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## Are engineered humans the solution to climate change?

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From NZCPR 8/4/12

No, this is not a joke. Just ethical suggestions from Oxford University, UK.

First, an extract from Atlas Shrugged.

?Sweep aside those parasites of subsidized classrooms, who live on the profits of the mind of others and proclaim that man needs no morality, no values, no code of behavior. They, who pose as scientists and claim that man is only an animal, do not grant him inclusion in the law of existence they have granted to the lowest of insects. They recognize that every living species has a way of survival demanded by its nature, they do not claim that a fish can live out of water or that a dog can live without its sense of smell?but man, they claim, the most complex of beings, man can survive in any way whatever, man has no identity, no nature, and there?s no practical reason why he cannot live with his means of survival destroyed, with his mind throttled and placed at the disposal of any orders they might care to issue.?

Paragraph 37, Galt's Speech by Ayn Rand.

So far, conventional solutions to global warming ? new government policies and changes in individual behavior ? haven't delivered. And more radical options, such as pumping sulfur into the atmosphere to counteract warming, pose a great deal of risk.

There may be another route to avoid the potentially disastrous effects of climate change : We can deliberately alter ourselves, three researchers suggest.

Human engineering, as they call it, poses less danger than altering our planet through geoengineering, and it could augment changes to personal behavior or policies to mitigate climate change, they write in an article to be published in the journal *Ethics, Policy and the Environment*.

"We are serious philosophers, but we might not be entirely serious that people should be doing this," said Anders Sandberg, one of the authors and an ethicist at Oxford University in the United Kingdom. "What we are arguing is we should be taking a look at this, at the very least.

In their article, they put forward a series of suggestions, intended as examples of the sorts of human engineering measures that people could voluntarily adopt. These include:

? Induce intolerance to red meat (think lactose intolerance), since livestock farming accounts for a significant portion of greenhouse gas emissions.

? Make humans smaller to reduce the amount of energy we each need to consume. This could be done by selecting smaller embryos through preimplantation genetic diagnosis, a technique already in use to screen for genetic diseases. "Human engineering could therefore give people the choice between having a greater number of smaller children or a smaller number of larger children," they write.

? Reduce birthrates by making people smarter, since higher cognitive ability appears linked to lower birthrates. This could be achieved through a variety of means, including better schooling, electrical stimulation of the brain and drugs designed to improve cognitive ability, they propose.

? Treat people with hormones, such as oxytocin, to make us more altruistic and empathetic. As a result, people would be more willing to act as a group and more sensitive to the suffering of animals and other people caused by climate change.

Engineering the Earth ?Frustration with the gap between measures to address climate change and rising greenhouse gas emissions has prompted a colorful array of geoengineering, or planet-altering, solutions. These include pumping sulfur particles or other aerosols into the atmosphere to reflect the sun's warmth back out into space; seeding the oceans with iron to prompt algal blooms that would, in theory, suck carbon out of the atmosphere and eventually tuck it away in the seafloor; and perhaps most realistically, pumping the excess carbon into reservoirs and storing it there.

In general, these solutions are problematic because they cannot be ground-tested before being implemented, and once implemented, the effects would be global, according to Sandberg.

"If I want to test out one of those brain-enhancing devices, I can test it on medical students. If something goes wrong, I might get a lawsuit, but it is a localized problem. How do you test geoengineering ?" Sandberg said. "How many Earths do we have to test on?"

What's more, a change that benefits one country may hurt another, he said.

Changing ourselves ?The concept of human engineering isn't new. Sandberg studies the ethics of human enhancement, or "all the tools we have to mess with ourselves to improve our performance," as he puts it. "A lot of them are quite controversial, except the ones we don't recognize," he told LiveScience.

"Someone will tell you, 'I think it's horrible people take pills to become smarter,' but they are saying it over coffee," he said alluding to the alertness-enhancing effects of caffeine in the coffee. Supplementing salt with iodine is credited with preventing brain damage in infants, and as a result, boosting intelligence around the world.

Fluoride is put into water systems to protect our teeth, and we receive vaccines to protect against disease. Both measures ? just like human engineering measures that could address climate change ? carry risk, but they have been widely adopted, Sandberg and his colleagues point out.

"Now, we are not that interested in saying the government should impose any of this stuff. ? It is more interesting to think about what can people actually do to modify themselves that might be green," he said. "I am mildly skeptical if anything we propose is going to happen. I think it's most likely green changes to human nature aren't anything we have thought of."

From a contributor "downic" to NZCPR, under GREEN MADNESS heading debating forum April 8th 2012.

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