

Doctoral thesis summary

## **The Notion of Enhancement in John Harris's Philosophy**

Keywords: enhancement, John Harris, bioethics, safety of the people, justice principle, survival lottery, negative action, violence

The subject of my dissertation is the meaning of the notion of enhancement in John Harris' philosophy. The English word "enhancement" used within the bioethics debate takes on a specific meaning in line with scientific and technical usage. The dictionary definition of the word used by Harris is different from that used by the authors of the entry in *the Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy* – namely, that enhancements are biomedical interventions that are used to improve a person or his or her functioning beyond what is necessary to restore or maintain health – and which stems from the foundational literature for the discipline and reflects the shared idea of enhancement. According to Harris, enhancement is, as he puts it, an improvement on what went before, anything that makes a change, a difference for the better, and if something wasn't good for someone, it wouldn't be an enhancement.

In my thesis, I try not only to present Harris' specific understanding of the word, to show how the word functions in his ethical thought, but also to put his considerations into the broader context of the safety of humanity and the duty of persons to make the world a better place. Over the course of four chapters, I attempt to provide an outline of Harris' ethical philosophy, show the convergence of the goal of enhancement and science, which is the welfare and safety of humanity, show the philosophical basis of Harris' thought that can be found in Herbert Hart, discuss the obligation to conduct and participate in research and its relationship to enhancement, and reconstruct the author's arguments regarding people's responsibility for themselves and others.

In the *Introduction*, I suggest that one can answer the question "what is enhancement?" in three ways. One can answer this question starting from the word itself, from the side of the meaning of the concept that this word represents as well as in relation to specific practices or technologies that can be referred to as enhancement technologies.

In *Chapter I*, in addition to a dictionary analysis of the word "enhancement" I suggest my own account on the way Harris considers whether something could actually be considered an enhancement into five levels. These levels are: material change, subjective improvement, moral good, social justice and political safety. I also present the concepts author uses in his moral philosophy, organized, in the form of an encyclopaedia. In a broad summary, we can say that ethics is the science of morality or the science of good and doing good, that is, making the morally best choices, all things considered. It involves determining the right action in a moral sense according to what is best. A good or right action is one that, given the consequences, makes the world a better place. Morality, and therefore the ability to understand what good is, requires an understanding of what the nature of morality is, and it is inherently independent and analytical. Ethics is supposed to support itself on verifiable judgments, something independent of our internal

states, e. g. emotions. Therefore, something indispensable in ethics is to make moral judgments, which are conclusions reached through a language-based deliberation process. Deliberation over judgment is an activity that takes place between individuals presenting their moral reasons for moral action. Ethics itself is a socially determined, rational, discursive process that is not limited only to academic practice and deliberation, which improves people – makes us able to consciously do good for ourselves and others and make the world a better place. Ethics and moral action is one example of enhancement technology. All moral action and the attempt to present the science of morality is aimed at ensuring the survival, safety and well-being of the only beings we know who have the highest moral value, namely, persons. A person is a self-conscious being who has the ability to value his own existence and who is a subject of language or a speaking being.

In *Chapter II*, I start with Harris' remark about how there will be no human beings in the future – we will be exterminated by man-made pandemics or ecological disasters or by the brute forces of nature, or, as Harris hopes, we will continue to evolve in a process that is more rational and much faster than Darwinian evolution, and which the author described in *Enhancing Evolution* – and there will be no Earth, since our sun will die, and with it any possibility of life on this planet. Despite the inevitable end of humans, what must be defended are persons, and enhancing people would be the way to ensure the safety of persons. Harris concludes that the question of the goals and meaning of science overlaps with questions about the legitimacy of human enhancement. That goal is the welfare of humanity and ensuring its safety.

To illustrate this point, the author addresses the debate revolving around H5N1 research. Two research groups – from Wisconsin and Rotterdam – conducted research in which a type A avian influenza virus was modified. Its transmission, at the time before the research, was possible from bird to human through direct contact, while there was no possibility of aerosol transmission. Although the mortality rate from infection with the virus is high, the global death rate at the time was small. The modification of the virus was, among other things, to make it possible to transmit it via the droplet route. The researchers' moral reason for conducting such research was to ensure global public health safety – to prepare for a future possible (natural) pandemic by simulating its emergence (or rather, the emergence of a pandemic version of the virus) under controllable, supervised, safe laboratory conditions. The editors of the journals, in which the research was to be published – *Science* and *Nature* – and numerous international oversight committees (including the NSABB), fearing possible use of the data by bioterrorists, were dubious about publishing it. Eventually, after increased discussion by the international community, the research was published.

