Brassington, Iain. "Must We Make Better People?." *Bioscience and the Good Life*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013. 45–66. *Bloomsbury Collections*. Web. 26 Apr. 2023. <<http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9781472544315.ch-003>>.

Downloaded from Bloomsbury Collections, www.bloomsburycollections.com, 26 April 2023, 14:54 UTC.

Copyright © Iain Brassington 2013. You may share this work for non-commercial purposes only, provided you give attribution to the copyright holder and the publisher, and provide a link to the Creative Commons licence.

Must We Make Better People?

Progress in the biosciences promises all kinds of opportunities to do things to ourselves in the hope of obtaining a better life; and, as I argued in the last chapter, arguments for the impermissibility of such interventions are not compelling. At the other end of the spectrum, there is a range of arguments that suggest that it is not only permissible to make use of these technologies, but impermissible *not* to. In this chapter, I'll examine such arguments – mainly through the prism of John Harris' claim about there being a duty to enhance. Claims about duties to enhance will often refer to things that one might do to (or for) members of the next generation; not the least of the reasons for this is that a claim that we have a duty to enhance ourselves – even if you accept that there is such a thing as a duty to self, and could supply an argument to show that it would apply in this case¹ – looks to be highly paternalistic if it's supposed to be for our own sakes, and slightly totalitarian if it's supposed to be for others'.²

I shall assume that, in respect of the putative duty to enhance others, the obligation is based on the good that it can purportedly do. This being the case, part of the work that the proponent of obligatoriness has to do involves establishing that beneficence is a duty. I'll consider this matter briefly in this chapter, and again (at some length) in Chapter 8, with the intention of arguing that it isn't. However, even without considering that, I think that it can be shown that there is little to no reason to believe that enhancement is a moral duty. On the other hand, my arguments about a duty to enhance have no bearing on whether or not there's a duty to provide therapy. To iterate the argument articulated in Chapter 1, though there is a sense in which therapy is an enhancement, and that might lead us to wonder whether, if enhancement is not a duty, therapy might therefore also not be a duty, 'enhancement' in the everyday sense means something different; and it's that everyday sense that I have in mind here. I'm going to accept without argument that providing therapy, in the sense of providing relief from suffering or aiming to ensure that a life is at least of a reasonably acceptable quality, is obligatory – or, at the very least, quite likely to be a duty.

John Harris' argument for a duty to enhance

There is a brand of optimism insisting that biomedical technologies – particularly those that involve genetic manipulation – promise to allow humanity to achieve in a generation or two what might take natural selection millennia in respect of the elimination of certain diseases or tendencies to disease, and increase in desirable traits such as intelligence. It might even be suggested that those same technologies could be used to instil desirable characteristics that we might reasonably expect *never* to appear ‘naturally’. John Harris belongs to this optimistic group; he claims in his book *Enhancing Evolution* that we have a duty to make use of enhancement techniques to improve the lives of future generations, and uses the word ‘enhancement’ to classify any such procedure. As we’ll see, and notwithstanding the arguments I’ve already presented, the use of the word ‘enhancement’ in this way stores up problems; but it is nevertheless true that some enhancements are possible now, and some of those that are not currently possible are not so squarely in the realm of speculation as to mean that duties relating to them are condemned always to be merely formalistic. Hence I’ll take it as read for the sake of this chapter that the substantial modification of humans for their own good is either possible or theoretically possible. Whether we have a duty to research in order to make practically possible what is only theoretically possible at the moment is a question I’ll address in Chapters 8 and 9.

Closely related to Harris’ claims about enhancement are claims such as those advanced by people like Julian Savulescu concerning ‘procreative beneficence’.³ The principle of procreative beneficence (PPB) rests on the idea that there are traits that it is better for future children not to have. For example, asthma may be easily controllable, but it is probably better not to have it at all than to have to control it. In a situation in which a fertility doctor can implant no more than one of a pair of embryos into a woman undergoing IVF, and one of those embryos carries the ‘asthma gene’ (there is no such gene as far as I know, but the term is a useful shorthand), it would be better – to the point of being obligatory – to implant the one without. After all, if one of those embryos is not going to be brought to birth anyway, it is better on the whole that it should be the one expected to have the worse life, however small the difference.

Still, whatever the resemblance, Savulescu and Harris are not necessarily arguing for quite the same thing. There appears to be a couple of important differences. Most obviously, the defence of the PPB concentrates mainly on choosing which embryo to implant; Harris’ claims encompass this, but also nod towards the idea of inserting characteristics that would not otherwise have been there. A second difference is that procreative beneficence claims are overwhelmingly ‘negative’: they concentrate on avoiding traits that a reasonable person would want (all else considered) to be without, and then getting rid of it. Even if asthma does not seriously erode flourishing, it would still be reasonable

to think that it is better not to be asthmatic. (This is presumably why asthmatics take medication – to get as close as possible to not being asthmatic.) The kind of thing for which Harris argues, by contrast, is more ‘positive’, inasmuch as that it is concerned to *promote* particular characteristics; it is a slightly more radical claim for this reason. And we might think that this makes a difference: while positive enhancement is more of a piece with what I called ‘bare enhancement’, removing characteristics that a reasonable person would not miss has a more therapeutic tinge.

But there are limits to the plausibility of a therapeutic interpretation of procreative beneficence. One reason for this – albeit the least powerful – relies on noting that, while it may be better to be rid of something like asthma for their annoyance factor, this kind of condition is frequently compatible with a more-than-minimally reasonable level of flourishing; hence the beneficent elimination of the asthma gene in a given person would not necessarily make anything more than the most marginal difference to his quality of life, and it’s unlikely to be determinative of whether or not he’s reasonably flourishing. It would not satisfy the criterion for therapy that I suggested in Chapter 1. Yet this attempt to limit the interpretation is weak precisely because there is no reason to think that a therapeutic intervention properly so-called would have to make a difference to the quality of a whole life; it might not. Treating the infected wound of the refugee from Chapter 1 would self-evidently count as therapeutic even though the quality of her life might still be, on the whole, unacceptably low.

