

Human Nature

Abstract

In the course of history, two (apparently incompatible) answers to the question of human nature have been given. On the one hand, the traditional "standard account" of human nature claims that we have something which other animals lack (namely, rationality). This is accompanied, however, by an antithetical, rival account which starts from the opposite claim, namely, that we lack something which other animals have. In this entry, the bioethical implications of both views on human nature are fleshed out. Subsequently, it will be shown how the contemporary debate over human enhancement has forced us to reconsider the question of human nature in a very fundamental way.

Keywords Human nature - Human enhancement - Aristotle - Philosophical anthropology - Philosophy of technology - Hegel - Dialectics and bioethics - Peter Sloterdijk

Introduction

Although "human nature" may at first sight seem a fairly academic and outdated issue, it actually proves to be right at the heart of contemporary bioethical debate and more relevant than ever. New biomedical technologies have always tended to revivify the question what makes us human, and in recent years, this notably applies to the debate between bioconservatives and transhumanists over human enhancement. Should we consider the dramatic reprogramming and upgrading of human bodies and brains (as advocated by the latter) as an assault on human nature or rather as the ultimate exemplification of what we humans essentially are, namely, intrinsically technological beings? According to some, we are even on the verge of a dramatic refurbishing of human nature or, as the French novelist Michel Houellebecq (1998) phrased it, humankind is about to undergo a "metaphysical mutation." In short, human nature is once again an issue which bioethicists cannot afford to ignore.

History and Development: Background of the Issue

The desire to understand ourselves, to conceptually grasp our "nature," the "essence" of what we are, is as old as philosophy itself. According to the Greek travelogue writer Pausanias, the famous maxim "Know Thyself" (γνώθι σεαυτόν) was inscribed in the front of the Apollo Temple at Delphi by the seven sages in the sixth century B.C. (1971, p. 466). Since then, the quest for self-knowledge has remained one of the key challenges of our *cupido sciendi*, our "will to know." We are our own favorite target species, so to speak, and in the eighteenth century, the poet Alexander Pope (1924/1959, p. 189) captured this in the following lines: "Know then thyself, presume not God to scan,/The proper study of mankind is man." On June 26, 2000, these lines were quoted during a famous press conference announcing the imminent completion of the Human Genome Project. The "question of questions" ("Who are we?") was about to be answered, so it seemed. Our nature (our genetic blueprint) was about to be revealed, at last. But the question what human beings essentially are has never been convincingly solved and even the human genome sequence failed to provide the ultimate answer to the riddle of the Theban Sphinx. From the dawn of Western philosophy in ancient Greece up to the present, the issue of human nature has remained one of the most controversial and perennial items on the philosophical agenda.

Conceptual Background: Two Rival (and Incompatible?) Understandings of Human Nature

In this entry, it will be explained that, in the course of history, two apparently incompatible answers to the question of human nature have been formulated, each of them pointing in a completely different direction. It is this chronic lack of consensus concerning human nature that is still hampering bioethical debate today.

On the one hand, it is claimed that human beings have something which (other) animals lack. This will be referred to as the traditional standard account of human nature. On the other hand, the very opposite has been claimed as well, namely, that human beings lack something which (other) animals have. Are both claims reconcilable somehow? What are their bioethical implications? And can they help us to untangle the polemics that have recently emerged around "enhancing"

human nature? Both answers have something in common as well, however. They both aim to explain what we essentially are by comparing human beings to (other) animals. In other words, they opt for a comparative ontological analysis.

The first of these two answers (the traditional standard account) was inaugurated by Plato and Aristotle twenty-five centuries ago. It claims that human beings are basically rational animals. Although we share some characteristics with (other) animals, such as a natural inclination towards self-preservation and reproduction, we have something which (other) animals lack, namely, a rational soul. This allows us (or forces us) to realize our goals in a conscious, considerate manner, relying on our knowledge of the world, rather than on preprogrammed instincts, like other animals tend to do. In other words, rationality allows us to systematically explore the world and to use (apply) this acquired knowledge in a prudent way. In the course of the twentieth century, this view on human nature, although still being advocated, has increasingly come to be seen as problematic, both in philosophical and in ("applied") bioethical discourse.

The counter-account basically claims the opposite, namely, that we lack something which (other) animals have. Although this view has been present (as a philosophical undercurrent) since time immemorial, it only recently gained momentum. What used to be the dominant view in philosophy (the standard account) has now become recessive, and vice versa, as we will see.

