

## INTERVIEW WITH JOHN HARRIS

John Harris was educated at the University of Kent and at Balliol College, Oxford. He is currently Lord Alliance Professor of Bioethics and Director of The Institute For Science, Ethics and Innovation at the University of Manchester. He is the author or editor of twenty books and over two hundred and fifty papers, and the Editor-in-Chief of The Journal of Medical Ethics. He is a Fellow of the United Kingdom Academy of Medical Sciences.

### *1. Human Enhancement*

**Praxis (First Question):** In your last book *Enhancing Evolution: The Ethical Case for Making Better People*<sup>1</sup> you claim that is not only the case that it is permissible, but also that we have a moral duty to enhance our species. Which are the enhancements that we should be promoting and why?

**John Harris:** In the book the claim is a very general one. The reason why I think we have a positive duty to enhance is simply that enhancements by definition are good for us and we have a duty to do good to others and powerful reasons to better ourselves. So, we always have moral reasons to do good, and if the good is important enough, significant enough, then it can be a positive duty to do good. I give you one example of the sort of things that I have in mind -which is in the book but there are many others. David Baltimore who is a Nobel Prize winning scientist and the president of the Caltech (Californian Institute of Technology) reported some years ago that his labs were working on the possibility of engineering into cells immunity to HIV and to cancer by creating actually new unprecedented cells, cells that had never been in the human genome before, and this would clearly be an enhancement because it is not typical of humans to be protected from cancer and from HIV in this way. If that were possible, then it would clearly be a huge benefit and it seems to me that it would be quite clearly a moral duty to confer this benefit if we can do so. Now, of course, the strength of moral duty to do good is proportionate

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<sup>1</sup> John Harris, *Enhancing Evolution: The Ethical Case for Making Better People*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 2007.

to the size of the good. Moreover, although I might be able to do a small amount of good to one person, I might actually prefer to do it to someone else but I do have this general obligation.

**Praxis:** So, would this be a wide scope obligation? Can we decide in what way to do it?

**JH:** Yes, the scope is wide but we do have duties to do this. Now, given that there is a general duty to enhance, this duty can be particularized collectively so that we do make laws actually to institutionalize particular duties to do good, some of these are simply the laws about not doing harm. The fact that we have laws preventing theft and preventing assaults and preventing murders are part of our general duty not to harm one another and to do good, which is the same thing.

**Praxis (Question 2):** According to what you have called the ‘democratic presumption principle,’ “people should be free to make their own choices in the light of their own values, whether or not these choices and values are acceptable to the majority and only serious real and present danger either to citizens or the society is sufficient to rebuke this presumption”. In relation to this principle I would like you to clarify how you envisage the fulfillment of this duty to enhance our species. Does the principle operate as a kind of justification for the claim that we shouldn’t forbid this sort of biotechnologies because unless there is a serious threat, people should be free to make their own choices? Is your idea that instead of the government encouraging, or even perhaps making it obligatory, for people to pursue this sort of therapies, it would be better to allow individuals to make their free choices and just focus in encouraging scientific research?

**JH:** Many people do not like the idea of human enhancement; they think it is part of an illicit imperative to perfect humans, a master race theology if you like. So my suggestion is that people are not entitled to legislate their prejudices, that human freedom may not be infringed in that way, that there is a presumption in liberal democracies, of which I hope the United Kingdom is one, that the liberty of citizens to pursue the good in their own way is not to be curtailed, or circumscribed unless we have a very good reason which would have to speak to the protection of others.

**Praxis:** Given that you advocate this idea of human enhancement, I was wondering how do you envisage the promotion of these therapies when they became available (I am not sure which ones are available right now...)? Should it be a question of allowing people to make their own choices? Or should it be a policy of the government to promote these therapies or even perhaps to make them compulsion?

**JH:** Generally speaking I think that people should be allowed to pursue the good in their own way but not be forced to benefit themselves and others. However, there are some forms of enhancement which, in some circumstances, it is rational and defensible for governments to impose. I'll give you a couple of examples. First, another enhancement technology which we are familiar with is vaccination. Now, there are circumstances in which in the face of an epidemic, governments have in the past, and may in the future, decided that it is good policy to protect the whole population by vaccination. And indeed they might make this compulsory in some sense. As for example in the US, although it is not criminal not to protect your children against measles or rubeola, children cannot attend public schools unless they are protected. That is a form of compulsion. So in those sets of circumstances I think governments might well reserve the right or entitlement to legislate to force people effectively to use enhancement technologies. Now, we are familiar with that idea in the form of vaccination. Consider another enhancement technology. There are now effective drugs available which improve wakefulness and concentration. Consider, for example, military pilots who have long missions. If the drugs are successful and safe, we might well want to ensure that our pilots use drugs like this in order that air traffic might become safer. Or we might wish to ensure that people in certain occupations, for example, young hospital doctors who are required to do long shifts in an A&E department, or an emergency room as the Americans say, also use these types of drugs. I would prefer them to be alert and wakeful, and able to concentrate on what was wrong with me, and if drugs help them to do this, then I think I would want to be sure that these doctors were taking those drugs.

