Transhumanism and the Ethics of Biomedical Enhancement: A Systematic Perspective

Dr. Peter A. DePergola, II, University of Massachusetts Medical School
1. INTRODUCTION

Successful philosophical logic moves from weighty premises to well-balanced conclusions. In the absence of this foundational methodology, arguments—and any justification they aim to issue—lack the comprehensiveness necessary to secure licitness. Unfortunately, arguments surrounding transhumanism and the ethics of biomedical enhancement have historically failed to follow this systematic approach. Fallacious and ambiguous rhetoric has replaced careful and transparent logic. The consequence has proved a bitter stalemate between those who reject enhancement unequivocally (the “anti-enhancement” position) and those who reject the uncompromising anti-enhancement arguments (the “anti-anti-enhancement” position).1

Allen Buchanan has identified a primary reason why the debate currently idles at an impasse: the mistaken idea that to enhance something de facto denotes the pursuit of its perfection or mastery, a form of axiomatic theological logic2 that collapses the conversation before it begins. This is a core argument, toxically misguided, of the anti-enhancement camp. For this group, enhancement is the all-too-tempting route to “posthumanity,” the brave new world in which humans are gods and masters of their own.3 Conversely, the anti-anti-enhancement camp contends that the concepts of enhancement and perfection or mastery are mutually exclusive. For this group, enhancement has little to do with the desire to become perfected. Rather, in the context of biomedicine, enhancement is properly understood as the active, intentional expression of the desire to augment, and by this means better, existing human capacities through the application of biotechnological science on the body or brain.4

To be sure, the issues of immediate import to anti-enhancement/anti-anti-enhancement debate are manifold, and any singular analysis of topics, no matter how sweeping, will unavoidably fall short of adequacy. This essay recognizes such limitations, and thus aims to briefly address but three: moral character, human nature, and distributive justice. Hence, the aim and proposal of this essay is such: to examine the concepts of moral character, human nature, and distributive justice in the context of biomedical enhancement with the intention of positing the argument that biomedical enhancement promotes moral character, is complimentary to human nature, can secure justice in distribution, and can therefore be morally justified in controlled contexts.

2. To be sure, some philosophical arguments, such as those issued by Jürgen Habermas, Leon Kass, Michael Sandel, and President George W. Bush’s Council on Bioethics, have followed suit. See Buchanan, Beyond Humanity? 5-15.
2. BIOMEDICAL ENHANCEMENT AND MORAL CHARACTER

A first point of divergence in the enhancement debate concerns moral character. Human identity is, in part, reducible to the decisions one makes, the actions one pursues, and the responsibility taken for the sum of the parts. Hence, character—the integrity that is the product of what one is and how one acts in response to who one perceives oneself to be—is essential to the notion of moral responsibility. In other words, who one is flows forth from what one decides to do and acts on doing, and moral character is shaped by this means. Utilizing biotechnological genetic enhancement is one such decision and action that significantly affects and shapes moral character. Since more than just biophysics is at stake in the choice to pursue enhancement, recognition of the promises and perils of its effects on identity, personality, mentality, and free will (among others) are things for which moral character, shaped by moral responsibility, must account.

Both expressivist and consequentialist concerns frame the anti-enhancement argument. The former concern is grounded in the idea that the pursuit of enhancement itself indicates moral viciousness and, hence, poor moral character. The latter concern is grounded in the moral forecast that enhancements will inevitably and unavoidably lead to the weakening of character. The strongest expressivist concern is posited by Michael Sandel, who contends that the effort to enhance human beings expresses character deficiencies that are flawed in the deepest sense. For Sandel, the thirst of those who pursue enhancement can be quenched only with perfection and mastery, and the insatiable craving for limitlessness can result, at best, in a failure to properly appreciate what one has already been given. Since appreciation is the product of humility—a precondition for the possession of other moral virtues—enhancement inevitably proves a stumbling block for the development of virtues necessary to live a robust moral life. In this sense, Sandel’s concern is equal parts essentialist and consequentialist.

As one of many manifestations of expressivist and consequentialist anti-enhancement concerns, Sandel’s rhetoric can be summarized as follows. His threefold premises include the notions that (i) appreciation for what one has been given is a human good of central importance that develops virtuous moral character; (ii) the pursuit of perfection and mastery is ultimately at odds with this sense of appreciation; and (iii) the employment of biomedical enhancement is an instance of the pursuit of perfection or perfectionism.

8. Other significant essentialist and consequentialist concerns include, among others, the collective degeneration of moral faculties, spontaneity, authenticity, emotional relationships, and rationality. See Buchanan, Beyond Humanity? 94-112.
mastery. From these premises can be derived two fundamental conclusions. The first is that the employment of biomedical enhancement is ultimately incongruous with appreciation for what one has been given. The second is that the employment of biomedical enhancement is ultimately incongruous with a central human good of which virtuous moral character requisitely consists.10