A more powerful reason to think that there’s a limit is just that Savulescu’s thought experiment is one in which we’re to choose between two embryos, one of which will certainly come to birth, and the other of which certainly won’t. There is not obviously anything therapeutic about this; at most, we’re minimizing the chance that there’ll be a need for therapy later on. PPB is about creating the child with the best chance of the best life⁴ – it’s not about improving lives. As such, the argument is perhaps best thought of as being neither therapeutic nor enhancing, but prophylactic.

Whether or not there’s an obligation to make use of this prophylaxis is another matter: Rebecca Bennett has argued that there is not.⁵ There is no need to go into the argument in any great depth here; it suffices to say that the principle of PPB aims to generate the best possible future world based on the avoidance of impersonal harm – and it’s an examination of the idea of impersonal harm that occupies Bennett. The overwhelming majority of actual lives are not passed in a ‘harmed state’, she reasons – that is: most lives, even those we would prefer to avoid, are worth living. But if no actual person is harmed by being brought to birth that makes it hard to see how there is a compelling moral reason to avoid bringing that person to birth. If some lives are actually not worth living, there might conceivably be an obligation not to bring them to birth – but this is a long way from establishing that there might

be an obligation to choose against the asthma gene. On this basis, we can infer that the PBB is not just about avoiding harm, but about avoiding good-enough, or even good, lives, just so long as they could counterfactually be better. This would bring us towards something more Harrissian, but would rely also on there being an obligation to be beneficent. This is something I'll dispute here and in Chapter 8. (Even those who, like Peter Herissone-Kelly,⁶ have qualms about Bennett's arguments are not *de facto* committed to accepting the PBB, either.⁷)

For the most part in this chapter, I think it is fair to treat Harris' argument as representative of the kinds of argument for a duty to enhance; the problems that it faces are more or less the problems that face any assertion that there is a duty to enhance; and there *are* problems. The case that I'll be making is that the hand that people like Harris have is reasonably strong, but is overplayed all the same; and it's a tendency to overplay that bedevils claims about an duty to enhance more generally. While, for the most part, there is no duty *not* to enhance, neither is there a duty to do so. The question that remains is whether enhancement is a particularly good idea short of being obligatory, and I'll confront that in the next few chapters.

Harris' argument

The 'ethical case for making better people' is spelt out in the opening chapters of *Enhancing Evolution* (and particularly in Chapter 2, the title of which – 'Enhancement is a Moral Duty' – sets out the stall fairly clearly). A crucial part of establishing his claim is the definition of enhancement as 'anything that makes . . . a difference for the better'⁸. Were a procedure not to make a difference for the better, it would be a straightforward semantic mistake to call it an enhancement. Obviously, I have a slightly different understanding of what makes for an enhancement; but for the moment, I will let this pass.

Good things may be good in one of two respects, Harris thinks. 'Positionally' good things are good because they confer a particular comparative advantage to their holder. For example, if being tall is a good thing, it is likely to be because of the advantages that the tall have over the short. A world in which the average adult height was around 150 or around 200 centimetres would be neither better nor worse than the one in which we live now. However, a person around 175 centimetres tall might well have a significantly different balance of advantages and disadvantages in each world in terms of shelves being reachable, doorframes being headbuttable and so on. Being a certain height is good or bad depending on the height of those around you.

Other things, by contrast, may be 'absolutely' good. There is, for Harris, a set of characteristics that do not necessarily give us advantages over others (although they may), but that simply make lives better.⁹ Education is an example

of the sort of thing that we might plausibly hold to be absolutely good: being better educated than one's peers is likely to confer positional benefit, but being educated is something desirable in its own right as well. A world in which only a few is educated would be a world in which that few would have a positional advantage over the uneducated; that advantage would be eroded were the hitherto-uneducated to receive an education. But benefit of being educated *at all* would be undiminished.

Harris relates the defence of enhancement to the absolute benefits it promises:

I favour and defend enhancements as absolute rather than as positional goods. I defend them because they are good for people, not because they confer advantages on some but not on others.¹⁰

It is not a given that anyone would really have to limit their defence of enhancement to cover positional goods, even by Harrissian lights. After all, the claim is also advanced that 'it is not wrong to advantage some in ways that also confer a positional advantage when all cannot be bettered in those ways.'¹¹ Having said that, the idea that it is *mandatory* to confer positional benefit would be harder to defend (or construct to begin with) than would either the idea that it is *permissible* to do so, or the idea that it is mandatory to confer absolute benefit. (David Jensen's Kantian argument against enhancement for positional advantage is, though problematic in some ways, rather neat on this particular point.¹²) Nor would someone who is concerned about making use of enhancement technologies for the sake of the good life really have cause to worry about positional advantage (unless, implausibly, she could demonstrate that her life would be made substantially worse merely by virtue of there being someone in comparison to whom she was positionally disadvantaged). Yet whether enhancements are better defended as positional or absolute goods, or as both, is a side-issue: more central is the point that enhancements, somatic or genetic, are worth having *qua* enhancements; their value lies primarily in the fact that the bearers of those enhancements would flourish more than they otherwise might.

Having established that, Harris moves on to claim that enhancement is much less occult a thing than many would assume: spectacles, telescopes and microscopes make some kind of difference for the better, and therefore represent fairly innocuous ocular enhancement technologies (and their being able to make a difference for the better is sufficient, in this account, to show that they are enhancements); inoculation against disease is another. Alteration of the human body or genome with the intention of conferring some desired characteristic is, the argument goes, not different in kind. Someone who accepts things like contact lenses and vaccinations ought, on pain of inconsistency, to accept the principle of enhancement more generally.

(A possible interjection here is that the advocate of enhancement has conflated enhancement and equipment: the two categories do not overlap, and

while something like genetic modification belongs in the former, things like spectacles belong in the latter. There might be, on this account, a difference between improving *people*, and improving *function*. Yet it is not obvious that this interjection will take us all that far. For one thing, if we accept that an enhancement is anything that makes a difference for the better, that is all we need to be able to say that to be equipped is to be enhanced. For another, the improvements offered by something like bioengineering are likely to be assessed in terms of the difference they make to function – just as are the improvements offered by becoming better equipped. So the enhancement/equipment distinction is probably merely semantic; and if there is more to it than semantics, it still remains to be seen that it is important.)