**Praxis:** What about PhD students who need to submit their thesis really soon...

**JH:** Well, I think that is a case where PhD students could have a good reason to use such a drug, and shouldn't be prevented. I do not think it should be compulsory but that is an interesting question. Suppose it were demonstrated, as it has been in some studies, that the use of a particular drug X aids studying, and students do better on such a drug. Now, these studies have been done with healthy volunteers in Cambridge, on Cambridge students, and it was found that they did perform better in a whole range of intellectual tasks on these drugs. So, I do not think that it should ever become compulsory but it would certainly be legitimate. Now, what if a university were to say we would make these drugs available to our students so that they can do better, what if the University of Manchester decided to do this, what would the University of Cambridge do? If as a result all the Manchester students were performing much better than all the Cambridge students...

**Praxis:** Yet a lot of people think that it is unfair to improve one's ability to work with the help of drugs.

**JH:** It is not unfair if this help is in principle available to all. Now, consider that drugs can be very cheap compared, for example, with private tuition. So, we do not object to the idea that you as university student could pay to have three hours a day with a famous philosopher to help you with your PhD, and that would not be illegal but it would be unfair. But if we could get the same results, or better results, available to all even those who could not afford it, by using drugs, then it seems to me that it would be fairer rather than less fair.

## **2. Public Opinion**

**Praxis (Question 3):** In relation to the issue of public opinion, why do you think that there is so much resistance against the use of techniques for the gender selection of embryos?

**JH:** Gender selection? Do you think it does generate resistance? Would you find it objectionable?

**Praxis:** No...but I am very liberal...

**JH:** There are circumstances in which people can do things for good reasons or bad reasons, and things can be bad in some contexts and not so bad in other contexts. But let me put you this hypothesis: if something is not intrinsically bad and not bad for an individual, why would you not permit people free choices about it? So if it is not wrong to wish as a mother, or as a potential mother, for a bonny bouncy brown eyed baby girl, if it is not wrong to wish for that, and to hope that your child will be a girl and that she will have brown eyes like her mother and so on, why it would become wrong if you had the technology to play fairy godmother to yourself and grant your own wish? Well, I do not think that it would be wrong. So given that is not wrong to be a girl or a boy, how could it be wrong to produce somebody who would be a girl or a boy?

**Praxis:** Why do you think that current policy is against the idea of gender selection?

**JH:** Some people are against it, and the Human Fertilization and Embryology Authority (HFEA) came out against permitting gender selection some years ago, and I criticized

them for it in some articles that I wrote but it is a mystery to me why there is so much opposition.

### ***3. Moral judgement, enhancement and rationality***

**Praxis (Question 4):** Sometimes people base their moral judgements on emotions and what you have called the ‘yuck factor’. If I have understood you correctly, the ‘yuck’ factor would be a tendency to base one’s moral judgements on one’s emotions, for example, repugnance?

**JH:** yes

**Praxis:** And you also think that one should correct these moral judgements by using reason. However, many moral theorists claim that moral judgments are just the expression of emotions. Could you explain how you understand the relation between our emotions and our moral judgements?

**JH:** Of course moral judgements may be influenced by emotions but the question is should they be? I think that they should not be, particularly because we may not be in control of our emotions. So the moral question, the ethical question is not ‘what do I feel?’, but ‘what should I feel?’, and we can’t answer the question ‘what should I feel?’ by thinking about how we do feel, because it doesn’t answer that question. Suppose somebody is planning to choose the sex of their child, and you know how you feel about that, but you are curious about how you should feel about that, and you can’t answer that second question, the moral question, by reference to your feelings. There is a famous case, a scientist who was asked a question and he said ‘I don’t know the answer to that question...’ and the interviewer said “but what is your gut feeling?” and he said “I try not to think with my gut”. I also try not to think with my gut.

### ***4. The Role of the Philosopher***

**Praxis (Question 5):** What is the role of the philosopher in these debates? Is it the case that the philosopher can provide a framework for emphasizing what sort of considerations count as moral reasons? Is the role of the philosopher to provide rational arguments to help people decide what would be the right thing to do?