Thomas Aquinas, Aristotle, and the Standard Account of Human Nature

The standard account of human nature starts from the idea that a limited set of basic moral goals are to be realized in life. Thomas Aquinas (1922, *Pars Prima Secundæ*, Q 94) lists four such basic human goals, namely, (a) self-preservation, (b) securing the future existence of the human race by producing and caring for one's offspring, (c) seeking the company of others (participating in social life), and (d) improving one's cognitive faculties/furthering our knowledge about the world and God. The realization of this set of goals supposedly leads to a good and happy life, allowing us to become what we essentially are. Moreover, Thomas Aquinas is convinced that the objectives to which we are naturally inclined correspond with our moral obligations: they are legitimate moral goals. In other words, there is a basic inherent concordance between our (natural) inclinations and our (moral) obligations: between what we want to achieve and what we ought to achieve.

The first of these inclinations (to preserve one's existence) is something we share with all living beings. It corresponds with the moral obligation to safeguard (human) life.

The second natural inclination is shared with all other animals, namely, the tendency for men and women to seek each other's company and, through intercourse, to produce and educate their natural offspring. This concurs with the moral value attached to marriage and family life.

Subsequently, we are by nature social animals, inclined to live in society, but we are also commanded to do so by natural law.

Finally, there is the inclination, typical for humans, to discern the truth about the world as well as about God. But again, there is concordance between our natural craving for knowledge and the moral law. Indeed, the latter prescribes us to shun ignorance and to further human understanding.

This set of natural moral goals (self-preservation, procreation, participation in social life, and the pursuit of knowledge) builds on the works of Aristotle who, in *Politics* (1932/1977), already argued that man is a conjugal animal and that "the first coupling together of persons ... is that between those who are unable to exist without one another, namely the union of male and female for the continuance of the species. [For] with man as with the other animals and with plants there is a natural instinct to desire to leave behind another being of the same sort as oneself" (I i 4, p. 5). Moreover, according to Aristotle, man is by nature a political animal (I i 9, p. 9), taking part in the life of the state, because this provides optimal conditions for individuals to realize the good life. Finally, in the opening sentence of his *Metaphysics* (1996), Aristotle claims that man is a thinking animal, since "all humans by nature desire to know." All these tendencies and talents, which we naturally have as human beings, must be seen as capacities, however, as human potential. We do not engage in these moral pursuits automatically but must be put on the right track through training and education. This presupposes the existence of culture, of a moral community that allows us to achieve these natural moral goals in a civilized and well-managed way.

One of the benefits of this view of human existence is that it gives rise, at least in outline, to a coherent program/agenda for biomedicine. For in principle, the basic objective of biomedicine is the help us to realize these goals. In other words, the goal of biomedicine is to preserve human life and to promote well-being (human flourishing) and human fertility (allowing us to reproduce and raise our children). Human well-being is not only an end in itself, moreover, but also instrumental in allowing us to actively participate in (and contribute to) society. Our natural inclination to acquire

knowledge, moreover, will further our understanding of the functioning of the human body, which subsequently will support and give rise to an effective biomedical practice, tailored towards realizing these basic goals. As Aristotle explains in the second book of his *Physics* (1980), there is a natural tendency inherent in the body towards self-preservation, towards well-being and health, and the basic objective of biomedicine is to assist nature (more exactly, the human body) in realizing this tendency to maintain and restore health, fertility, and mobility (by removing physical obstacles to social participation and biological reproduction). In other words, the physician is a servant of nature ("minister naturae").

To everything, there is a season, moreover. Childhood is different from adulthood, which again is different from old age. This means that biomedicine must observe the natural boundaries of physical existence. Intervention is called for when infertility, for instance, occurs prematurely. At old age, interventions to preserve life should become more restrained than earlier in life. This concurs with the second maxim, inscribed in the front of the Apollo Temple in Delphi by the seven sages, namely, "Noting too much." In contemporary terms, biomedicine must be oriented towards therapy (seeing illness as deviance from natural normalcy), rather than towards enhancement (shifting natural physical and biological boundaries).

To sum it up, although we share some basic inclinations (self-preservation, procreation, etc.) with other living beings, we (as rational animals) have something which other animals lack, namely, rationality: the ability to realize our goals in a conscious and "evidence-based" way. This allows us to develop technologies that will effectively help us to achieve our goals. Yet, technological interventions must be guided by normative principles that are grounded in nature. Rationality (as well as its moral correlate: prudence) is not something that is simply "given," however. It is not a "privilege," but rather an obligation, a calling we have to live up to, a capacity we have to develop and refine through training and education, in the course of a whole lifetime, resulting in wisdom and virtue.

