

# The Transhumanist Risk: Protecting Our Need for Efforts, Key for our Feeling of Achievement and Pillar of our Modern Societies

Yasmine Bennani\*

Department of Economics, London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE), United Kingdom

## ABSTRACT

The transhumanist idea aspires to improve human capacities using new scientific technologies such as gene editing, drugs or artificial intelligence. Transhumanism therefore directly threatens to modify human nature. In this paper, I suggest that cognitive enhancement could jeopardize one major human drive; our sense of achievement. I explain how it might cancel out the need for efforts that is at the heart of our feeling of achievement. This presents the risk of undermining the pleasures with get from satisfaction about ourselves and admiration from others and, more importantly, of redefining the structures of our society.

**Keywords:** Kility; Watershed; Image Classification; GIS; Land Use/Land Cover Change; Remote Sensing

## INTRODUCTION

Should we use biotechnology to improve human nature? This is the question that is at the heart of the transhumanist debate. In this paper, I focus on cognitive enhancement, namely the enhancement of learning, understanding and reasoning capacities. I shall oppose human cognitive enhancement on the ground that it destroys the need for efforts, leading to a loss of meaning and a risk of undermining the satisfaction and pleasures that we get from our feeling of achievement. I start by exposing the wider transhumanist debate (section 1) narrowing it down to the case of cognitive enhancement (section 2) to show why our human nature is endangered (section 3). I then warn about the risk of destroying the need for efforts at the origin of our feeling of achievement (section 4) and of cancelling out the pleasures that we get from satisfaction and admiration (section 5). I finish with analysing the consequences a free access to enhancement would bring about (section 6) before concluding that we should definitely regulate the use of human enhancement technology in order to protect human nature and the structures of our society.

## FOR OR AGAINST TRANSHUMANISM?

The transhumanist idea aspires to improve human capacities using new scientific technologies such as gene editing, drugs or artificial intelligence. The implications of this debate are huge because transhumanism would directly affect human nature and the organisation of our society. Transhumanists like Nick Bostrom or Rebecca Roache argue for the benefits of human enhancement, comparing it to therapy. Conversely, bioconservatives foresee how enhancement could threaten important democratic values such

as equality, and challenge the meaning of essential aspects of our human life. Related to this second worry, Leon Kass defends the role played by contrasts dictated by our current limits: aging in contrast with immortality, difficulty in contrast with ease, for instance. Similarly, Francis Fukuyama presents the famous objection that transhumanism undermines human dignity. What stands out from the debate is the worries about the kind of society transhumanism would create but also about the alteration of human qualities in posthumans themselves. I shall concentrate on those two aspects.

## THE RISK OF COGNITIVE ENHANCEMENT

In this essay, I focus on some of the risks posed by cognitive enhancement. Persson et al. [1] distinguish two types of cognitive enhancement. The first type is the “internal biological enhancement” (p. 165), which refers to enhancements with drugs acting on our memory capacities, mental energy and wakefulness, for instance. The second type of enhancements is the “external aid” manifested by supercomputers, connecting our minds to machines. Such techniques would feed us with “cognitive powers (otherwise) beyond our reach” (p. 165). I shall assume that scientific progress would allow reaching the maximum level of cognitive enhancement by supposing that either the supercomputer technique or the drugs could enhance people’s capacities to a maximum level of enhancement. In the most extreme scenario, having access to these technologies could make anybody ‘superintelligent’. I concede it is not a necessary scenario, but it is a possible one and I am limiting myself to it.

**Correspondence to:** Yasmine Bennani, Department of Economics, London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE), United Kingdom; E-mail: bennaniyasmine@gmail.com

**Received:** January 22, 2021, **Accepted:** February 05, 2021, **Published:** February 12, 2021

**Citation:** Bennani Y (2021) The Transhumanist Risk: Protecting Our Need for Efforts, Key for our Feeling of Achievement and Pillar of our Modern Societies. *Review Pub Administration Manag.* 9:979.

**Copyright:** © 2021 Bennani Y. This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited.

## A THREAT TO OUR HUMAN NATURE

I shall start my argument by rooting it in the assumption that our fallibility is what makes us humans. Michael Sandel claims that what makes doping problematic for athletes is not only the cheating aspect of it, but also the fact that it uses the body as a machine, which is, according to him, dehumanizing (2015). Similarly, Fukuyama argues that the possibility for humans not to “struggle (and) aspire” anymore would cause them to be dehumanized [2]. I argue that transhumanism might threaten this humanly characteristic of struggling and making efforts in a way that would question some of the values that ground the very structures of our society. Weakening those values presents the risk of radically reorganizing society.