There is no need to go further along this line. This short rehearsal is meant to demonstrate that Harris has the components of an argument for enhancement. But demonstrating the components of an argument is not the same as *making* an argument for ‘making better people’, and falls long way short of establishing that such is a duty.

A basic version of the missing parts of the argument is offered in Chapter 3 of *Enhancing Evolution*, where Harris claims that ‘improving life, health, life-expectancy and so on is . . . a *mandatory* dimension of any moral programme’.¹³ The mandate derives from the consequentialist idea that moral value is a function of welfare, so that the power of a duty derives from the benefit that it gives, and the utilitarian idea that builds on this, that we have an obligation to maximise welfare. If we are satisfied that something like genetic enhancement is capable of improving life, health, life-expectancy and so on, the natural next step is to say that genetic enhancement is thereby a duty. I shall claim that Harris mis-steps here in a little while – but there is more to say before I get that far. For now, it is enough to note that Harris’ claim at this point represents at least the beginnings of a positive argument that is stated and elaborated in several places throughout *Enhancing Evolution*.

For example, in relation to the possibility that we might engineer increased longevity into ourselves or our children, Harris suggests that ‘[d]ying of old age is acceptable only because it is regarded as inevitable. Absent the inevitability, the acceptability is problematic’.¹⁴ The logic of the passage would seem to be capable of bearing something stronger: if the sole condition for the acceptability of death from old age is its perceived inevitability, and were it (justifiably) to become regarded as avoidable, it would *not* be acceptable. And had we the means to get rid of something the presence of which is not acceptable, it would seem to follow that we would have a good moral reason to get rid of it – a duty, in fact, since to call something ‘unacceptable’ in everyday language is to say that it *ought* to be altered or got rid of. Harris is saying that allowing people to die from old age in a world in which they need not is not acceptable; the possibility of enhancement of the right sort means that we live, or may soon live, in just such a world. Others – notably, Aubrey de Grey – have mounted arguments that amount to largely the same thing.

At the same time, appealing to the normality of senescence pulls no moral weight:

If we subtract the acceptability from the normality we are left with nothing of moral, nor of argumentative force. Traits in short are not acceptable (in the normative rather than of course the simply descriptive sense of ‘acceptable’) because they are normal, they are acceptable because they are worth having. If they are not worth having, or if they are worth not having, their normality seems bereft of interest or force. This, it seems to me, obviously applies to saving life, that is to postponing death to increase longevity, resistance to the diseases of old age and to those that strike at any time like HIV, cancer, and heart disease.¹⁵

If mortality was a characteristic worth having, then dying might be counted as unproblematic. But it is not something worth having, and dying is something that (*pace* what I’ll say in the next chapter) would be better not to happen.¹⁶ And if it is better that something not happen, then – granted the (*prima facie* minimal) premise that, where possible, we ought not to allow that which it would be better not to happen – this generates the claim that we ought not to allow avoidable death.

To reinforce the argument, note the close association that Harris draws in the passage quoted between saving a life and postponing death or increasing longevity. For him, to postpone a death just is to save a life: the phrases are interchangeable and, therefore, their moral weight must be the same. For Harris, there is no difference between preventing the harm of death from age, Aids or cancer and conferring the benefit of extra life or health. Moreover, since preventing these deaths is a matter of saving lives, it is something we ought to treat as a duty, in just the same way as we are duty-bound to save, or to attempt to save, a drowning child.

If this goes through, Harris thinks, it elides the difference between preventing harm and conferring benefit *tout court*, since it is the conferral of benefit that does the moral work. *Any* conferral of benefit will, by the same token, have corresponding moral weight. When it comes to leaping from claims about extra longevity or disease resistance to claims about, say, sharpened intellectual skills, ‘[t]here seems to be no difference in principle here and thus no difference in the relevant ethical considerations’.¹⁷

In a nutshell, Harris’ position boils down to the claim that, where we can improve lives by whatever standard we choose to assess those lives, we ought; enhancement can improve lives; therefore we ought to enhance. Granted that enhancement may require further scientific research, Harris thinks that there is a secondary obligation to support and/or participate in that¹⁸ – and I’ll turn my attention to that claim later.

Using Harris’ argument as a template, I want to spend the next few pages arguing that there is no duty to enhance. This said, I am willing to countenance the possibility that many enhancements are not only permissible, but admirable as well. But there is no obligation to be admirable; and I think that the arguments for there being an obligation to enhance are overplayed

somewhat, and a number of questions remains unanswered. The areas on which I'll mainly concentrate here concern the best understanding of the two main words in the claim that enhancement is a duty: what is meant by 'duty', and by 'enhancement'?

Why would enhancement be a duty?

In order to get to grips with the question of whether or not enhancement is a duty, it may well be useful to spend a little time looking at what constitutes a duty to begin with.

Very often, we don't have to worry too much about the precise meaning of the word; but in the face of a radical claim that there is a duty to enhance, a little circumspection might be warranted. Harris does not offer a definition of the word 'duty' within the confines of *Enhancing Evolution* – but he has said that 'we have a moral duty to do what we have good moral reasons for doing'¹⁹. This can't be all there is to it, though, for a couple of reasons. For one thing, an obligation is a reason to act; but it doesn't follow from that that all reasons to act generate duties. (The victim of a crime has a reason to punch the perpetrator; but there are reasons not to, too, and there is certainly no duty to punch him.) For another, 'duty' describes not only that which we have a good reason to do, but something more: it describes actions that others could justifiably blame us for not having carried out. That is to say: a duty is an action the omission of which is blameable. The difference will turn out to be important.

