Title

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Journal

The American Journal of Bioethics, 19(7)

ISSN

1526-5161

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Publication Date

2019-07-03

DOI

10.1080/15265161.2019.1618947

Peer reviewed

“The Empirical Examination of the Social Process of Genetic Enhancement, Objectification and Maltreatment”

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In “Yesterday’s Child,” Rob Sparrow argues that genetically enhanced children will be considered to be obsolescent when the next improvement in genetic technology occurs, and that this will have negative effects on what we consider a human being to be. I offer a few friendly amendments to Sparrow’s persuasive analysis. Since Sparrow acknowledges that he is making empirical sociological predictions, I place Sparrow’s argument into a larger family of empirical claims that genetic technology will transform society’s conception of what humans are (Evans 2016; Kaye 1997), and fill in details about how that literature would describe Sparrow’s mechanisms.

DEPENDENCE ON EMPIRICAL CLAIMS

The ethical literature about human enhancements, like any ethical literature about technologies that are not yet available, is very dependent upon a probabilistic predictive sociology of how people in the future will react to technology. This is inevitable and necessary. Sparrow recognizes that his questions are ultimately empirical claims about what society will do in the face of technology, and that more definitive social science research would require the phenomena to actually be occurring. But, given that we cannot wait, we have no choice but to engage in probabilistic predictions of what the

social implications of technology would be. Sparrow's argument is in a family of implicitly empirical claims about the impact of human technology on what humans will perceive themselves to be.

INDIVIDUAL VS. CULTURAL IMPACTS

When identifying how genetic enhancement will lead to changing how people are perceived, it is important to explicitly distinguish two levels in Sparrow's analysis – the individual and the cultural. Individual level claims in the sections of the paper titled "feeling obsolete," and "being seen as obsolete," include whether an enhanced individual will be treated differently by their parents, discriminated against in the workplace, whether the enhanced individuals will be stigmatized or lauded. These are relatively easy to operationalize into social science research, and their individualist focus makes them an easy fit with the profession of bioethics, as well as public policy and law, all of which prefer to describe ethics as conflicts between individuals (Evans 2012).

But, these are not the most important questions. Sparrow is more interested in the deeper cultural level, which is <u>not</u> whether an individual will be treated differently, but whether human culture will be transformed so that humans – enhanced or un-enhanced – are <u>all</u> thought of differently. He is concerned about the "transformation of human nature such that human beings would become 'products'" (p.19). He also writes that "Enhancement would transform our understanding of what it means to be human such that

we would come to understand ourselves as – indeed, in an important sense to be – manufactured things to be improved upon in future iterations." (P.21-22) This is a cultural change, so whether any human is actually enhanced is not relevant, and all that is important is that we think some humans are enhanced. As the nearly 100 year old sociological adage states: if people "define situations as real, they are real in their consequences." (Thomas and Thomas 1928:571-72)

THE CONCERN IN THE LITERATURE

Sparrow's article is a part of the literature about how enhancement would change our perceptions of ourselves, which was one of the original post-reform eugenics debates about human genetic engineering in the 1960s (Evans 2002). He cites C.S. Lewis and Hans Jonas – canonical authors in that era of debate. But Sparrow leaves the typical punch line in this literature implicit, which is that if humans are thought of as more like objects we will treat them as such (Bain, Vaes and Leyens 2014) For example, nations at war define their enemy as animals ("vermin") or objects ("logs of wood") which makes it easier to kill (Keen 1986), a literal "de-humanization" at the hands of government propaganda. Therefore, to tie it all together, the concern in this literature is that if we engage in human genetic enhancement, we will ever so slightly think of all humans as more like objects, and ever so slightly treat humans worse than we otherwise would.

In other terms, this is not the dehumanization of any one enhanced individual, but of humanity writ-large.

