

Is human enhancement possible if it comes from the outside?

RUBÉN HERCE

Universidad de Navarra, Pamplona

rherce@unav.es

ORCID: 0000-0002-5526-2310

Abstract: Throughout history, human beings have worked on their personal enhancement. Not only improving the living conditions, but also trying to improve the moral behavior of people, usually through education. The Transhumanist proposal of moral enhancement promises to make us better and understands it as a duty, also because of the ethical challenges that present to us. In the following article we explore if that is possible and to what extent, taking into account that humans are agents.

Keywords: Transhumanism Moral Enhancement; Human Enhancement; Agent; Bioenhancement.

According to Robert Spaemann (2006) humans are different from other beings because (1) people are not determined by a ‘biological niche’ but form a ‘vital centre here and now’, in reference to which everything else acquires its own sense; and (2) humans are ‘agents’ who not only act seeking certain aims, but are ‘aware’ of the relationship between their actions and purposes. They know that they are responsible for their actions and have a special kind of purpose: ‘self-realization’.

Humans feel responsible for the fulfilment of their own lives and know that it depends mainly on them. It is not a duty imposed from the outside, but it arises from the inside. This kind of ‘imperative’ distances us from our primary and secondary interests in order to consider our lives as a whole.

When it comes to acting, human beings are not limited to mapping strategies for action, subordinating some ends to others, but first and foremost, they should and ask themselves: Where does this action or this kind of life lead me? What type of person am I turning into? What am I doing with my life? Is this the right way to live? Without this approach it is difficult to assume that there is a genuinely human behaviour (Herce 2018).

Would this mean that transhumanism or any proposal for human enhancement would eventually fail in fostering what is essentially human, i.e. moral behaviour?

We humans have a long tradition on human enhancement, which includes both successes and failures. We have learned better ways to teach languages or climb mountains, to optimize time or travel routes. Among the traditional means of moral enhancement, we have civil legislation, socially recognized moral exemplars, religious teachings and disciplines, or familial upbringing. Well-probed all of them, though not enough by themselves, especially if used as a technique.

So, it seems clear that the improvement of external conditions, of the environment in which human beings develop, is necessary and works as a catalyzer for human enhancement, although it is not enough.

In “Can Prudence Be Enhanced?” Jason Eberl (2018) explores “the necessity and feasibility of pursuing methods of moral bioenhancement as a complement to traditional means, grounding his analysis within a virtue-theoretic framework. Specifically, whether proposed methods of moral bioenhancement could facilitate the cultivation of prudence within the psyches of moral agents.” And Eberl concludes that “certain means of bioenhancement may serve to augment the ability to reason prudentially and assist moral agents to align their wills with their higher-order rational desires, though such means require higher-order desires to already have been formulated independently”. But, where these desires come from if not from the methods of moral bioenhancement?

The answer to this question calls for an agent, in the sense of someone conscious and able to determine what is best in one circumstance or another, in order to make the right decision.

In principle, we could agree that the better informed the agent is, the better decision will make. We wisely look for advice when we feel deeply involved in our decisions, biased by our own prejudices or limited by our human fragility. We do it with personal trainers, marriage counselors or friends, and we know that it works: not always, but more often than not. They probably know techniques and know us well, they have relevant and additional information, in terms of our possibilities and our performance. So, their advice can enhance our lives.

According to this line of work, an artificial intelligence could be a good personal trainer: able to know my health status, my basic needs, or my learning capacity as to get the best out of me, at least, in some respects.

This is one of the ideas which Norbert Wiener got across some seventy years ago in a book titled “The Human Use of Human Beings.” In this book, he gathered a critic to his personal point of view made by a French Dominic frère, Père Dubarle. The critic was published for the very first time in *Le Monde* in 1948, and Wiener himself translated it into his book:

Can't one imagine a machine to collect this or that type of information, as for example information on production and the market; and then to determine as a function of the average psychology of human beings, and of the quantities which it is possible to measure in a determined instance, what the most probable development of the situation might be? Can't one even conceive a State apparatus covering all systems of political decisions? (...) We may dream of the time when a *machine à gouverner* may come to supply –whether for good or evil– the present obvious inadequacy of the brain when the latter is concerned with the customary machinery of politics. [...] The *machines à gouverner* will define the State as the best-informed player at each particular level; and the State is the only supreme coordinator of all partial decisions. These are enormous privileges; if they are acquired scientifically, they will permit the State under all circumstances to beat every player of a human game other than itself by offering this dilemma: either immediate ruin, or planned cooperation. This will

be the consequences of the game itself without outside violence. The lovers of the best of worlds have something indeed to dream of! [...] In comparison with this, Hobbes' *Leviathan* was nothing but a pleasant joke. (Wiener 1989, 178–179)

This critique describes the potential to create a computer system that would gather data from people and would provide feedback to those people in real time. The aim would be to put them partially or statistically in a behaviourist system.