Within this definition, there is scope to draw a distinction between *prima facie* and absolute duties. After Ross,²⁰ a duty may be classed as *prima facie* if (a) the action it describes is obligatory in the normal run of things, but (b) the proper consideration of other duties or rights may nullify that obligation. By contrast, an absolute duty is that action the omission of which would be blameable in all cases. Whether or not there is such a thing as an absolute duty, or whether blameability is always a function of context, would be a further question – but it would be a question that belongs in the field of meta-ethics, and is not one that I can address here. For the time being, it's enough to say that, *if* we're going to be making appeals to duty, a distinction between absolute duties and rebuttable *prima facie* duties is a plausible one to draw.

If enhancement is a moral duty, then it would have to follow that *not* to enhance is blameable in at least some cases. So we may justly ask whether, and under what circumstances, it is true that the failure to enhance is blameable. By raising this question, we may hope to get more of a handle on the nature of the duty.

One possibility, which can be shut down fairly quickly, is to relate duties to enhance to a duty of non-maleficence. That there is a duty of non-maleficence

is an idea familiar within bioethics from Beauchamp and Childress' attempt to capture the essence of biomedical ethics in four principles²¹; I shall take it as read that having a duty not deliberately to cause harm is trivially acceptable in its own right. Some commentators have claimed that to fail to promote the welfare of others is to harm them: for example, Harris has claimed that work on cancer therapy is justified by means of an appeal to '“beneficence or nonmaleficence”, or welfare'²² – note that beneficence and non-maleficence are treated as describing the same basic concern – and has written that 'the withholding of a benefit that could be conferred harms the potential recipient'²³. If enhancement confers benefit, not conferring benefit is a harm; and since harming violates the duty of non-maleficence, there would be a duty to enhance.

But while non-maleficence and beneficence are related, inasmuch as both have at least something to do with welfare claims (and so, indirectly, to do with flourishing), non-maleficence is not the same as beneficence. The former is negative in its orientation: it is concerned with avoiding the causation of added suffering. The latter is positive, being concerned with the promotion of welfare. Suffering and welfare might belong on the same spectrum, but this does not mean that non-maleficence and beneficence are versions of the same underlying disposition. I can easily enough refrain from making your life worse than it is now without making it any better: if withholding a benefit harms the potential recipient, it would seem to follow that I have harmed the people I meet by not offering them the contents of my wallet; and if harming is wrong, it would follow that (*ceteris paribus*) not offering them the contents of my wallet is wrong also. That, I take it, is absurd. Nor is my refusal to steal from you an attenuated form of charity. This ought to be enough to demonstrate that duties of beneficence and duties of non-maleficence are, and should be kept, separate.

All the same, we might be able to ground a duty to enhance in a duty of beneficence that could be established argumentatively on its own terms. If a duty to enhance obtains because enhancement improves people's lives, this implies that the real moral weight is carried by the prospect of that improvement; this implies a duty of beneficence. In this respect, I have already noted that Harris is committed to the idea that the moral power of a duty derives from the benefit that it gives: at the start of *Enhancing Evolution*, he talks about a 'responsibility shared by all moral agents to make the world a better place'.²⁴ I take it that that which one has a responsibility to do is equivalent to that which one has a duty to do. So Harris wants to argue that, since enhancement (by definition) makes individuals or individuals' lives better than they would otherwise be, and since a world in which a person's life is improved is better than one in which that life is not improved, enhancement is a duty. This, in turn, implies (on my understanding) that it would be blameable not to improve those lives – which is as much as to say that it would be blameable not to make

the world a better place. And, though welfare is not the same as flourishing, it is straightforward enough to say that an increase in welfare will generally correspond to an increase in flourishing. Hence I shall take the idea of a duty of beneficence to be wide enough to cover a duty to promote the flourishing of others.

The question then would be this: would it be blameable not to promote others' flourishing?

Sometimes, it might be. By improving a person's level of flourishing to a point at which it becomes reasonably acceptable, we would be promoting that flourishing. I'm happy enough to allow that making such improvements where possible is at least a *prima facie* obligation. However, by the standards of the argument set out in Chapter 1, this would count as a therapeutic intervention, rather than bare enhancement. It would not, therefore, be enough to establish that there is a more general duty to enhance. To do that, we'd have to be able to say that it's blameable not to provide for the further improvement of lives that are already at least reasonably acceptable in terms of flourishing. And while providing such improvement may well be admirable, I simply don't see that a failure to provide them would be blameable. Hence there is not a duty.

Here, there might be a worry that I am simply gainsaying or talking past the Harrissian claim, and that using a particular understanding of duty to undermine a claim that enhancement is a duty is all very well, but won't serve to persuade anyone signed up to the Harrissian account. It remains to be shown either that there is no duty of beneficence, or that it is not wide enough in its scope to mandate enhancement.

I think that this can be shown, on the grounds that it is not at all obvious how establishing a beneficence-based and generalized duty to enhance might be done. I'll go into the argument in more depth in Chapter 8, but it seems that there's a range of ways in which we might set about the task – though none of them is up to it.

The least plausible strategy would be to appeal to a version of virtue ethics, and promote a disposition to beneficence – to do the kind of thing that improves the lives of others irrespective of how well-off they are already – as the kind of quality we would admire. Still, there are hurdles that need to be jumped before we can say anything about a duty to enhance from this starting point. Notably, however welcome a moral trait such as a disposition to beneficence would be, strong *ought* statements fit only uncomfortably within a virtue-ethical framework. Hence claims about duty tend to be eclipsed by claims about admirability – but while few, if any, would deny that beneficence is admirable, that won't establish obligation without adverting to some non-virtue-ethical framework; and if we're prepared to step outside of that framework, it stops being obvious why we stepped into it to begin with, or whether it was even a good move.