SPARROW'S OBJECTIFICATION MECHANISMS

Filling in the details of Sparrow's mechanism from the social science literature, the objectification of humanity would occur when people become aware of parents' motivation for enhancing their children, which reveals a ranking of capacities. The strength of the idea that humans should be ranked is reinforced as new "improved" capacities for humans become available, which emphasizes that the new capacities are better than obsolescent ones. Since "obsolescence is something that happens to things not people," thinking that some humans are obsolescent will make us think of them as more object-like and by extension that all people are more object like. Similarly, he writes that a unidimensional value ranking of people will develop, which homogenizes social experience. Only objects have unitary purposes, so this will also make humans become seen as even more object-like. Identifying obsolescence as an intensifier of this social mechanism is an important contribution to this literature.

EXISTING DATA

I believe that mechanisms identified by Sparrow and others for how genetic enhancement would make all humans appear to be more object-like are empirically plausible. I have some data on his specific ranking mechanism. I conducted a research project that measured the conceptions

of a human that the public actually holds (what Sparrow calls ontologies) in relationship to questions about biotechnology and whether those are linked with treating people more like objects. (Evans 2016)

My analysis of the same ethical literature that Sparrow is engaged with, and including his earlier writing, led me to look for three versions of the human possibly held by the public. The first is the Jewish and Christian idea that a human is that which is made in the image of God. The second is that a human is that with a particular genetic code.

I focus here on the third, which is that a human is defined by having a particular set of capacities like capacity for rational thought, self-consciousness, moral agency and so on. Critics of the capacities definition are concerned that such a view instantiated in living wills, discussions of the personhood of chimpanzees, the status of coma patients and much else is teaching the public that we are defined by our capacities and, critically, that a human has more value if they have more of these capacities. The object lesson for this effect was the eugenics movement where humans with certain capacities were thought to have more inherent value than others. The reader should recognize that this is the same ranking mechanism hypothesized by Sparrow.

I conducted in-depth interviews of a pseudo-representative sample of 51 ordinary Americans and an over 3500-respondent nationally-representative public opinion survey. Limiting myself to the more easy to

explain survey results, I found that the more a respondent agreed with the capacities definition, the less likely they were to agree that people with "lesser" abilities had the same general value as those with "better" abilities.[1] More importantly, the less a respondent thought that all humans had equal value, the more likely they were to agree with buying kidneys from poor people, that sick people should commit suicide to save money for their families, with taking blood from prisoners without their permission; and torturing people to try to save others. (Evans 2016:60-65) And, to finish the loop, the more strongly someone agreed with the capacities definition of the human, the less likely they were to agree that militaries should stop genocides and the more likely to agree with buying a kidney from a poor person, that people should commit suicide to save money and to torture people to try to save others' lives. I portray these positions as treating people like objects, but I recognize that they are also the positions often taken by utilitarians. For nuance, see the book.

I would be the first to say that my earlier research is not the final word on this topic and indeed, as Sparrow points out, we really cannot get a definitive conclusion until the technology starts being used and the

[1] "What is the general value of people with better abilities compared to those with lesser abilities?" Would you say the people with better abilities have: Much more value, more value, the same value, less value, or much less value?"

hypothesized effects begin to happen. But, I think my research generally supports Sparrow's hypothesis, and he is therefore right to be concerned.

Debates in public bioethical debate that concern future technologies typically rely upon implicit empirical predictions about societal reactions. We cannot wait for the technologies to be developed to try to make these empirical predictions, and they can be done in a probabilistic manner. Philosophers also cannot wait for social scientists to conduct all of the studies that are needed, so I encourage everyone to use as much of the extensive data on our contemporary society as they can to make reasonable predictions about the future.

I finish with noting that the lack of data for implicitly empirical claims is not only the province of those concerned about future technologies. Rather, those who Erik Parens calls "enthusiasts" (Parens 2015)are perhaps even more fact free when they, for example, just assume without data that somehow greater intelligence is good for individuals and for society (Hauskeller 2013:13-21). Social science data on the nature of present social structures, and their durability, would inform all sides of this debate.

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