Most modern philosophers, such as Descartes and Kant, continue to side with this standard account, claiming that human beings "have" something which (other) animals lack. Descartes, for instance, argues that, whereas animals are basically automata (machines), human beings are endowed with a thinking soul. And Kant claims that, whereas all animals are organisms, only human beings can rightfully be regarded as rational subjects, as moral agents, so that only humans can have rights. Both authors underscore, moreover, that rationality cannot be taken for granted: it must be formed and edified through training and mental exercise (through reading, writing, logic, mathematics, and so on).

The Counter-Account: Humans as Deficient Beings

The traditional standard view on human nature and human existence, however, is neither self-evident nor indisputable. Since time immemorial, a completely different view has been put forward as well, albeit initially in mythological and literary, rather than in philosophical genres. This view basically claims that human beings lack something which (other) animals have. Whereas other animals are well adapted to their environment, able to live up to the challenges of natural existence, being endowed with specialized body parts and organs (such as claws, teeth, fur, superb senses for seeing and smelling, etc.), human beings are by nature remarkably vulnerable, disoriented, and helpless. Social life (the grouping together in the form of clans, villages, cities, nation-states, etc.), in combination with human technologies (pyro-technology, metallurgy, agriculture, etc.), must be seen as compensations for our congenital deficiencies. However, in the course of history, these compensations have become so astonishingly successful (giving rise to complex human societies, in combination with sophisticated and effective human technologies) that they evolved into a threatening, overwhelming force in their own right, through overcompensation. In other words, in order to survive, a development was set in motion long ago that now seems impossible to control, as it is guided by a tendency towards excess ("everything too much").

This also applies to biomedicine. Rather than allowing us to achieve our natural goals, biomedicine now seems bent on completely reprogramming biophysical existence, so that the objective has become "enhancement" (i.e., upgrading natural capacities), rather than "therapy" (restoring natural normalcy).

The Prometheus myth can be seen as an early version of this countervailing view. Human beings are depicted as helpless, disconsolate, and pitiable creatures, on the brink of extinction, ill-adapted to a natural life. They are saved by a gift from above: pyro-technology, the art of managing fire. A frightening, awesome natural element (fire) is miraculously domesticated, and this is the beginning of culture. We as human beings are compensated for our lack (of fur, for instance) by a technology that allows us to control the temperature of our environment, while keeping (pyrophobic) predators at

bay. This is the first of a whole series of technological revolutions. Prometheus is ruthlessly punished by Zeus because the latter quickly realizes that technology (via overcompensation) will eventually make human beings more powerful than gods.

A similar idea is expressed by Sophocles in the famous choir in his play *Antigone* where it is said that, whereas natural elements and large animals are initially more threatening (*δεινός*) and forbidding than we are, the most unsettling entity on earth (*το δεινότατον*) are we ourselves. We have acquired the power to alter the course of rivers, to capture and domesticate horses, and to subjugate large bulls. Through culture and technology, we master and dominate nature, overpowering and destroying what is apparently much more powerful than us.

Gradually, this view came to "infect" philosophical discourse as well. One of the first modern philosophers susceptible to it was Hegel, who sees human beings as acting (rather than merely "behaving") animals. In his *Philosophy of Nature* (1830/1970, 9, § 245, p. 13), he argues, referring to Sophocles, that human beings are more awesome (*δεινότερον*) than nature herself, and in the *Phenomenology of the Spirit*, notably in the famous sections explaining the dialectics of Master and Slave, a historical dimension is added to this insight. Hegel's Master still occupies the position of the Aristotelian aristocrat, for Aristotle's view on human nature may indeed be regarded as an articulation of the ancient Greek aristocratic master-discourse (Zwart 2009). While enjoying the fruits of the labor of others (i.e., slaves), the master has sufficient leisure to contemplate (human) nature. Meanwhile, the slave, relying on his hands as well as on his brains, really interacts with nature, thereby gaining robust concrete knowledge concerning the functioning of natural systems. Experimental (hands-on) knowledge, rather than contemplative (hands-off) theories, constitutes the core of "slave-epistemology." By developing natural sciences and technology, the slaves become much more powerful than their masters until, in the end, by way of an epistemological revolt, the "hard" natural sciences, pervading nature and intervening in natural systems in very effective ways, take over and metaphysics is dethroned, so that respectful contemplation of nature gives way to manipulation and disruption. In other words, coming from an original position of subordination and intimidation, human beings (through science and technology) finally manage to gain sway over nature (while eclipsing the master-discourse that had presented social inequality as "natural," that is, as inherent in human nature).