Various deontological theories tell us that there's a duty to assist the needy – Kant, for example, thinks that it is an imperfect duty to do so. He claims that, while it is possible to universalize 'Every man for himself' as a maxim,

everyone who finds himself in need wishes to be helped by others. But if he lets his maxim of being unwilling to assist others in turn when they are in need become public, that is, makes this a universal permissive law, then everyone would likewise deny him assistance when he himself is in need, or at least would be authorised to deny it. Hence the maxim of self-interest would conflict with itself if it were made a universal law, that is, it is contrary to duty. Consequently the maxim of common interest, of beneficence towards those in need, is a universal duty of human beings.²⁵

Yet Kant's argument refers specifically to people in need, and this criterion does seem to be important: while we might want to embrace the idea that there is a duty of beneficence in respect of need, the idea that we have a duty to give to those who are not in need, or are positively well-off, is much less intuitive, notwithstanding that to do so would be beneficent. So obligatory beneficence in this sense is perhaps better understood as being beneficence of a particular sort, directed to certain specific requirements. But if this is so, it comes up against my understanding of enhancement as being something that imbues attributes beyond what is recognized as being necessary for a reasonably flourishing life. In short, the Kantian argument might be able to establish that enhancement *qua* therapy is required; but about bare enhancement, it says nothing unless we think – implausibly – that everyone is in need simply by virtue of living a life that could conceivably be better in some respect. And while not every deontologist is a Kantian, Kant's account does seem still to be the best attempt to define a set of moral duties by means other than by *fiat*. More importantly, it is not at all clear that a general rule mandating the promotion of further welfare for the already adequately well-off would be forthcoming from any other quarter.

The remaining strategy would be a utilitarian one of welfare-maximization. On this account, moral demands are a matter of bringing about the best possible state of affairs in the world. Since beneficence makes at least some people better off, we ought to perform beneficent actions, at least for as long as it's efficient to do so and their benefit outweighs the cost of their performance. There is no particular reason why this policy has to be thought of as being restricted to the alleviation of need: since it is possible to improve the lot of the well-off, there might be a duty to do that. Yet it is not obvious that it really would be blameable not to improve the lot of the already-at-least-reasonably-well-off; and if it is not blameable, then not doing so would not be a duty.

Naturally, a reasonably sophisticated utilitarian argument ought to be able to distinguish between the obligatory things that we ought to do for the neediest, and the merely admirable things that we might do for those not in

specific need. The problem that this presents in respect of a putative duty to enhance is that avoiding the idea that we have the same obligation to benefit the non-needy as the needy requires drawing some sort of moral distinction between them; but since I understand ‘enhancement’ to refer to things that improve lives that would not otherwise be needy, it is not obvious that this sophisticated utilitarianism would have to, be willing to, or even be able to embrace enhancement as a duty.

Beneficence and duties to enhance

There are other problems with the idea of the duty in a duty to enhance. Not the least of them is that, for quite different reasons from those suggested above, not all beneficent actions are obligatory, and their being hypothetically obligatory would not follow even from their being beneficent. So even if we do have a duty of beneficence, it does not follow that everything that makes the world a better place is a duty. This is because there is a number of ways in which a person may potentially make the world a better place, and potential duties may get in each other’s way. Action *A* may make the world better than would *B*; in this case, there would be a clear moral reason to do *A*. But there may not be a *duty* to do *A*: it may be incompatible with doing *C*, which could make the world a better place to the same extent as *A*, although in a different manner.

Assume that *A* and *C* are unimprovable: there is no option *D* that is better even than they. In such a situation, we could say – based on an appeal to a duty of beneficence – that an agent would have an obligation to do either *A* or *C*. But we could not say that she had a duty to do *A and C*, since – although she has a good moral reason to do both – that would be impossible; and nor could we say which of *A* and *C* duty demands. (This provides a nice demonstration of the problem with Harris’ understanding of the word ‘duty’. If we accept that a duty is that which one ought to do, and that *ought* implies *can*, there is no obligation – no duty – to do *A* and *C*. But there is still a good moral reason to do both. Therefore what there is a good moral reason to do cannot be the same as what there is an obligation to do.) It would appear to follow that it is possible for an action to be world-improving but not obligatory. *A* and *C* are *potential* duties, but the mere fact that some action can improve the world will not mean that it is straightforwardly a duty. The most that we can to say is that, even if improving the world is a duty, a given strategy of doing so is mandatory if and only if it is the best possible way of improving the world to the same extent.

Does enhancement – of persons or of genomes – satisfy this demand? It is not obvious that it does. In fact, granted the many ways in which we could

improve the world in which we currently live, there is a good reason to believe that enhancement of human beings ought to make an appearance quite a way down our list of priorities, and that there is any number of ways in which not enhancing would not be blameable, so not violate any moral requirements. To give a couple of quick examples: it may be a very good thing to provide reading glasses to the presbyopic inhabitants of the slums of Lagos, but it is plausibly more urgent that we provide them with basic sanitation; it may be a very good thing to engineer a greater resistance to HIV in our descendant generations, but it is not obviously crazy to counterpose that with the thought that it is more urgent that we find a way to avoid global warming, develop safe nuclear fusion reactors, and so on. It is not obvious that providing or researching enhancements represents the most demanding or the most efficient of the world-improving things we could do – and it is a peculiar sort of duty that we invariably have a reason to abandon in favour of something else. (Of course, it may be possible to enhance in such a way as to dissolve many of today's problems. The absence of sanitation in a slum might be less serious were we to engineer immunity to cholera, for example. But this seems like a needlessly complex solution to the problem that would still leave millions of presently-existing people vulnerable, and I find it hard to accept the idea that we might have a duty to ϕ when ϕ -ing achieves the same sort of thing as ψ -ing, but in a less effective and more complicated way; hence engineering cholera resistance is not plausibly a duty here.)

The most we can say is that enhancement is a *prima facie* duty – that is, the kind of activity that may be obligatory when there are no competing claims, but the blameability of which's absence may be nullified. Yet, pragmatically speaking, there will likely as not *always* be claims that not only compete for our attention, but are more pressing. The blameability of not enhancing will *invariably* be nullified. This means that, notwithstanding that enhancement would be a good thing, the 'duty' to enhance will invariably turn out to have been illusory.

