

Technologically enhanced humans—a look behind the myth

November 30 2017, by Gérard Dubey



Augmented warrior. Credit: U.S. Army/Flickr, CC BY

What exactly do we mean by an "enhanced" human? When this possibility is brought up, what is generally being referred to is the addition of human and machine-based performances (expanding on the figure of the cyborg popularised by science fiction). But enhanced in relation to what? According to which reference values and criteria? How, for example, can happiness be measured? A good life? Sensations, like smells or touch which connect us to the world? How happy we feel

when we are working? All these dimensions that make life worth living. We must be careful here not to give in to the magic of figures. A plus can hide a minus; something gained may conceal something lost. What is gained or lost, however, is difficult to identify as it is neither quantifiable nor measurable.

Pilots of [military drones](#), for example, are enhanced in that they use remote sensors, optronics, and infrared cameras, enabling them to observe much more than could ever be seen with the [human eye](#) alone. But what about the prestige of harnessing the power of a machine, the sensations and thrill of flying, the courage and sense of pride gained by overcoming one's fear and mastering it through long, tedious labour?

Another example taken from a different context is that of telemedicine and remote diagnosis. Seen from one angle, it creates the possibility of benefiting from the opinion of an expert specialist right from your own home, wherever it is located. For isolated individuals who are losing independence and mobility, or for regions that have been turned into medical deserts, this represents a real advantage and undeniable progress. However, field studies have shown that some people are worried that it may be a new way of being shut off from the world and confined to one's home. Going to see a specialist, even one who is located far away, forces individuals to leave their everyday environments, change their routines and meet new people. It therefore represents an opportunity for new experiences, and to a certain extent, leads to greater personal enrichment (another possible definition for enhancement).



Telemedicine consultation. Credit: Intel Free Press/Wikimedia, CC BY-SA

How technology is transforming us

Of course, every new form of progress comes with its share of abandonment of former ways of doing and being, habits and *habitus*. What is most important is that the sum of all gains outweighs that of all losses and that new feelings replace old ones. Except this economic and market-based approach places qualitatively disparate realities on the same level: that of usefulness. And yet, there are things which are completely use_les_ – devoting time to listening, wasting time, wandering about – which seem to be essential in terms of social relations, life experiences, learning, imagination, creation etc. Therefore,

the issue is not knowing whether or not machines will eventually replace humans, but rather, understanding the values we place in machines, values which will, in turn, transform us: speed, predictability, regularity, strength etc.

The repetitive use of [geolocation](#), for example, is making us dependent on this technology. More worryingly, our increasing reliance on this technology is insidiously changing our everyday interactions with others in public or shared places. Are we not becoming less tolerant of the imperfections of human beings, of the inherent uncertainty of [human relationships](#), and also more impatient in some ways? One of the risks I see here is that in the most ordinary situations, we will eventually expect human beings to behave with the same regularity, precision, velocity and even the same predictability as machines. Is this shift not already underway, as illustrated by the fact that it has become increasingly difficult for us to talk to someone passing by, to ask a stranger for directions, preferring the precise, rapid solution displayed on the screen of our iPhone to this exchange, which is full of unpredictability and in some ways, risk? These are the questions we must ask ourselves when we talk about "enhanced humans."

Consequently, we must also pay particular attention to the idea that, as we get used to machines' binary efficiency and lack of nuance, it will become "natural" for us and as a result, human weakness will become increasingly intolerable and foreign. The issue, therefore, is not knowing whether machines will overthrow humans, take our place, surpass us or even make us obsolete, but rather understanding under what circumstances – social, political, ethical, economic – human beings start acting like machines and striving to resemble the machines they design. This question, of humans acting like machines which is implicit in this form of behavior, strikes me as both crucial and pressing.



Korean robot, 2013. Credit: Kiro-M5, Korea Institute of Robot and Convergence

Interacting with machines is more reassuring

It is true that with so-called social or "companion" robots (like Paro, [Nao](#), NurseBot, [Bao](#), Aibo, [My Real Baby](#)) in whom we hope to see figures, capable not only of communicating with us, acting in our everyday familiar environments, but also of demonstrating emotions, learning, empathy etc. the perspective seems to be reversed. Psychologist and anthropologist Sherry Turkle has studied this shift in thinking of robots

as frightening and strange to thinking about them as potential friends. What happened, she wondered, to make us ready to welcome robots into our everyday lives and even want to create emotional attachments with them when only yesterday they inspired fear or anxiety?

After several years studying nursing homes which had chosen to introduce these machines, the author of [*Alone Together*](#), Sherry Turkle, concluded that one of the reasons why people sometimes prefer the company of machines to that of humans is the prior deterioration of relationships which they may have experienced in the real world. Hallmarks of these relationships are distrust, fear of being deceived and suspicion. She also cites a certain fatigue from always having to be on guard, as well as boredom: being in others' company bores us. She deduces that the concept of social robots suggests that our way of facing intimacy may now be reduced to avoiding it altogether. According to her, this deterioration of [human](#) relationships represents the foundation and condition for developing [social robots](#), which respond to a need for a stable environment, fixed reference points, certainty and predictably seldom offered by normal relationships in today's context of widespread deregulation.

It is as if we expect our "controlled and controllable" relationships with [machines](#) to make up for the helplessness we sometimes feel, when faced with the injustice and cruelty reserved for entire categories of living beings (humans and non-humans, when we think of refugees, the homeless or animals used for industry). A solution of withdrawal, or a sort of refuge, but one which affects how we see ourselves in the world, or rather outside the world, without any real way to act upon it.

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