This line of thinking was taken up by Friedrich Engels who saw humans as laboring animals and who, in the context of his (posthumously published) manuscript entitled *Dialectics of Nature*, devoted a whole chapter to the role played by labor in the emergence of human nature and the transition "from ape to man." It is through technology and labor, Engels argues, that nature is gradually overwhelmed by us, allowing us to satisfy our needs. This is the optimistic version of the countervailing account: ultimately, in the ideal society of the future, all our shortcomings will be overcome.

A more pessimistic view on human nature was put forward by Sigmund Freud, who defined humans as pathological (rather than "logical") animals. Human beings, he argues (1930/1948), are unhappy and frustrated creatures (indeed, human happiness is a transitory experience at best). In the course of history, various methods have been developed to reduce unhappiness, such as intoxication (i.e., the use of toxic substances to evoke pleasurable sensations or at least to subdue disagreeable ones), but this usually means that in the end, we are worse off. Other methods consist in ignoring or even annihilating insatiable desires, but this, Freud argues, only seems to work for a small minority of people. The most successful strategy so far, Freud claims, has been the development of science and technology to control nature. And indeed, we humans have made much progress in this respect: the soil has been cultivated, animals have been domesticated, and we ourselves have been turned into what Freud refers to as "prosthesis-gods," equipped with all kinds of machinery as artificial limbs. But this has not made us happy either. Quite the contrary, while discontent continues, these accessory organs, and the various forms of labor and servitude they entail, often become a source of unhappiness and frustration in their own right. We end up with neurosis as a psychic pandemic modern plague, quite symptomatic of modern technologically advanced societies. Moreover, many products of technology strike us as unsettling and "uncanny," as disruptive rather than benign. This process has been continuing for quite some time now and there is no telling where it will end.

To make matters even worse, moreover, the striving for happiness (the so-called pleasure principle) is not the only program embedded in human nature. There is also a darker side to human nature as well, namely, the tendency towards destruction as an independent drive, expressing itself in our hyper-destructiveness as a species. The only technique developed so far to counteract this innate aggression is to internalize it in the form of a ruthless conscience, torturing us with bitter self-reproach: a psychic affliction which only seems to befall humans (as guilt does not seem to play a role in the carefree, guilt-free lives of other animals at all).

These ideas have been taken up (and elaborated into an impressive philosophical anthropology) by Jacques Lacan. Our

psychic malaise, he argues, is inherent in the human condition as such. We are born prematurely into this world, unable to walk and talk, or even to control our metabolism. By way of compensation, we are infected by (and preyed upon by) culture. But culture awakens in us insatiable desires, and thus a disruptive gap comes about between what we seek and what we find in this world. We are haunted by cultural images and messages and overwhelmed by demanding technologies (by computers, gadgets, machines, etc.), giving rise to alienation and to a plethora of neurotic and psychotic symptoms. The human situation is without precedent in nature. As insatiable, craving individuals, we continue to dwell in a self-made, instable, unreliable, artificial, technological world, quite incomparable to the natural environments of other animals. But there is no escape, as culture is an inherent part of what we are.

Similar views can be encountered in the work of Nietzsche, who sees humans as unfinished animals, but this allows us to take up new types of challenges coming from culture (our self-made environment). In human beings, the omnipresent strive for power has gained a new momentum. Indeed, humankind may even be regarded a transitory phenomenon, a temporary stage on the route towards the realization of the superman: not a particular biological variant of *Homo sapiens*, but rather a post-biological, self-made creature, able to determine the conditions of its own future.

In the twentieth century, this line of thinking has become the dominant view on human nature, the dominant "philosophical anthropology." Human beings are increasingly seen as deficient creatures, as *Mängelwesen*, as Arnold Gehlen (1940/1062) phrased it, suffering from organ inferiority (Adler, 1917/1927). This deficiency (this physical inferiority) must be compensated with the help of science and technology, but sooner or later, this will give rise to overcompensation, so that science and technology become a threatening, alien force themselves, dominating, employing, and exploiting us (rather than being dominated, employed, and exploited by us).