The point is that it will not do to say that it is *always* blameable not to perform some particular action to improve the world: such a claim reflects, at most, only a particular manifestation of a more general, and implausibly general, duty of beneficence. If improving the lot of the needy – or the world as a whole, for that matter – can be better achieved by doing something other than ϕ -ing, it may be permissible – and would probably be obligatory – not to ϕ . And if this argument goes through, then it will apply to enhancement as much as to anything else. If a life that was not hitherto reasonably good can be made reasonably good by enhancements, then it might be blameable not to provide them – and so it might be a duty. But such enhancements do not meet the everyday meaning of the word 'enhancement' to begin with. It's not nearly so clear that anything more would be blameable.

What is enhancement?

So there's a problem with the claim that enhancement is a duty that stems from how we're supposed to understand 'duty'. If there's ever a situation in which *not* to enhance would be at least as acceptable a course of action as enhancing – and I posit that there frequently, if not invariably, would be – then it would not be obvious that enhancement is a duty at all.

It turns out that the word 'enhancement' is at least as problematic.

To begin with, the word needs fleshing out. As I hinted a little while ago, to say that enhancement is a good thing is to say very little, since if an alteration – whether to a gamete, an embryo, or an adult – turned out not to be a good thing, we would thereby lose the entitlement to call it an enhancement. At the most, we would say that we had *attempted* to enhance this or that characteristic, but that we had failed. (Note that one could *attempt* to enhance without ever once actually managing to improve the world or even much expecting success. But there being a duty to *attempt* enhancement is not the same as a duty to enhance, and we can't say that it's attempts to enhance that are obligatory without relinquishing our claim that it's welfare that provides the moral motor of obligation.)

Harris' idea about 'enhancement' meaning anything that makes a change for the better does improve things – but it is still rather formalistic, since it leaves the question of what counts as an enhancement wide open. For example, someone could quite understandably include on the list of enhancements things like increased intelligence or athletic ability. Equally, heightened resistance to malaria or the common cold, or a reduced chance of suffering from irritable bowel syndrome, would also be fairly straightforwardly classifiable as enhancements. However, giving someone the ability to echolocate would be to make a change and, assuming that nothing comparable was lost in the process, to make a change for the better – it would make navigation around the house at night a lot easier – and so engineering that into humans would plausibly count as enhancement. The same might be said for any number of other characteristics, too.

Here lies the problem: there is an indefinitely long list of things that might count as an enhancement. But, if there is an indefinitely long list, then it is hard to sustain the idea that providing those enhancements might be a matter of duty. After all, if the list of enhancements we could provide (and are in some sense obliged to provide) is indefinitely long, then it means that, if we do nothing, there will be an indefinite number of things we ought to do. But this will be no less true if we do *anything*, or even *everything possible*: there will still be an indefinite number of things we ought to do. In other words, no matter what we do, we will not be any closer to discharging our moral duty – and this makes it hard to see why we must even try. It would not be reasonable to blame someone for not having met every demand on an indefinitely long list – and so a duty that is impossible to discharge doesn't look like much of a duty at all. Call this the *Endless List Objection*, or 'ELO' for short.

There is a few counterarguments to the ELO. First, and apparently strongest, is to point out that a duty to enhance is not the same as a duty to provide every possible enhancement, any more than a duty to rescue a drowning child is a duty to rescue her in every possible way. There being lots of ways to rescue the drowning child doesn't mean that we can avoid choosing one of them; that there's a lot of ways to enhance doesn't alter the obligation to enhance. But this counterargument doesn't quite work – not least because, once the child is rescued, the duty definitely *is* discharged and it is no longer incumbent on us to do anything. This is not true in respect of enhancement; here, we are in the position of the Red Queen, for whom 'it takes all the running you can do to keep in the same place'.²⁶ A cognitively enhanced human could still be athletically enhanced, kept young, immunologically enhanced, cognitively enhanced a bit more, given the ability to echolocate, and given another top-up of cognitive enhancement. The point is that it is hard to see how the notional duty to enhance could *ever* be discharged. The list stays endless.

This leads on to the second counterargument, though, which points out that *even if* the list of possible further enhancements is endless, there comes a point at which it is reasonable to stop providing them (just as it is reasonable to stop attempting to rescue the child after a certain point). But while this is true, it gives the game away, because we are no longer talking about a duty to enhance *simpliciter*: we're now opening the way to a set of claims about what is reasonable enhancement. I'm inclined to think that all enhancement is more than reasonably demanded; but even if that claim falters, there would still be space to talk about how many enhancements are enough. So while it's true that one would be able to avoid the ELO if the argument was about a more nuanced duty to provide enhancements, making this move would simply raise another requirement that the proponent of the position be willing to argue that *this or that* specific enhancement is a moral duty.

Aside from the ELO, an interesting thing to note about Harris' claim in particular is that it is not that we should enhance human *characteristics*, but that we should enhance *humans*. This point raises interesting questions about the nature of the enhancements that we're supposed to instil.

Harris cannot say that what he means is the enhancement of human characteristics without undermining his own argument fatally, since humans are characteristically intelligent within a certain range of intelligence, characteristically athletic within a certain range of athleticism, characteristically susceptible to malaria within a certain range of susceptibility, and – importantly – characteristically subject to the whim of fortune when it comes to stepping outside these ranges. If characteristically human traits are the mark by which we are to understand what an enhancement is, there is no need for us to enhance evolution: natural selection has already made us as characteristically human as we ever could be.

Nor could he appeal to non-characteristically human traits to provide the mark of what counts as enhancement. After all, although we could strive to ensure that each child in some future generation combine the various virtues of the brightest and best of humanity as it stands at the moment, even this seems to be aiming low. Consider, for example, intellectual enhancement. It is possible that no human – even uncharacteristically clever humans – will ever be clever enough to reconcile quantum with relativistic physics; it is possible that one would have to have a different sort of brain altogether.²⁷ Moreover, there's no reason to think that such intellectual feats would represent the epitome of cleverness anyway. So if we're going to enhance at all, it is not clear why the abilities of even the most extraordinary members of the current crop of humans should represent the limits of our ambition: we would seem obliged, by the lights of at least some enhancement enthusiasts, to pursue them beyond even abnormal human ranges. (This is why Harris seems to be, on the whole, a trans-humanist.²⁸ I say 'on the whole' because Harris is not always wholly clear on the matter: in Chapter 1 of *Enhancing Evolution*, for example, he talks about enhancements that will help humanity 'achieve its potential'²⁹ – though, in the light of the considerations I have just presented, that seems rather paltry.)

