

Genetically engineering humans for enlightenment?

David Pearce wants to enlighten you. Not just you; he wants humanity to evolve itself past human suffering through genetic engineering. He is the founder of the abolitionist project, which seeks to free humans and other animals from pain and struggle.

Pearce is a transhumanist. He thinks that through science, it's possible for humans and all other animals to move beyond their biological failings. Here's a clip of Pearce talking about the ways in which he foresees humans will reach this goal:

For Pearce, this doesn't just mean creating clean energy and genetic treatments that stop disease before it starts. His vision is a world where we've bioengineered our brains to be beyond suffering. From Pearce's website, abolitionist.com:

Beyond the optimists, there is a very small minority of people who are what psychiatrists call hyperthymic. Hyperthymic people aren't manic or bipolar; but by contemporary standards, they are always exceedingly happy, albeit sometimes happier than others. Hyperthymic people respond "appropriately" and adaptively to their environment. Indeed they are characteristically energetic, productive and creative. Even when they are blissful, they aren't "blissed out".

Now what if, as a whole civilisation, we were to opt to become genetically hyperthymic – to adopt a motivational system driven entirely by adaptive gradients of well-being? More radically, as the genetic basis of hedonic tone is understood, might we opt to add multiple extra copies of hyperthymia-promoting genes/allelic combinations and their regulatory promoters – not abolishing homeostasis and the hedonic treadmill but shifting our hedonic set-point to a vastly higher level?

The utopian environment Pearce seeks to create is a physical space, but largely one that's in our head. He argues that uniformity won't be a problem when everyone has the same baseline of happiness engineered into our brains because happier people seek out novelty more than other people. This may be true of the psychological literature in our current world, but it's hard to extrapolate into a world where neurotransmission as we know it has been altered.

Libertarian Ronald Bailey, who writes for Reason, doesn't have a problem with transhumanism at all, but he does with the idea that all humans should be put on this track. [How does](#) a zen-world address personal liberties?

This ideal of political equality arose from the Enlightenment's insistence that since no one has access to absolute truth, no one has a moral right to impose his or her values and beliefs on others. Or to put it another way, I may or may not have access to some absolute transcendent truth, but I'm pretty damned sure that you don't.

What if a majority decides that we must free zebras from their stripedness? The black ones are keeping them from diffusing heat efficiently and they're getting too hot (or some such hypothetical suffering related finding). If we engineer them all to be white, are we taking away their zebra-ness?

Similarly, it's difficult to imagine a human life that does not involve the perception of struggle. Major world religions are founded on this exact principal. We know [some types of stress are adaptive](#) to us, while others are particularly harmful, But if we totally eliminate stress and the perception of stressors in humanity, what will be left to incentivize the next generation of human to keep evolving and developing these ideas?

Pearce makes some very interesting and profound points: If we can use our technologies to eliminate suffering, we have an ethical obligation to do so. In the United States, we already do this everyday when we refuse to turn uninsured patients away from emergency medical treatment.

And, it's definitely conceivable that in the next centuries humans will absolutely be able to eliminate psychological suffering on a grand if not universal scale. "Two hundred years from now, if suffering exists it will be because we've chosen to preserve it," Pearce says. But in Pearce's idea world will choice remain one of the fundamental parts of being human?

Additional Resources:

- [Transhumanism in the crosshairs: The dark side of radical longevity](#), Genetic Literacy Project