**Embracing Human Obsolescence: Implications for the Enhancement Project**

**John Danaher**

In both the present target article (Sparrow 2019), and in his earlier work on obsolescence and the enhanced rat-race (Sparrow 2015), Robert Sparrow has identified an important and neglected concern about the impact of rapid improvements in enhancement technology on the quality of human life. For this he is to be commended. Broadly speaking, I agree with Sparrow that rapid obsolescence is a problem that proponents of enhancement need to address: a world in which I and my offspring obsolesce as quickly as the latest model of smartphone does not seem particularly inspiring at a first glance.

But, as Sparrow himself points out, the concern about obsolescence does not provide an all things considered case against the use of genetic enhancement, nor does it balance the risk of human obsolescence against other risks and rewards of rapid technological change. I believe that if we take a broader perspective on technological change and its consequences for human flourishing, we can approach Sparrow’s concerns in a new light, and see human obsolescence as an opportunity not a crisis.

To see why, we first need to consider some of the key premises underlying Sparrow’s concerns about obsolescence. First note that the threat of obsolescence arises whenever technology undergoes *rapid* *change* and development. Obsolescence is consequently a general feature of rapid technological change and not something unique to enhancement – this much is clear from the smartphone analogy. Nevertheless, Sparrow claims it is a particular problem if human capacities are the “technology” that is being rapidly changed. There are several reasons for this but prominent in Sparrow’s argument are (a) because it would mean that individuals are rapidly devalued by themselves and the society in which they live; and (b) it would mean that individuals, specifically genetically enhanced offspring, are treated as products and not as co-equal members of the kingdom of ends (a worry famously articulated in Habermas 2003). I will address (b) towards the end of this commentary; in the interim I will focus on (a) and its connection with obsolescence. I will make three points.

The first point is that the fixation on genetic enhancement is somewhat curious. It would be bad if humans were rapidly devalued by themselves and others, but the suggestion that this is a particular problem when humanity itself, as opposed to its technological artifacts, is the ‘hardware” undergoing the process of rapid technological development is questionable. Human capacities can be rendered obsolete by other technological developments. Innovations in robotics and artificial intelligence, for example, are commonly argued to threaten widespread human obsolescence (Danaher 2019). In fact this has already happened in some traditional areas of work, particularly in agriculture, manufacturing and routine clerical work (Autor 2015). It is increasingly happening in high-end cognitive work (medical diagnostics; legal research and analytics; financial trading) and skilled manual work (driving; food preparation) (Manyika et al 2017). Furthermore, and perhaps most distressingly for human self-confidence, it is also now starting to happen in the world of science, governance and the arts (Danaher 2019, ch 1). If the trend continues, the relevance of humanity to the future of the world may be in doubt.

None of this implies that the threat of obsolescence from genetic enhancement is unreal or should be ignored, but rather that the threat should be viewed in its proper context. The threat of obsolescence from robotics and artificial intelligence is a far more tangible, credible and immediate threat. The threat of from genetic enhancement is more speculative and distant. Indeed, one could even argue that the lust for rapid human enhancement could be a response to these other forms of technologically induced obsolescence. Enhancing human capacities could be a way of retaining traditional human values in an era of automated obsolescence, allowing humans to remain competitive with the machines that would otherwise render them obsolete (Danaher 2016). That said, it’s not clear if that is a plausible or desirable way of looking the function of human enhancement. The main reason for this is that it seems unlikely to work: enhancement technologies are still quite basic and speculative, and are not yet improving at a rapid scale.

This brings me to the second point. Sparrow sees obsolescence as a source of concern but, as he is aware, it is only really a concern if we understand the value of a human life in a particular way. If we have a highly instrumentalist or productivist understanding of what makes a human life valuable, then we are certainly in trouble. If my life is valued primarily (or solely) to the extent that I bring about other valuable ends – for example, to the extent that I am economically productive, or scientifically insightful, or politically effective – then any technological development that reduces my capacity to contribute to those ends will bring my continued value into question. But this is not the only way to think about the value of a human life, nor the best way to do so. This hyper-instrumentalist approach to valuing a life can be highly dehumanizing: people are cast off and disregarded if they are no longer contributing to productive ends; they are not viewed or treated as ends in themselves.

Of course, Sparrow is well aware that this hyper-instrumentalist ethos is questionable and is the source of the problem. This is why he highlights the tensions between the future world he imagines and the loss of the more egalitarian and Kantian world he seems to favour. But embedded in his argument is the assumption that the prospect of technologically-induced obsolescence will cause us to double-down on the hyper-instrumentalist approach to life. Why assume that this will be the case? At the moment, most Western and economically-developed societies probably hover somewhere between a hyper-instrumentalist ethic and the more egalitarian/Kantian ethic. Our economic system, in particular, pushes us in a hyper-instrumentalist direction, but this is counterbalanced by some of the values undergirding liberal egalitarianism. Technologically-induced obsolescence will certainly force us to reconsider the role of hyper-instrumentalism, but if I am correct in suggesting that the primary threat stems from robotics and AI (not genetic enhancement) then there is good normative and practical reason not to double down on hyper-instrumentalism. Instead, there is reason to abandon it and favour a more radical, hypo (or post) instrumentalist approach to the value of human life. Far from representing a crisis for human flourishing, our threatened obsolescence could represent a utopian moment in which personal satisfaction/fulfillment, interpersonal relationships and play become the hallmarks of the good life, not economic and social productivity.

This then leads to the third and final point. Sparrow may well argue that my concerns here are orthogonal to the argument he is making about genetic enhancement and the enhancement project more generally. His point is not simply that obsolescence is a problem in a hyper-instrumentalist world, but that the pursuit of human enhancement is expressive of a hyper-instrumentalist ethos. If we favour human enhancement then we are, in some sense, necessarily doubling-down on the hyper-instrumentalist approach to life. This is why the threat of obsolescence is a particular problem for the proponent of human enhancement. They do not have the luxury of abandoning that value system for some post-instrumentalist ideal. This is where is the Habermasian concern becomes most salient as it suggests that the pursuit of enhancement is expressive of a hyper-instrumentalist mode of valuing, a mode of valuing that turns people into products.

Here, I think Sparrow’s concerns are valid, but less compelling than they first appear. It is true that human enhancement is often promoted and favoured on largely instrumentalist grounds. Proponents of enhancement often want to be fitter, happier and more productive. They want enhanced capacities so that they can think better, act better and make more of a difference to the world. But it is also true to say that this is only one way of approaching the enhancement project. The concept of enhancement is a little vague and open-ended, as Sparrow acknowledges. This makes the concept highly adaptable in response to new perceived threats.

If anything that improves well-being beyond a certain threshold counts as an enhancement, then we have a lot of room to play around with when thinking about the purpose of the enhancement project. It may be true at the moment that improving capacities that are connected with instrumentalist success are the be-all and end-all of enhancement. But it is possible that other forms of enhancement can be pursued and prioritized in lieu of them. Instead of focusing on instrumentally valuable capacities, perhaps we could focus on improving our capacity for playfulness or mindfulness? There are already some people arguing that the use of psychedelic drugs can be viewed as a kind of enhancement (Earp 2018; Hartogsohn 2018) on the grounds that one of the widely-experienced effects of psychedelics is their capacity reduce anxious, future-oriented thoughts and encourage more mindful, in-the-moment living. This is anathema to a hyper-instrumentalist ethos and could also be factored into how we think about what counts as a genetic enhancement.

So, the bottom line here is that the pursuit of enhancement does not necessarily lead to the endorsement of the hyper-instrumentalist ethos. Consequently, it may be possible to both embrace human obsolescence and human enhancement.

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