of thoughts than dry academic speculations. I was quite surprised to not find a single reference to the classic film “Gattaca” (1997), which addresses a number of the ethical questions raised by Harris and answers them in the negative. The plausibility of Harris’s assertion that providing genetic enhancement and extreme longevity to a limited section of the population would not create existential ethical problems is not very high, and his comparison with the use of artificial lighting or compulsory schooling as established enhancement techniques is not convincing.

Harris's basic reminder that living species change is certainly valuable. It is also undeniable that humans have increased the depth of interventions into species' evolutionary destiny in various ways. On the other hand, the specific manipulations Harris champions in his book ought to be contemplated with great caution, for biological reasons as well as from an ethical and socio-political perspective. Germ line modifications cannot be undone except by undoing their carriers. In addition, revolutionizing the most fundamental aspects of society (like mortality) in the blink of an eye, which have evolved over millennia, does not bode well for the future of humankind—this one or another.

“Enhancing Evolution” is a stimulating read, raising vital issues that deserve reflection. Yet, we could call it a premature book, several steps ahead of an argument that still requires substantiation.