## THE LOSS OF MEANING RISK

Efforts are a necessary condition for the feeling of achievement Sandel [3] writes: “as the role of enhancement increases”, our need for efforts and “our admiration for the achievement” fade away. Efforts are the pathway through which we achieve our goals. They are a necessary condition for feeling the achievement. Referring to its definition, achievement is associated with difficulty and effort. The feeling of achievement could be defined as the sensation of pride and completeness one feels when reaching the point she has worked hard to get to. I shall emphasise further the correlation between personal effort and feeling of achievement throughout my reasoning.

Objection: But why do we care? Wouldn't it be nice to achieve our goals without struggling and suffering? If one builds on a parallel with virtue-ethics, the “practical reasoning of the virtuous person” is analogous to the “practical reasoning of someone who is exercising a practical skill” [4]. Indeed, the same way virtues could only be acquired through practice and cultivation, “real” skills could only be achieved through efforts; in both procedures, one “learn(s) to do it for (her)self and striv(es) to improve” [4]. In Johann Fichte's philosophy, the effort (streben) is even taken to be the condition of possibility of any object; “no effort, no object” [5]. That effortful pathway is what makes the achievement meaningful. If it were only about the result, then cheating to reach y would be equally considered as working hard to get to y. It seems quite clear intuitively that one gets more satisfaction out of getting toy on her own than by cheating or by heavily relying on someone else's help.

Transhumanism: Will eliminate the need for efforts Deepening our reflection on the link between efforts and achievement, it appears that the latter presupposes the former. Furthermore, if I never have a prior feeling of absence, why would I ever need to work on it? Such “lack of” feeling differs from simply desiring the achievement; it is a precondition of the desire. If I weren't lacking mathematical skills (i.e, if I were good in maths), I wouldn't need to make efforts to improve. If cognitive enhancement, either through the internal biological method or the external aid technique, automatically fills in every absence gap, the need to produce efforts will probably fade.

Objection: Could perhaps object that efforts and the feeling of achievement could still be present in enhanced humans. I feel quite sceptical about such claim. If posthumans were perfect, then, by definition, they wouldn't be lacking anything. Consequently, why would they ever need to make any effort? I see no reason for that. If one wants to learn how to play the cello, no need to make much effort! Might as well get enhanced and learn how to play it faster and better.

Therefore, transhumanism will undermine the sense of achievement: If a. efforts are a necessary condition for the sense of achievement and b. transhumanism will cancel out this need for efforts, it follows that transhumanism will undermine the feeling of achievement. I argued that dissipating the need for efforts could jeopardize the meaning of our achievements. Yet, behind this efforts and achievements question lies an even deeper worry about a greatly valued element that is a pillar for our society: our sense of authorship. People highly value the idea of being the authors of their own life, of their own choices and even of their own mistakes. Expresses this worry when depicting the case of parents “programming” their children because of transhumanism; this would deprive children from their authorship rights [6]. I analyse further the implications of this idea in section 6. Nonetheless, it still feels unclear why we should care about losing the effort-achievement underpinning the sense of authorship if it makes us feel happier and better about ourselves. In a posthuman society, won't we be missing anything at all, and for the best? Wouldn't this precisely make us feel happy and content?

## THE LOSS OF PLEASURE RISK

The senses of achievement and authorship are necessary conditions for admiration

The feeling of achievement and the sense of authorship described above are what supports our sentiment of satisfaction about our own realizations, but it is also what grounds our admiration for others. We should give particular attention to this point because, as famously defended, what we think about ourselves depends on others' perception of us. If the achievement is realized because of an enhancing pill or because of a supercomputer, one has no authorship in it. Therefore, the enhancement takes away the merit that one traditionally has through her achievements. Let me suppose that I know an extremely talented musician and composer, Neil. I greatly admire him for his performances and compositions. But then, I discover one day that his creative and technical abilities are in fact due to continuous cognitive enhancement. My consideration for him will probably be negatively impacted.

