

Plus ultra! To enhance or not to enhance?

The strange properties of *ontological enhancement* suggest to **David Gems** a new angle on the human condition

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Can I interest you in a new and dangerous idea? It's called ontological enhancement. We can pick up its trail in Philip K. Dick's novel *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* on which the film *Blade Runner* was based. The hero of this tale is Rick Deckard, a hunter of runaway androids. Unlike in the film, the Deckard on the page has a wife, Iran. At one point we find the Deckards together at home, in an intimate but restless moment. Deckard suggests to Iran that she watch television, but she doesn't feel like it. Why not use their Penfield mood organ? Dial 888, "The desire to watch TV, no matter what's on it." But Mrs. Deckard says that she doesn't want to dial anything. Deckard: "Then dial 3." Here is Iran's reply...

I can't dial a setting that stimulates my cerebral cortex into wanting to dial! If I don't want to dial, I don't want to dial that most of all, because then I will want to dial, and wanting to dial is right now the most alien drive I can imagine; I just want to sit here on the bed and stare at the floor.

Life is simple enough when one has desires, and possible means to achieve them. But in their absence, as we sit on the bed and stare at the floor, the question of what to desire and what to aspire to can be hard.

What we should want becomes a quite bewildering question when considering so-called enhancement technologies. These are medical technologies reapplied to enhance human traits or capacities, sometimes in illicit ways. Take Viagra, for example. Marketed for treating erectile problems, it was soon used in other ways - for one, it helps to revive an erection sooner after orgasm.

Likewise, plastic surgery straightens noses and makes breasts more luscious, wind instrument players pop anti-hypertensives to becalm jitters and play more sweetly, and Tour de France cyclists boost their staying power on the sly by upping their blood count with anaemia remedies. Yet these are really just little things when compared to real future possibilities - such as enhancements of longevity, perception, and mental ability.

Is all this good news - or madness? The truth is, enhancement technologies present us with a profound challenge, an embarrassment of freedom. What do we want from them? Or: what sets the limits to the forms of enhancement that we might want? I always found the boundaries of desires and aspirations mystifying. For example, a female friend of mine listens a lot to the music of Benjamin Britten, which leaves me cold. I would like to like it, to discover what I am missing, and will keep trying to develop a taste for it. She also likes to sleep with men. But there I have no wish to discover what I am missing. In fact, even the possibility that I am missing something makes me uneasy. Why is that?

Suppose that a drug were available that could act on gender-determining centres in my brain - something from Penfield, perhaps - to give me the sexual desires of a woman, in addition to my own male desires. Would I take it? Probably not. But that's how I feel now: if I took the drug I would feel differently. So would I take it?

This is an example of what I call *ontological enhancement*, a type of profound enhancement with three eerie properties, superfluity, directionality and identity transformation. This might all sound a bit academic, let me show you what I mean.

Let's start with superfluity. On the face of it, I really would not want to take the gender-extender pill. Other enhancements, perhaps - say, of intelligence or longevity - but extending my gender is not anything that I aspire to. To me such a drug would be *superfluous* to my desires.

Yet suppose that I took the drug: some days later I might be saying: "What I've been missing all these years!" or "Gender-wise, I have seen the light!" This being so, how would I respond if I was then offered an antidote? Assuming no unpleasant side effects, probably with a No, thank you. This is the second feature: *directionality*. Ontological enhancements may be superfluous and unimportant before they have happened, yet once they are done their loss will be experienced as a diminution, a bereftment, even a disability. To someone born blind, their blindness may be a matter of relative indifference, and likewise the possibility of sight. Yet to those accustomed to seeing, becoming blind is a catastrophe.

Finally, in becoming a bisexual man I would undergo a distinct change in identity: a transformation, a metamorphosis. In all likelihood my circle of friends, my tastes, my clothes would all alter: I would be a different person. And some of my old friends might feel they no longer knew me.

Why *ontological* enhancement? Sight for the sightless, hearing for the deaf, the birth of sexual desire *ex nihilo* at puberty: such changes represent extensions of being, of existence - that is, ontological enhancements. Of all the imaginable forms of enhancement, these are the most radical, since they open up new domains of the self, such that there is more of one than there was before. By contrast, other forms of enhancement merely extend or embellish existing qualities.

The superfluity of ontological enhancement sets a boundary to what each of us could become. Yet at the same time, we are each of us free to choose it, just as we choose to have or not to have children, to do something or nothing with our lives, or even to go on living or to commit suicide. To take or not to take the gender-extender pill? That is the question.

But what of the opposite of enhancement? Consider the prelingually deaf (those who have never known hearing). One can ask: are they really

disabled, or are they just different? Over recent decades there has emerged a Deaf community (the capital D signifying the Deaf culture rather than the absence of hearing), with a rich and distinctive culture of its own, centring on the use of sign language. To the prelingually deaf, their deafness is disabling mainly because hearing people are unable to sign. Hence, Deaf people occasionally refer to the hearing as "signing impaired". Do prelingually deaf people wish they could hear? If we consider those who are integrated into the Deaf community, apparently they sometimes don't. Thus, to at least some members of the Deaf community hearing is superfluous. The deaf are not bereft of hearing, yet if they acquired hearing, they would, one assumes, soon feel they had been so. For someone prelingually deaf, acquiring hearing would be an ontological enhancement.

The self seems to be dimensionless: our self fills the new space produced by ontological enhancement as exactly as it filled the old. There is no "increasing" the self. Thus, it is really makes little sense to view the prelingually deaf as disabled, or missing anything - at least, not those that are happily Deaf. This is what is nice about the ontological enhancement idea: it grants us a view of human difference that is more humane, but which does not deny the value of enhancement.

Another idea. Could we understand the uneducated and educated in terms of the values of ontological enhancement? Or - and here's a suggestion that will raise some hackles - what about "traditional" versus "developed" societies? In both education and cultural development, something akin to ontological enhancement is taking place... we can see its hallmarks - superfluity, directionality and transformation of identity. In the case of cultural development, this is a kindly idea. It is painful to have to consider some societies as advanced and enlightened, and others as primitive. To do so seems to doom us to being cultural chauvinists, sneering at

backward "natives", and talking of societies in terms "civilised", "barbarian" or "savage".

The magic properties of ontological enhancement rescue us from such arrogance without forcing us to deny the value of intellectual and cultural development. Let me rehearse the argument once again.

Ontological enhancements are superfluous, so the condition of a hearing person is not better than that of a deaf person. Yet to a hearing person becoming deaf is a dreadful loss. Now, consider the Wa of the forests Myanmar, a very traditional society - head-hunters until recently. The bright young Wa who found himself at a university might easily grow to view his own people as backward and primitive. Not because of the betel nut chewing or the snacking on rats (cultural relativism, that). But rather, the illiteracy, the obscured view of the world.

Through the prism of ontological enhancement we can view Wa society, without hypocrisy, as simultaneously equal to and less than our own. This is thanks to the strange nexus of superfluity and directionality. One seems to have to say "it is better to have more, *when* one has more, but not before". Thus, we who can hear and read cannot view the deaf or the Wa as having less, although we have more.

But... how to respond to superfluity? One possible response is a new ethic, one that says, go further. Or as the early transatlantic sea-farers would have it, *plus ultra*. So then, enhancement technologies: too much trouble? Or plus ultra!

David Gems is reader in the biology of ageing at University College London.

(A longer discussion, from which this article was extracted, is available online at <http://www.ucl.ac.uk/~ucbtdag/DGRefs.html>).