In other words, when it comes to enhancement, the reason to provide non-characteristically human traits seems to be displaced by the reason to provide characteristically non-human traits. But this takes us straight back to the ELO: we could always be a little bit cleverer, faster, better-looking, or more creative; and if there actually was an upper limit on the number of enhancements that we could provide within the bounds of humanity, there certainly isn't if we've decided to break through them. Certainly, the onus seems to be on Harris and those who share his brand of genomic optimism either to bite the bullet and admit that the scope of the enhancements that we are ostensibly duty-bound to provide is pretty much limitless, or else to dodge it by providing some criterion of genomic propriety that does not undermine the programme of enhancement teleologically before it ever gets going – and that looks difficult. After all: if we are willing to say that there is some sort of upper limit on the amount of enhancement that we are obliged to pursue, we would have to be able to say what it is without opening the possibility that we have, as a species, reached it already.

The point is that, within a phrase like 'enhancement is a duty', the word 'enhancement' is at least as problematic as the word 'duty', and we should therefore be wary of it. One might wonder what remains.

What is 'acceptable'?

The argument of the last few sections would apply to anyone who claims that there is a duty to enhance. Harris' claims provide a handy lens through which

we can examine the structure of a kind of argument that is not uniquely his; but any person occupying a comparable position would have to be able to give a compelling definition of duty, and be able to give an account of how there could be a set of bare enhancements that are obligatory, but which is constrained tightly enough as not to fall foul of the ELO nor so tightly constrained as to admit that the only obligatory enhancements are those that are justified by their ability to make a less-than-reasonably-good life good enough – and so fall squarely within the category of therapy.

However, there is a few things that Harris says that do seem to be more specifically *his* claims, and which merit attention; I'll try to widen the scope of their relevance here, but cannot claim that my arguments over the next few paragraphs will have a guaranteed wide application.

Harris seems in some places to have fallen victim to linguistic ambiguity. A nice example of this is provided in the context of his discussion of the acceptability of death from old age. Consider again what Harris has to say on the matter:

Dying of old age is acceptable only because it is regarded as inevitable. Absent the inevitability, the acceptability is problematic.³⁰

I'm going to look more closely at senescence, and the possibility that we might make use of the biosciences to eliminate old age, in the next chapter; it's the word 'acceptable' that's of concern here. This can bear being read as a component of an argument for death from old age (or for any number of other bad things) being unacceptable.

Does the argument pass muster? I think not. The argument is weak, and its weakness is caused by an equivocation around the word 'acceptable', which could mean either 'that which is capable of being accepted' or 'that which is worthy of acceptance'. A student's essay may be acceptable in the sense of it being possible for me to accept it, but unacceptable in the sense that it isn't very good. The two senses are very different; it is the latter sense that tends to dominate in everyday speech, and Harris admits that it is in that normative sense that he is using the word.³¹ But this normative sense does not belong in any claim about dying of old age being acceptable because inevitable. Of course, from the fact that people *do* accept age-related death, it must follow that they *can* do so; and, from this, it is 'acceptable' in the (non-standard) descriptive sense of the word: it is capable of being accepted. But it would be no less acceptable in this sense if death from old age was something we could prevent easily: a person's accepting such a death is not impossible. Even if no one *would* or even *ought* to accept it, they *could*, and the argument fails as a result.

If the argument is to make sense, we have to read the claim in the sense that dying of old age is not worthy of acceptance. But why on Earth we should believe that death from old age is unacceptable in the normative sense? To say

that something is unworthy of acceptance in this way is to appeal to a norm of some sort that has been violated: the unacceptable essay has violated some rule on plagiarism, the unacceptable behaviour some rule of social propriety, and so forth. But what rule has been violated here, and by whom? If an essay is unacceptable, it is the author who has failed to satisfy some standard. But, when someone becomes senescent or dies from old age, the same does not apply: we aren't looking the Reaper in the eye and telling him he has broken the rules. And if someone said that he was willing to accept the possibility of dying of 'natural' old age 50 years before technologically necessary, we would not – presumably – want to say that *he* had broken them, either. His death would be normatively acceptable to him, and it would be at the very least odd to think that he was mistaken on the matter.

Is it, then, the rule that tells us we have to save lives if and when possible that means that it is unacceptable for us to stand and watch as someone places his first foot in the grave? (We do say that to stand and watch while a child drowns is unacceptable: mightn't the same apply here?) Assuredly not. That there's a disanalogy between preventing death from old age and preventing death from drowning is something I'll demonstrate in the next chapter. But even without that, the claim would have to apply either to people who currently exist, or to potential people, or to both. To advocate enhancement on behalf of those who already exist as a means of saving their lives is either doomed to fail (since, as we have seen, granted that we ought to save lives if and when we can, it does not follow that we have a duty to enhance when there are more effective ways to save possibly more lives) or strange (either because it is hard to see why we are obliged to intervene to save someone's life if that person is perfectly happy to accept his death, or because it suggests – implausibly – that pulling drowning children from lakes is enhancing them in some way). So the rule must apply, if it applies at all, to those people who have yet to exist.