Objection: But what if everybody is enhanced? In such situation, why wouldn't there still be admiration for others' achievements? I would answer this objection by reminding that the attribution of merit is one of the grounding stones of our society. If the effort is not attributable to person x, person x cannot feel a sense of achievement and person y has no reason to admire her as she would just as much be able to realize goal z. In Neil's case, the

musical talent would simply be interchangeable. People would have no reason to admire him for his talent if they could just have the exact same one whenever they want to

We can further conclude that this loss of meaning and sense of authorship engenders a loss of pleasure: the pleasurable feeling deriving from one's own achievements and the pleasurable feeling of being admired

The sense of being admired brings about pleasure: As defended above, we value people's opinion on us. Thus, being admired and recognized as praiseworthy provides us with pleasurable feelings. Here, I have in mind the famous Hegelian master-slave dialectic where the need for others' recognition is even what makes one become dependent on the other [7].

Transhumanism will undermine the sense of admiration, taking away the pleasure attached to it: As I argued, cognitive enhancement will challenge the admiration that we feel for people who achieve their goal through an effortful process of which they are the authors. Thus, transhumanism presents the risk of depriving us from a form of self-esteem and from the esteem that we feel for others and, this way, from a pleasure that is at the heart of our social interactions. In section 4, I presented the risk of losing the need for efforts, preconditioning our feeling of achievement and our sense of authorship. It could have been worth putting those at risk if transhumanism were, in exchange, making us happier. But, in this section, I presented reasons to believe that enhancement could actually threaten some of the things that make us happier. It therefore seems quite reasonable to favour a strict regulation of cognitive enhancement.

### Deeper implications and resulting decision: the big illusion and the Precautionary Principle

But, to what extent giving up such pleasures is actually harmful? Are those losses important enough to outweigh the potential pleasures of being more intelligent, more efficient, more rapid and more creative? I think the best answer to this objection is the Robert Nozick's machine thought experiment (1974). The machine in question stimulates people's brain in order to create pleasurable experiences that people could not differentiate from real life experiences. They could be in their bed, motionless, with the illusion of happiness. I see a parallel with cognitive enhancement: maybe we should think of such enhanced cognition as being a kind of illusion. What is the value of being delusional about an intelligence, an efficiency or a creativity that is not ours? Cognitive enhancement could have serious implications on the way we perceive ourselves and the way we perceive others. In the worse scenario, the loss of our sense of authorship could even shake up our current

conceptions of agency and responsibility. Such implications would result in a radical restructuring of society. Consequently, it does not seem reasonable to open the door to unregulated cognitive enhancement use. Calling upon the Precautionary Principle -a general principle encouraging precaution rather than repairs, such technology should be strictly regulated. One might even want to go further and forbid its use, particularly the external aid supercomputer type of enhancement, because of the irreversible consequences it might lead to.

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

I argued that we should regulate the use of human cognitive enhancement technologies by showing how those could alter human nature and undermine the grounding values of our society. First, cognitive enhancement would eliminate the need to produce efforts, which would empty our achievements from their meaning and deprive us from our sense of authorship. Such consequences could cancel out the satisfaction that we get out of our own realizations and the admiration that we feel for others. I presented arguments for warning about a loss of meaning and a loss of pleasure, with the potential consequences of radically reorganizing our society. In regard to all those risks and building on the Precautionary Principle, it feels that we should regulate the use of human enhancement technology. However, further investigation needs to be done on how to set a threshold between the cases of serious impairments (as it is the case for people diagnosed with severe ADHD, for instance) and the cases of people with average cognitive abilities, who have other motives in mind for getting enhanced.

## REFERENCES

1. Persson I, Savulescu J. The perils of cognitive enhancement and the urgent imperative to enhance the moral character of humanity. *J Appl Philos.* 2008;25(3):12-177.
2. Fukuyama F. *Social Capital and Development: The Coming Agenda.* Project muse. 2002;22(1):23-37.
3. Sandel MJ. The case against perfection: what's wrong with designer children, bionic athletes, and genetic engineering. *Atl Mon.* 2004;292(3):50-54.
4. Julia Annas. *Intelligent Virtue.* Oxford University Press. 2011.
5. Dynamique et subjectivité selon Fichte : Effort, pulsion, aspiration. *Revue germanique internationale.* 18. 2002.
6. *The Future of human nature* by Jurgen Habermas Polity Press, London, 2003, £14.99. Cambridge University Press.
7. Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel. *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy.* 1977.