This view is summarized in a rather radical way by Martin Heidegger in his *Introduction to Metaphysics*, published in 1953, the year in which Edmund Hillary and Tenzing Norgay conquered Mount Everest, while James Watson and Francis Crick discovered the molecular structure of DNA: in other words, the very year in which nature in all her dimensions finally seemed to be conquered by human beings. Heidegger (1953) begins his account by referring to Sophocles' *Antigone*. Whereas nature is "deinos" (terrifying and forbidding), the most awesome entity on earth (to *deinotaton*) are we ourselves: humankind as such. Initially, technology seemed a benevolent factor, giving rise to a "familiar" world (*heimlich*, in German) of traditional technologies (the tools of crafts and agriculture), wherein we still could feel at home. But now, our technological sway over nature has become downright uncanny, in the literal sense of the term: *un-heimlich*. We no longer can feel at home or at ease in our man-made technological environment, but rather experience chronic uneasiness and discontent. We ourselves have become human "resources," the ultimate material to be exploited by the global technological system that is now ruling us.

According to Heidegger, this also applies to biomedical technology. Whereas traditional ("familiar") medical techniques worked in service of the natural inclination of the body to restore/maintain its health (1967), our bodies are now exposed to a demonic, technological force ("*Gestell*"), turning them into a standing reserve. And one could add that, in the current era of "cognitive capitalism," the focus has shifted from human bodies to human brains. We have been thrown out into existence, vulnerable and fragile, but have been saved by (and infected by) technology, as compensation. Thus, we ourselves became the awesome. But now, technology is about to turn against us. We ourselves are now in the process of being overwhelmed and invaded by this alien, uncanny, omnipresent power. And this is a revealing experience, because it shows us what we really are, according to the truly Greek definition of a human being, namely, the uncanny entity that overwhelms and overpowers nature against all odds but may fall victim to its own achievements in the end.

Preliminary Assessment: Human Nature as an Emergent Property

So far, we have presented the debate over human nature as a collision between two basic, incompatible statements, namely, (a) human beings have something which (other) animals lack and (b) human beings lack something which (other) animals have. This deadlock may be overcome by adopting a Hegelian, dialectical approach. The beginning of the debate is a positive statement: humans beings are animals with a "surplus" (A+), namely, intelligence or rationality. This definition of what we are, however, inevitably gives rise to its "negation," its reversal, emphasizing the shortcomings, the lack of being on the part of humans, in comparison to (other) animals: A-. Both statements are (polarized) "moments," however, of a comprehensive, overarching "truth": a third term, combining the positive statement (our surplus of being) with the negative statement (our lack of being) into a process of becoming. In other words, yes, we do have something which other animals lack, but this is the product/outcome of a long history (of conflict and struggle) rather than a starting point. And yes: we do lack something which other animals have, but we overcame this defect by frantically working on

ourselves, both individually and collectively. In other words, A+ is the outcome of self-cultivation and self-domestication. Between "having something" (A+) and "lacking something" (A-), we are continuously becoming what we are. Or, in modern biological terms, human nature is an emergent property. And this "becoming" human is the "negation of the negation": the negation (abolishment) of our deficit, our lack. Although we are exceptional beings in an unprecedented way, our uniqueness and singularity is not "natural" but historical in a very profound sense of the term: we are self-made. Human nature consists in our plasticity, and the concept of what a human being is is something which has to realize itself in the course of history.

For Hegel, modern, self-made, nineteenth-century humans could be regarded as the final end product of a long history, but in this, he seems to have been mistaken, for science and technology continued to develop and now we seem to be on the verge of a completely new chapter in the history of human nature. This, at least, is what is at stake in the so-called human enhancement debate.

Human Enhancement: Is the Debate on Human Nature Now Reaching Its Final Act?

The human enhancement debate is (again) dominated by two apparently incommensurable (polarized) positions. On the one hand, the so-called transhumanist position, arguing that transcending ourselves by means of science and technology, is something "typically human." Time has come, moreover, to promote a radical transformation of human nature through the application of science and technology, taking our destiny and evolution firmly into our own hands once and for all. Gregory Stock (2002) for instance has argued that human enhancement is both natural (for humans, in view of their plasticity) and inevitable.

On the other hand, we have the bioconservative position, bent on safeguarding human nature against biotechnological infringements. These authors principally reject technical intervention in human nature (for instance, in the human brain or the human genome) and highlight the dangers of enhancement, especially "dehumanization." Their ideal is to "stay human." Francis Fukuyama (2002), for instance, has proposed to identify a "factor X": the uniquely human genetic endowment that must be traceable somewhere on our genome and could explain our exceptionality and singularity (as highly intelligent and creative beings, compared to other animals).