But this also cannot be. The Harrissian argument at this point would rely on a form of the PPB to provide its motor. But who benefits from preemptive enhancement? Noone. If we manipulate the gametes that will become an embryo, we are not improving the life of anyone who currently exists so much as changing the range of possible people they may become, and so providing some possible person with his only chance of becoming an actual person. The same applies if we are trying to choose between implanting an enhanced and a 'natural' embryo after IVE, since implantation is an embryo's only shot at having the kind of life that could be good or bad in the first place. If my only chance at existing was in an un-enhanced state – as it was – then I would *not* be benefited by the cells-that-became-me having been manipulated, because, had they been manipulated, *I* would never have existed at all. Someone similar to me in many ways would have, and that is all very well for him – but he would not have been me. I have not benefited from enhancement, because I only ever had one shot at existence anyway – something that Harris admits cheerfully.³²

By contrast, things are not the same when we pull the drowning child from the pond to save her life. Since she does already exist, our decision is the grave one of whether or not she, a creature who already exists, should continue existing. The decision concerning whether she should *begin* to exist in the first place is not raised. Suffering a person to exist who is vulnerable to age is simply not the same as refusing to pull a child from a pond; it is more like suffering a person to exist notwithstanding that they might drown. One would not normally want to label the possibility of such an existence unacceptable.

The conclusion that seems unavoidable is that the claim about age-related death being unacceptable must either be false or meaningless, there being no violation of any norms. *Acceptability* provides the wrong scale by which to measure senescent death. Such a death is not like the essay that we don't accept because it is hand-written on the back of an envelope. And so this aspect of Harris' claims about enhancement being morally demanded is not compelling.

A duty to enhance?

Ensuring the best life for themselves and their offspring is a project in which humans have been engaged, wittingly or not, for millennia. Indeed, any animal that prefers to mate with the strongest and healthiest could be said to be responding to a genetic imperative to seek out the fittest for the sake of the fitness of the next generation; a selfish gene 'wants' to ensure it has the best vector possible. And since enhancements contribute to this project, and are by definition good, it seems fairly straightforward to say that the project of enhancement is good as well. However, for that project to be a *duty*, it would have to be more than a good thing: it would have to be shown that agents are obliged to do positive good such that they could be legitimately blamed for not doing so, that enhancement is the *best* way to do this – lest there be times when we had a duty *not* to enhance, but to do something else – and that it would be possible to discharge the putative duty.

I have argued that, on all counts, arguments about there being a duty to enhance fail. Reading 'enhance' in broad terms means conceding that there is an indefinite number of potential enhancements we can make. No matter what we do, there will always be something else that we could yet do in addition. And this, I have claimed, looks odd.

We could try to interpret the duty narrowly, and talk about specific enhancements that we are obliged to provide, or specific facets of the project of enhancement that we are obliged to pursue. But now – bearing in mind that this is already a large move away from the initial claim that enhancement in the wide sense of the word is a duty – we have to decide *which* enhancements demand our attention, and in what circumstances. My claim is that, since to be un-enhanced is not the same as being in a harmed state, if any kind

of enhancement did turn out to be mandatory, it would be the kind that is described in ordinary language as therapeutic – which is as much as to say that it would not be much of an enhancement as the word is commonly understood at all. But even ignoring that claim, it seems not to be improper to suspect that at least many things are more demanding of our attention than at least most enhancements. Even allowing that there is a duty to improve the world, it remains to be shown that any particular enhancement – let alone enhancement *simpliciter* – would be the best possible way of doing so. This is a very tall order at best; in all likelihood, it is impossibly tall.

Enhancements are good – that much is analytically true – and they might very well increase a person's flourishing. Providing them is a good thing. In fact, it seems plausible to suggest that providing enhancements is more than good – it is admirable. But it is not a duty. In saying that it is, one would be overplaying a hand that was plentifully strong to begin with.

Notes

- 1 Kant, of course, thinks that there are duties to self (Kant 1998, 6:417 ff); but a duty to self-enhance would not be among them – the closest he'd get to that claim is the claim that there is a duty to develop one's talents (Kant 1993, 4:422–3). See Timmermann (2006) for elaboration.
- 2 One interjection here might be that vaccinations can be thought of as enhancements, and we might have a moral duty to vaccinate ourselves for the sake of public health. If this is permissible, then the back of the totalitarianism objection has been broken. However, there does seem to be a response to this, in that a policy of requiring vaccination has a couple of aspects. In the first, it is an enhancement for the sake of the person being vaccinated – and none of what I say in the coming pages makes this problematic. In the second, from the point of view of the public, vaccination perhaps isn't so much an enhancement as a means of minimising the risks faced by others. Whatever our opinions on such a policy, they won't tell us anything about enhancement.
- 3 Savulescu, 2001, *passim*.
- 4 Savulescu and Kahane, 2009, *passim*.
- 5 Bennett, 2009.
- 6 Herissone-Kelly, 2012, *passim*.
- 7 Vide Herissone-Kelly, 2006, *passim*.
- 8 Harris, 2007, p. 36.
- 9 Ibid., p. 29.
- 10 Ibid.
- 11 Ibid., p. 29; cf. pp. 14–15.
- 12 Jensen, 2011, *passim*.
- 13 Ibid., p. 39; emphasis mine.
- 14 Ibid., p. 52.

- 15 Ibid., p. 53.
- 16 Even in cases of voluntary euthanasia, I take it that death is not desired on its own terms. The best we can say about dying is that it is better (by some standard) than the alternatives in some cases – but that is hardly sufficient to demonstrate that mortality is worthwhile.
- 17 Ibid.
- 18 cf. Harris, 2005, pp. 242–8; Harris, 2007, § 11.
- 19 Personal communication, 4 March 2008.
- 20 Ross, 2002, *passim*.
- 21 Beauchamp and Childress, 2009, *passim*.
- 22 Harris, 2007, p. 50.
- 23 Ibid., p. 189.
- 24 Harris, 2007, p. 3.
- 25 Kant, 1998, 6:453.
- 26 L. Carroll, 1998. *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland/Through the Looking-Glass*. Oxford: Oxford World's Classics, p. 145.
- 27 If, astonishingly, this problem has been solved by the time this is published, substitute some other conundrum such as $P = NP?$.
- 28 Ibid., pp. 39–40.
- 29 Ibid., p. 11.
- 30 Ibid., p. 52.
- 31 Ibid., p. 53.
- 32 see Bennett, 2009, *passim* for an expanded critique of the principle of procreative beneficence; cf. Harris, 2001, p. 385 and Harris, 2007, pp. 105–6.