**JH:** Well I hope what philosophy tries to do is to provide a combination of empirical

evidence and rational argument that you need to sort out all these problems. So philosophers cannot just operate with rational arguments, they have to know about the evidence as well. In the area I am working mostly, which is in bioethics these days, although I am trained as a philosopher and think of myself as philosopher, there is a lot of science I need to know in order to construct rational arguments. I cannot just look at a problem if I do not understand the science, and be a philosopher about it. You actually have to understand the science or the medical facts or the empirical evidence as well.

**Praxis:** Are you in dialogue with scientists as well?

**JH:** Yes, all the time and indeed here at the University of Manchester we have a new institute, the Institute for Science, Ethics and Innovation. The chair of that institute is Professor John Sulston, a Nobel Prize-winning scientist, and when you came to see me I was on the telephone with John, so yes I work very closely with scientists.

**Praxis (Question 6):** Is there a difference between the way in which scientists approach ethical issues and the way philosophers do?

**JH:** Well I think that the perspectives scientists take are as various as there are scientists, just as the perspective that philosophers take varies with each philosopher. However, I think that scientists are primarily concerned with satisfying their curiosity about the Universe, if you like, or about bits of the universe. Very often scientists are concerned about ethics because they think that ethics will obstruct what they do. There are two kinds of people who look at the ethics of science or medicine or technology. There is the famous joke about the mother who said to her daughter “go and see what your little brother is doing and tell him to stop”. Now, many bioethicists think that their duty is to go and see what scientist are doing and tell them to stop . I think what we should do is go to see what scientists are doing and more often I think that they should go on and do more rather than stop. It is not because I like science particularly, but because I see the imperfections in the world and I see the ways in which science and technology can help us overcome those imperfections, help us to achieve our next evolutionary state. I want these solutions; I want cures for diseases; I want people to live longer; healthier, happier lives. I want poverty reduced; I want global warming counteracted. And philosophers are not going to do that, so there are the philosophers who work with scientists to enable them to do that sort of thing.

**Praxis (Question 7):** You have written in many articles or books that you think that the philosopher should be committed to transform the world like Marx said.

**JH:** Yes, well Marx said pretty much that, but Plato almost said that, is not an original idea of Marx, there is a long tradition in philosophy to think that what matters is not simply to understand the world but to change it. And Plato certainly wanted to change the world.

**Praxis:** Yes, that is true but it also true that in this century the opposite perspective (i.e. the view that philosophers should be concerned with understanding the world rather than changing it) has dominated philosophy. Could you specify in more detail the active role that you envisage for the philosopher?

**JH:** (...) My own vision for the role of the philosopher is to try to change the world, and that means not only working with practical people whether they are doctors, scientists, nurses, politicians or lawyers, but also to take part in public debates. So I am very committed to try to reach a wider audience, not simply the tiny and increasingly marginal and marginalized audience that reads *Analysis* or reads *Mind* or reads even *Philosophy & Public Affairs*... But I ask myself if I write in *Mind* how many people would I reach, if I write in *The Guardian*...How many more ...so these things are worth doing.

### ***5. Moral Disagreement***

**Praxis (Question 8):** Given moral disagreement, what sort of view government agencies should take about it? And a more philosophical point, do you think there are objective moral truths?

**JH:** I think that there are right moral views. I think 'moral truth' is a funny sort of expression, but I think that some things are objectively right or wrong.

**Praxis:** Sure. But, should the government act as if these disagreements were irreducible, in the sense that given that there is so much disagreement about certain issues, then governments should allow each group the right to hold their views?

**JH:** Well, if you took a scientific view about what objectivity is. The hallmark of objectivity is just consensus. Objectivity is something that can be established. That means that people would agree about it, so the arguments in favour of it, whether it is a theory about the origins of the universe, or whether there is a theory about the chemical composition of water, it is objective only if people can agree about it. Insofar as there is not substantial agreement it is reasonable to say that these things are not objectively established, so you then come to the question what do you do when political and moral claims are not established, where

there is wide disagreement. And by large you have to try to achieve consensus, you have to try to achieve consensus by the normal means which is a combination of evidence and arguments and of course that might take some time. But of course if it is important and it matters and if the agreement can't be reached, then if you are the government and can and you might legislate, and if you are the opposition you might try to combat the legislation.

### ***6. Equality and biotechnology***

**Praxis (question 9):** I want to ask about a particular issue that you talk in your books; it is the question of inequality and the issue that this biotechnology would be available in the beginning only to wealthy individuals. Why would that be the case? What could we do if these technologies generate inequality?

