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The “Sustainable History” Thesis: A Guide for Regulating Trans- and Post-Humanism

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NAYEF AL-RODHAN, APR 24 2018

The subject of inequality is rightly at the centre of many debates regarding domestic and international politics. Some of the political shocks destabilizing the Western world, and responsible for the quick surge of populism, are due to rising perceptions of economic inequality and injustice. To this aspect, issues related to racial inequality, particularly in some countries, add to a bleak image of persistent inequalities and disempowerment. Further, as also demonstrated by the 2008 financial crash, extreme inequality has dramatically intensified rather than dissipated. These considerations offer powerful evidence that even liberal democracies remain insufficiently attentive to the dignity needs of individuals: indeed, while they enshrine liberties and rights for all, they also tolerate obscene levels of inequality and marginalization to persist, and a blatant assault on human dignity.

Less frequently discussed in this connection are the unfamiliar forms that inequality has begun to take. Given our growing capacities for physical and cognitive enhancement, enabled by neuroscience and advances in other disciplines, the notion of inequality is bound to acquire new connotations in the coming decades, beyond the problem of economic disparity – although there is an economic component to it insofar as access to enhancements are more readily available to the wealthy. Technological convergence leads us on the path to trans- or post-humanism, whereby humans could transcend their natural limitations and acquire physical and/or cognitive abilities beyond those that define their species. Enhancement, if it is not carefully regulated, will be developed and applied unevenly, resulting in far greater social and political inequalities. Were this to occur, the potential destabilizing effect to the international system would be significant.

Early forms of human enhancement with the help of technology and pharmaceuticals have proliferated in recent years. In the long term, this will have profound consequences for the future of both individual and state relations. Physical enhancement is already starting to show its effects on social trust. For instance, the ongoing scandals related to the Olympics are highly illustrative: those athletes who choose not to use outlawed forms of enhancement are known to be at a severe disadvantage compared to those who resort to methods of enhancement. In this context, sports competitions, typically conceived of as prime examples of a venue for the unbiased evaluation of merit, become thinly veiled demonstrations of wealth and power. The use of some cognitive enhancements on campus (such as Adderall, Ritalin or Concerta) also gives unfair advantage to some students, keeping them focused for longer. In the workplace, enhancement will have profound implications on productivity and inter-organizational relations. Finally, the use of enhancement in the military will have profound impacts on the conduct of military operations, giving enhanced soldiers more endurance and, implicitly, operational value. It's the impact of human enhancement will be wide-ranging, both in the civilian and military realm.

Controlled substances are a small fraction of the potential means of enhancement. Our growing knowledge of neuroscience, genetics, nanotechnology, bioinformatics and robotics make the possible forms of enhancement that are becoming or are likely to become available staggering. Faster mental processing is in principle achievable with the further development of neuroscience, via the introduction of nanotechnology or the manipulation of genetic codes—a possibility made much more likely with the development of collaborations like the Human Genome project. While global disparities in life expectancy are already significant, emerging technologies will further and dramatically increase longevity. In principle, the obstacles to a significant prolongation of longevity are slowly being removed for

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the most fortunate. Assuming that common sense alone will prevent a widespread adoption of such new technologies is simply baseless and goes against everything that neuroscience has revealed thus far about human nature.

With insights from neuroscience, I previously theorized about five timeless human motivators, which guide our actions – sometimes unconsciously. I called these the ‘Neuro P5’: *power, profit, pleasure, permanency, and pride*. Given the malleable nature of our moral compass and behavior, when a technology appears which guarantees or enhances these powerful motivators, we will most likely pursue it. This might go against the assumption of human nature as rational and, indeed, a lot of evidence in neuroscience converges towards the conclusion that emotionality is a key characteristic of our “rational” nature. Even as technologies of enhancement are set to present serious existential risks in the long run, the prospect of enhancing ourselves is a very appealing one. With technological innovation bringing more and more possibilities of enhancement, transhumanism becomes a question of “when” more than “if”. In a world populated mostly by humans, such trans or post-humans will be unequal entities, without precedent in human history.

A salient reason for concern regarding human enhancement is that it potentially reinstates patterns of ranking human beings. The insidious ways in which such ranking occurs include ethnic, theological, political and gender discrimination. A challenge introduced by post-humanism is that categories of inferior and superior risk becoming an inescapable reality. The temptation to conflate enhanced abilities with evaluations of merit will be greater as enhancement develops.

Such inequality risks shaking the foundations of social cooperation. In legal and normative terms human rights doctrine recognizes the equal worth of human beings and dictates equal treatment for all. The difficulty arises in practice because we cannot be complacent about the enforceability of law. Humanity has a long history of tolerating forms of discrimination and attributing unequal worth to different people. It is imperative to bring dignity into discussion. My philosophy of history, “Sustainable History” posits that only dignity-based governance is sustainable in the long run.

Dignity is a fundamental human need, insufficiently appreciated in political theory and, indeed, even more central to human nature than the quest for liberty or political freedom. The search for dignity has pushed humanity forward and examples from around the world demonstrate this. This also explains the crises battering even mature democracies in the West, where people do enjoy political freedom and Constitutional rights but where many live in poverty, alienation, exclusion and hopelessness. Importantly, what I mean by dignity is much more than the mere absence of humiliation. It is a more comprehensive and holistic set of needs that include: *reason, security, human rights, accountability, transparency, justice, opportunity, innovation, and inclusiveness*.

The disruptions caused by enhancement technologies will be particularly damaging for societal justice, where all countries already face challenges in varying degrees. When injustice is allowed or perpetrated, it poses a threat to all the parties involved, leading to unrest, social turmoil, and revolutions. Ultimately, nobody can be left behind if humanity is to succeed. “*Sustainable History*” theory requires not merely the absence of oppression but the presence of recognition. Any hierarchical understanding of humanity entails the denial of certain kinds of recognition and the possibility of a future of post-humans imposes such hierarchy by its very nature. While I believe that enhancements and transhumanism are inevitable, there is an urgent need for regulation of enhancements to ensure that human dignity is not sidetracked.

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