Wiener gives credit to Dubarle and answers that, as a thought experiment, one could imagine a global computer system where everybody has devices on them all the time, and the devices are giving them feedback based on what they did, and the whole population is subject to a degree of behaviour modification. But such a society, Wiener concludes, would be insane and could not face its problems, although he thought that such a future is technologically infeasible.

Does it sound familiar? Despite Wiener's thought, reality is more stubborn than imagination and what seemed just a thought experiment, has become a plausible reality. As Jaron Lanier put it: "in the 80s of the past century (...) we knew that if we thought of our technology as a means to ever more power, if it was just a power trip, we would eventually destroy ourselves. That is what happens when you're on a power trip and nothing else". (Lanier 2018).

This trip to power has led to what Zuboff has christened as 'surveillance capitalism' a system which challenges democratic norms and whose *machine à gouverner*, the 'Big Other', "is constituted by unexpected and often illegible mechanisms of extraction, commodification, and control that effectively exile persons from their own behavior while producing new markets of behavioral prediction and modification." (Zuboff 2015)

Of course, the beginning of this power trip, at least, is threatening to us and, nevertheless, we are encouraged to continue traveling a path of more and more power in which the object of manipulation is the human being; with the premise that everything will be for our enhancement, in defense of the dignity of the posthuman being, and as an essential step for

the survival of the humans (Bostrom 2005). But what does enhancement or dignity mean?

For many people the feeling of having lost control is remarkable. They do not feel masters of their own lives, but rather at the mercy of changing technological winds. Winds that are not those of biology, because of my lack of virtue, but those of others wills that know how to ‘hack’ the behavior of large population groups.

It is not easy to determine what really enhances a human being here and now, taking into account their whole life, not only from a purely subjective point of view, or because a group of people or an AI decide *heteronomously* for him. It is necessary to guess what enhances this human being in the broader context of a truly and significant human life. And it cannot be determined merely from the outside or merely from the inside.

What should we do then? Is it more appropriate to follow a set of rules or to decide according to the majority or an algorithm? If I decide not to be enhanced, is it a good decision? Green (2018) presents a broad overview of twelve topics in ethics in AI, including function, transparency, evil use, good use, bias, unemployment, socio-economic inequality, moral automation and human de-skilling, robot consciousness and rights, dependency, social-psychological effects, and spiritual effects. We need to stop to think and somewhere we have to start.

So, recapitulating my contribution, a more favorable environment for human enhancement can be created from the outside. In addition, we can get more information through advice or behavioral models to enhance some aspects of our personal development. But we cannot make good citizens from the outside. We can create an environment where it is easier to develop one type of behavior or another, but who or what determines what kind of behavior is better for the human being? Similarly, it is not enough to have good moral models or receive good advice to make people good, although it can certainly help. In addition, who or what determines the type of models or tips that enhance human beings? Everyone has to path her personal enhancement, discovering what is good or bad at each moment. Even so, where does the moral imperative of personal enhancement come from?

Landing my proposal, I would say that three elements are needed for enhancing humans. In the first place, a healthy environment that empowers and allows the adequate development of the capabilities of the human being. For this, a contact with reality, mediated more intensely by technique, would not suffice, if this prevents an authentic real experience with the environment. Second, a healthy personal interdependence, which allows the development of social human capacities, is necessary. For this, it would not be enough with an interpersonal interaction mediated by the technique, if this, instead of approaching us, distances us from having significant relationships with others. And third, an autonomous and healthy involvement of the individual is needed, so that he can lead the construction of his own life, not simply as a product of technical improvements, but as an agent master of his life, capable of perceiving what really improves her as a person.

References

- Bostrom, Nick. 2005. In Defence of Posthuman Dignity. *Bioethics* 19 (3): 202–214. doi:10.1111/j.1467-8519.2005.00437.x
- Eberl, Jason T. 2018. Can Prudence Be Enhanced? *Journal of Medicine and Philosophy*, 43: 506–526. doi:10.1093/jmp/jhy021
- Green, Brian Patrick. 2018. Ethical Reflections on Artificial Intelligence. *Scientia et Fides* 6(2): 9–31 DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.12775/SetF.2018.015>
- Herce, Rubén. 2017. Is Homo naledi going to challenge our presuppositions on human uniqueness? In Fuller, M., Evers, D., Runehov, A., Sæther, K.-W. (Eds.), *Issues in Science and Theology: Are We Special? Human Uniqueness in Science and Theology*. Springer, pp. 99–106.
- Lanier, Jaron. 2018. How we need to remake the internet, TED Talk.
- Spaemann, Robert. 2006. *Persons. The Difference between 'Someone' and 'Something'*, New York: Oxford University Press.
- Wiener, Norbert. 1989. *The Human Use of Human Beings: Cybernetics and Society*. Free association books: London.
- Zuboff, Shoshana. 2015. Big Other: Surveillance Capitalism and the Prospects of an Information Civilization. *Journal of Information Technology* 30: 75–89. doi:10.1057/jit.2015.5.