**JH:** Well, if one is talking about the availability of new technologies or new science what often happens in the process of innovation, which is the process between discovery and the point at which products come into the market place, or they came into the clinic if they are medical products. That process usually involves the development of products which are sold and very often if they are new products they start expensive, but as economies of scale are achieved the prices come down. If the product is beneficial, we have this ethical dilemma: it is unfair if only some people have access to something that is acknowledged to be good, important and useful. What is the solution to that? Well it seems to me that the solution is not to say we will not give it to anybody until we can give it to everybody because while that is fair, it deprives many people who could benefit from it. The example which is very telling here is that in the United Kingdom we do not perform as many heart and kidney transplants as are needed to save lives because there are insufficient organs. So, there is a sense in which it is unfair when not all get them. The solution to that is not to say we will do no transplants until everybody can receive them. The solution is to try to increase the supply and to distribute access to transplants in some fairer way, and that I think is the right solution for new technologies as well.

**Praxis:** What about those technologies that could only be developed if there is a market?

**JH:** Of course the solution to the market is not always to require people to pay for them. What we do in terms of therapies and drugs for health in the United Kingdom is try to making them available free at the point of use through the National Health Service (NHS). And we decide only sometimes and reluctantly that certain drugs are too expensive to be

paid by the public purse. One solution, of course, is for the government to pay for them, if they are important enough and that sometimes happens. And indeed to pay for them not only for citizens of the UK, or the European Union, but to pay for them for citizens in poorer countries as well.

**Praxis:** You have also argued that there is an analogy between the goals of education which for you are to improve intelligence and physical abilities, and the goals of biotechnologies which you claim are the same ones. That is, if we have reason to try to get the best education that we can for our children, then we would also have reason to use technology for the same purposes.

**JH:** Exactly. What I would like to add to that is that unfortunately education is a very inefficient way of improving intelligence and knowledge, and that if we could find better ways that would be a good thing.

**Praxis (Question 10):** If people in rich countries get not only better education but also better genes, then would it not be a way of intervening with the natural lottery of life? Would it not be very unfair for poor children who perhaps insofar as they have these natural abilities have a chance to achieve more than their parents?

**JH:** Yes, if that is right and if we have developed ways of improving the base line by improving upon natural abilities, then it seems to me that is a very good thing to do. And it maybe cheaper to do it chemically or indeed genetically than it is through education and training. Another example I am fond of using is the following one: people say that drugs in sport are very unfair but actually the alternatives to drugs in sport are very unfair. You cannot become a top athlete without a personal trainer, without not having to work because you have to be training all the time, without having a dietician to look after your dietary requirements. To be a top athlete is very expensive. If we can achieve the same results through drugs and if the drugs are cheaper, then that is probably fairer than the situation we have at the moment.

## ***7. Life, Death and Immortality***

**Praxis (question 11):** You have said that you welcome the possibility (I know that this has some qualifications) that the use of enhancements would allow human beings or possibly post-humans to live a very long period of time or even perhaps become immortal in some sense. But many philosophers have thought that the meaning of human life rests

fundamentally in the fact that we are self-conscious beings and that we know that we are going to die, that we embark on projects and try to achieve goals because we know our time is limited. Is a possibility that for humans or post-humans (i.e. intelligent beings) who may in the future be able to live indefinitely or for a very long period of time, life would become meaningless?

**JH:** Well, there is that possibility but I would be willing it to risk it, wouldn't you? Of course we are self-conscious beings but I doubt very much if the meaning of life is given by knowing that we are going to die. And of course if we don't have to die, we are not going to die, then to know we are going to die is to know something false. And there is no virtue in clinging to a false belief. So, if we get to the point where we can indefinitely prolong life, then we would be just clinging to a false belief to think actually that we have to die. And then the next question is: is there any evidence that the meaning of life is only given by our mortality and by our vulnerability and by our fragility? I don't know but I doubt it. And I believe in empirical research which is why I like science. So the solution for me is to experiment, let's let people live for ever and see if they get bored, see if they find life meaningful. What we should not do either as philosophers or as human beings is decide in advance, on only theoretical grounds that something will have a particular effect. Let's do some empirical research...

**Praxis:** Well, philosophers have given so much importance to this idea: Heidegger or Sartre...

**JH:** Hans Jonas as well.

**Praxis:** Perhaps even Kant in a sense...but certainly enhancements would not make us non finite, we could never be beyond not being finite, because there could be wars, accidents...

**JH:** yes, immortality is not invulnerability, so we can always kill ourselves which is maybe a comfort to some.

**Praxis:** We wouldn't be Gods in any sense...

**JH:** We wouldn't be Gods...but since there are no beings that are Gods that is no great handicap.