Today, thanks to the introduction of the Internet, the responsibility for actions has changed. Researchers, journal editors and international bodies are responsible for the possible negative consequences of publishing research (a possible bioterrorist attack) as well as not publishing research (inhibiting scientific research, which prevents preparation for a possible global pandemic). From the mere fact of conducting research, as well as the possibility of speculating on a future possible threat to humanity, including that caused by the publication of the results, it follows that we must take up the issue of our obligations to humanity, scientific research and human enhancement anew. Our

primary duty as mankind is to protect us as persons from the greatest bioterrorist, that is nature. The author states that the entire practice of medicine can be described as an comprehensive attempt to frustrate the course of nature (fighting against disease, old age or suffering resulting from the normal course of nature). The fight against nature is about fighting against certain harmful effects that we can, thanks to the achievements of science, counteract.

In presenting an obligation to pursue and participate in research, Harris refers to a philosophical concept and justification given by Herbert L. Hart. In this chapter, I present the explanation Hart provides us with regarding the concepts of justice, morality, law, and types of responsibility (role responsibility, causal responsibility, legal and moral responsibility-liability, and capacity-responsibility). The principle of fairness which is a right that provides a special justification for interfering with another person's freedom, plays an important role in justifying aforementioned obligation. The principle of fairness is derived from the reciprocity of restrictions. It proclaims that if a certain number of people conduct any joint endeavour in accordance with certain rules, and therefore restrict their freedom, those who have submitted to these restrictions when required to do so have the entitlement to expect similar compliance from those who have benefited from their compliance.

In *Chapter III* I present a list of theses, which can be drawn from *Enhancing Evolution* and which can be collectively called the theses on the social significance of science and enhancement. They are based on a global understanding of social justice and can be summarized as follows: since all of humanity can benefit from the good created by seriously practiced science (prolonging life, minimizing suffering, improving the functioning of people) it is right to support research on improving people's living conditions, develop enhancement technologies, disseminate scientific advances to all people (and not just to members of developed societies), and enable people who wish to do so to benefit from enhancement techniques and technologies (including both accessibility to health care and human modification techniques).

In this chapter, I also present the reasons given by Harris for the obligation to pursue and participate in research, which is supported by the principle *do no harm* and Hart's principle of fairness. The principle *do no harm* is the most powerful moral obligation we have and it states that we should do what is in accordance with our interest, and it is always in our interest not to suffer. It is also related to the rule of beneficence, which is otherwise known as the rule of rescue. The rule of rescue states that everyone has an obligation to participate in rescue at reasonable risk to themselves, irrespective of their occupation or contractual commitments and this operation aims to reduce suffering or save lives.

Harris gives a broad account of research and science. He writes about "blue skies" research (and philosophy), that is, science practiced in such a way that seeks answers without limits and without fear. It is not the same as goal-oriented research, that is, research that seeks a specific result. What is important in "blue skies" research is to follow a question or hypothesis wherever it leads. The H5N1 research would be an example of such a study - oriented toward exploring future possible harmful consequences of a naturally evolving virus and preparing for them. "Blue skies" research (and philosophy)

is that in which the researcher is driven by cognitive curiosity, with the moral purpose of science at the back of their mind. Therefore, it can be aimed at increasing the possible safety of people.

In *Chapter IV*, I present an analysis of the survival lottery thought experiment and the concept of violence and negative actions. In the thought experiment proposed by Harris, in a text published in 1974, the author presents an imaginary situation. In a world where organ transplant procedures have been perfected, but there are no free organs in stock, two people – Y, who will die soon without a heart transplant, and Z, who will die soon without a lung transplant – propose a method that could save their lives. They propose a survival lottery, which involves all citizens of a society being given a lottery ticket, and when someone needs an organ for transplantation (and there are no spare organs in stock) they report to a central computer, which selects one person from that society who becomes a "life giver". This person is killed and his organs are distributed to those in need. Harris, with his controversial experiment, wanted to show the injustice underlying the natural lottery – the random and accidental distribution of congenital defects, such as heart defects. If we are unwilling to agree to a survival lottery, which at least has some rational justification, we should be even more unwilling to agree to a natural lottery (and therefore also to natural reproduction), which is guided by pure chance.

The author also states that there is no moral difference between killing someone and allowing them to die. He justifies this thesis with his concept of negative action, which can be an act of violence (even if they are devoid of a violent act). When can we say that refraining from an action is in the same sense inducing harm as when directly causing harm, and when can we talk about the responsibility of individuals for this type of inaction? In this way, the author makes his meta-ethical point about the cause-and-effect relationship justifying the fact that, as persons in general, we can be responsible for both positive and negative actions. The notion of negative action can not only subvert the way we look at issues of responsibility, but also puts the notion of enhancement in a new light. If we are also responsible for actions we have not performed, we are responsible for not enhancing ourselves and others. Non-enhancement, in turn, involves harm resulting from the fact that people could be better than they are, and by refraining from enhancement they are not.

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