From a Hegelian/dialectical point of view, it is easy to discern that both (allegedly incompatible) views have once again something in common. They both start from the idea that we have something which other animals lack: we are A+. Although the bioconservatives call it our "humanity," while the transhumanists refer to it as our inherent "technicity," they both see humans as "enhanced animals" to begin with. Thus, the transhumanists claim that we have always been enhancing ourselves. We are (by nature) self-enhancing animals, as it were. And in order to safeguard human existence and to upgrade human intelligence in the future, we have to drastically further our knowledge of human nature so as to be able to enhance ourselves even more effectively. And this is called for, moreover, in view of the challenges we are facing (from overpopulation, global pollution, and the demands on individuals coming from sophisticated modern technologies and complex societies up to viral pandemics caused by global mobility, ecological disruption, and climate change). Meanwhile, the bioconservatives, although they move in the opposite direction, start from the same basic conviction: we are A+ (or, as Fukuyama phrases it, we "have" a factor X).

In view of this common ground, one could argue that the tediousness of their ongoing debate is explainable by the fact that both positions leave something out, namely A-. In the case of the transhumanists, for instance, what is missing is the awareness of the possibility that we will prove unable to employ these new, self-directed technologies in a responsible manner. We may not be able to live up to the awesome technological power we are about to unleash.

A perhaps more "Hegelian" position has been developed by Peter Sloterdijk (2001, 2009). First of all, he argues that indeed we are highly vulnerable and deficient beings (Mängelwesen), both from a historical and from an individual perspective. We are born prematurely into this world, so that protective spheres have to be developed (clans, caves, houses, agricultural villages, cities, metropolises) together with the technologies and social networks they entail. Gradually, something like A+ emerges but as a product, by way of compensation, rather than as a privilege. Moreover, qua product, and qua compensation, our A+ can never be taken from granted as a starting point (as both the transhumanists and the bioconservatives seem to do). Both positions fail to take into account the instability and frailty of the human psyche, as well as the uncanny and pervasive potential looming in our technologies. In other words, to the extent that technological power will be expanding further (in order to meet survival challenges), new tools for managing and domestication of these technologies must be developed as well, so as to forego that this (potentially quite disruptive)

technological "leap" into the post-human future becomes inhuman. In other words, science and technology call for the codevelopment of something that may compensate these "compensations": something which (among other things) includes societal debate, moral deliberation, bioethical research and critical analysis, to begin with, but also the infrastructure that allows us to remain the subject (the agent), instead of becoming the object (the target) of this imminent revolution.

Conclusion

In the human enhancement debate, both parties advocate a partial truth. On the one hand, the bioconservatives argue that, if transhumanism is unleashed without some kind of bioethical compensation, something which we currently "have" (our humanity) may well be lost. We may deprive ourselves of the very conditions that allow us to work on ourselves and improve ourselves (as we have been doing since time immemorial). On the other hand, given the fact that what we have (A+) is itself a product of culture (of science and technology), we cannot use it to advocate a moratorium on techno-scientific progress from now on. In dialectical terms, the compensation (science, technology, and culture, as compensation for our lack of being) must in turn be compensated by bioethics, philosophical reflection, and societal interaction, resulting in governance and policy strategies to prevent technology from sliding into overcompensation. Technoscience is not a benevolent force in and by itself. Rather, it is uncanny by definition. This entails a plea for prudence as a middle ground between a much too optimistic (euphoric) and a much too pessimistic (phobic) view of enhancement technology.

Bioconservatives and transhumanists represent the two faces of the enlightenment, namely, the humanistic (anthropocentric) and the technological (utopian) one. But the enlightened view of human nature is myopic and tends to eclipse the more obscure and detrimental (unconscious) aspects of ourselves as uncanny beings, as well as of the technologies we bring forth. Whereas the bioconservatives believe in humanity and the transhumanists put their faith in technology, a critical approach is called for, able to discern (and come to terms with) the strength and weaknesses, the possible benefits and inherent deficiencies of both. The good news (on the conceptual level) is that the human enhancement debate has once again forced us to (re)frame and (re)consider what we mean by "human nature" in a very fundamental way.

Cross-References

Enhancement
Genetic Determinism
Humanism
Transhumanism

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