

Perfection as Lifestyle Choice

Rosaleen Love*

Monash University, Australia

What if perfection of the human body could become just one lifestyle choice among others?

In September 2001, Professor Stephen Harrap and his team from the University of Melbourne announced the discovery of two genes vital in determining the height of men. Men with both genes were up to 4.2 cms taller than would otherwise be the case (Ellis, et al., 2001).

The discovery gives rise to two possible outcomes. First is the use of gene therapy to treat people with disease. Harrap says a link may be established between the two genes and osteoporosis in men.

The second possible outcome is the use of the new gene technologies for human enhancement. Healthy people may choose to become tall as a lifestyle choice.

The use of gene therapy for people with serious genetic conditions is no longer controversial. Research using stem cells is proceeding, though under some restrictions. Gene therapy offers hope to people with otherwise untreatable disease.

What though, of the use of genetic technologies for the enhancement of otherwise healthy people? Human enhancement is already big business, with cosmetic surgery, anabolic steroids, and the recreational use of drugs. These projects are highly controversial. Enhancement through recreational drugs is mostly illegal. The use of anabolic steroids in sport may give temporary enhancement, to be followed by years of physical decline.

Gene technologies will add new dimensions to human enhancement.

It is with the subject of human enhancement in mind that I read the article by Graham Molitor, 'Genetic engineering and life sciences: controlling evolution'. Molitor writes with a commendable biological optimism that I wish I could share. But I cannot.

I'd like to sketch three possible scenarios.

* **Correspondence:** School of Literary, Visual and Performance Studies, Monash University, Clayton, Victoria 3168, Australia.

Email: rlove@vic.bigpond.net.au

Imagine a country that I shall call country A. It is ruled by a caste of feudal warlords who have their own idea of human enhancement. They know women are useless for fighting, for God forbids women to use Kalashnikovs. The men of country A have eliminated the XX chromosome pair from their populations. No women are born anymore. The population is all male.

With techniques of cloning and male pregnancy, women were not needed. When pregnancy proved too unpleasant an experience even for a hardened warlord, came the creation of the artificial womb and the baby boy in the vat.

Being a deeply god-fearing people, they enhance the gene for God, so that the baby boys are born with a great sense of awe and wonder at the mysteries of the world.

The warlords of Country A enhance the gene for God, because they believe there is but one god, but they get themselves into a lot of trouble that way.

The gene for God, enhanced, gave people a sense of a heightened spirituality. God, however, manifests himself in many ways. The men of country A began to find a multitude of paths to God, and that was something that can not be controlled with guns. Country A became, for a while, the land of a million martyrs, until people got sick of the killing, as eventually they must. Some of their men were in the business of creating the babies, and babies must be nurtured somehow, otherwise they languish and die from despair. Country A changed, though it took them too long to discover that their version of human enhancement was more of a path to human destruction.

Country B also engaged in full-scale human enhancement programs. Country B is the dominant world power, its currency the most sought after. Its economy is powered by biotechnology industries, and biochip brain enhancers. But there is one big problem that stands in the way of their human enhancement program. Country B women refuse to have anything to do with Country B men. The women say all the men do is work, drink, and make money. When they come home, all they want is a spotless house and a docile wife, as in the times of old.

The men of country B decided to breed the docile wife, but it took longer than they thought, and the results were unexpected. They found themselves with the worst of both worlds. The Country B man became docile in business deals and aggressive in the kitchen.

Another scenario might interpret the term “human-enhancement” in quite another way, as in the human-enhancement, through industrial processes and deforestation, of the greenhouse effect. Molitor’s forecasts read as if they will take place in a world rather like the United States of America in the year 2001, before the destruction of the two world trade towers. What if, though, the climate changes significantly? Might we then be choosing to enhance quite different features of our future selves, for example, selection for small, light-weight people who will be able to live more simply in the flood-plains of future urban swamps?

Like it or not the human enhancement technologies are coming, and some of will turn out to be worthwhile, and others will be big mistakes.

The idea of perfection as a lifestyle choice makes it seem as if the individual acts alone in making decisions about what size body to be wearing this year. Yet there is more to it than this. In the future parents may be making genetic decisions for their future child for enhancement purposes, in addition to the present use of genetic counselling for parents who carry seriously defective genes.

Problems lie in the framing of the human enhancement as the individual’s right to choose.

For people in rich nations, it can mean more cosmetic surgery, more recreational drugs, short men becoming taller, and other outcomes of the links between big business and medicine. There is money in selling people what they want, and persuading us we want the perfect body is big enough business already.

Human enhancement may mean more than this. For developing nations, it may mean economic self-reliance, food security, economic sustainability, basic but effective healthcare, and the preservation of biodiversity and other natural resources.

The human enhancement debate is just beginning.

Molitor, I think, assumes that illness is something we can recognise, and will be able to fix; that beauty is something we will recognise, and be able to enhance; and the same goes for personality.

Philosopher Carl Elliott disagrees. In his essay, ‘What’s wrong with enhancement technologies?’ Elliott writes that our understandings of illness and personality and beauty are culturally located in particular places (Elliott, 1998). Our present understandings will not be our future understandings. They won’t look the same to someone from another culture, nor will they look the same to us in fifty years time.

Equally, the development of human enhancement technologies will proceed differently in different countries. Some of those uses we are not going to like, or admire.

One suggested use of the discovery of the two genes for tallness in men may be to help aspiring basketballers become taller. But in fifty, or two hundred years, time, basketball may no longer be a dominant world sport. Men may seek to suppress rather than enhance their genes for tallness, for reasons we can't even begin to understand.

References

- Ellis, Justine A., et al. 2001. "Significant Population Variation in Adult Male Height Associated with the Y Chromosome and the Aromatase Gene." *Journal of Clinical Endocrinology and Metabolism* 86 (9): 4147-4150.
- Elliott, Carl. 1998. "What's Wrong with Enhancement Technologies?" CHIPS Public Lecture, University of Minnesota, at the Enhancement Technologies Group website at <<http://www.gene.ucl.ac.uk/bioethics/writings/Elliott.html>>