This essay finds such essentialist and consequentialist concerns misguided. Essentialist and consequentialist concerns are typically the culprit of two primary errors. First, they assume that all persons who pursue biomedical enhancement possess an insatiable craving for perfection or mastery. This is simply false. Consider the gentleman who wears spectacles to enhance his vision while driving at night. He indubitably has neither perfection nor mastery in mind when taking the necessary measures to ensure both his safety and that of others. Second, essentialist and consequentialist concerns take “gratitude” at face value rather than realistically considering it a vague concept for something more appropriate and less weighed-down by theological rhetoric. To be sure, all persons should be concerned with the risks of becoming exceedingly focused on the beneficial effects of enhancement to the extent that they cease to be appreciative of the things they have. But such risks are not ipso facto unavoidable, and a person who focuses on what is to be gleaned from enhancement at the cost of appreciating current possessions already exhibits a deficiency in virtue.11

More to the point, essentialist and consequentialist concerns fail to acknowledge the possibility that enhancement may preserve one’s sense of appreciation—thereby edifying the capacity to cherish things rightly—rather than effectively terminating it. If this can be defended, then enhancement can be said to fortify moral character. Consider the use of a cognitive drug that would moderately heighten the senses, thus allowing for a deeper experience of the same things one normally enjoys. This enhancement certainly possesses the potential to lead to a deeper sense of appreciation for the already given, not a movement away from it.12 Furthermore, an adequate sense of appreciation for what is given includes the appreciation of everything that is given, including biotechnologies. In the context of human health and well being, then, the appreciation argument seems to be one in favor of, not against, enhancement. Recall that moral character is the product of omission as much as action. Understood in this light, enhancing natural endowments seems to promote, not detract from, moral character.

3. BIOMEDICAL ENHANCEMENT AND HUMAN NATURE

A second point of divergence in the enhancement debate concerns human nature. The commanding philosophical conception of human nature as a set of shared moral ideals between human beings that distinguishes them from all other beings can be traced to Aristotle. If these ideals are considered natural, they are consequentially regarded as essential rather than contingent or superfluous. This logic lends to the interpretation that if human beings were to lose any of the moral characteristics considered essential to

human identity, they would cease to be human. The question is thus raised over whether enhancement contributes to or depreciates human nature. Since human activity is shaped by human nature, participating in enhancement is considered moral or immoral based on the answer assigned to the aforementioned question.  

Two primary concerns frame the anti-enhancement argument. The first is that enhancement will alter or obliterate human nature. The second is that if enhancement alters or obliterates human nature, this will affect one’s ability to determine the good, because the ability to determine something is dependant on the nature of the determiner. With regard to the first concern, the principal fear is that one or more of the characteristics essential to human nature will inevitably be manipulated by biomedical enhancement, thus rendering one an alien to oneself (and others). The continual creation of these “posthuman others” might eventually result in the extinction of human beings. Since it is illogical to tamper with the wisdom of nature, it follows that it is illogical to attempt to become better than well. What is natural is good, harmonious, and stable, and the desire to transcend human nature would leave one with no possessions beyond free will. A theological slant of this argument includes the idea that changing human identity would be at odds with the respect due to the “Master Orchestrator” of human nature, and would alter or destroy the potential for an appropriate moral relationship between creator and creature.

The second part of the argument is based on the idea that human goodness is inextricably linked to human nature. Transcending this nature—becoming posthuman—undermines the apprehension and valuation of goodness. Since understanding and valuing the good is essential to moral living, human beings must do everything possible to preserve it. Thus, any enhancement that would augment human nature is discouraged and must be avoided. In this view, human actions flow forth from human nature. Once nature is sacrificed by participating in enhancement, the ability to determine the good and act upon it is lost. Hence, these twofold concerns are steeped in normative essentialism: the belief that comprehensive moral rules may be extracted from reflection on human nature.

This essay rejects normative essentialism as implausible for several reasons. First, there is nothing intrinsically wrong with altering human nature since it clearly contains both good and bad elements and because there is no persuasive reason to believe that in every effort to nuance the poor elements there would exist a disproportionate risk posed

---

to those considered good. Second, if it were the case that biomedical enhancement would “obliterate” human nature by transforming human beings into “posthumans,” this action would not in itself be wrong and may in fact be morally right. Third, it does not necessarily follow that adjusting human nature will result in the loss of the ability to make judgments about the good, because human beings requisitely possess a conception of the good by which they evaluate human nature itself. Finally, appeals to human nature generally effect obscurity in the moral debate over enhancement and can be ameliorated with more apposite considerations.\(^{19}\)

The third reason above deserves immediate attention. What underlies the erroneous anti-enhancement claim that nature and goodness are inextricably linked is the idea that to decipher whether something is good, one needs to know if it conforms to, or “fits” with, human nature. This essay has already noted one reason to reject this claim: appealing to the role nature plays in decision making is largely about recognizing constraints; therefore, rather than rendering human beings incapable to judge rightly, participation in enhancement would simply require the consideration of new constraints.

There is, however, a second and more important reason to reject this claim: human beings already make coherent and reasonable judgments concerning human nature that can persuasively argue in favor of augmentation. Recognizing flaws in human nature—e.g., selfishness, sinfulness,\(^ {20}\) etc.—suggests that human beings have a concept of human nature that is independent of human nature itself. Based on the innate desire to evolve, then, participation in enhancement may be seen in this light as complimentary of, not a detraction from, human nature.\(^ {21}\)

**4. BIOMEDICAL ENHANCEMENT AND DISTRIBUTIVE JUSTICE**

A third point of divergence in the enhancement debate concerns distributive justice. In a highly innovative world, the dispersion of biomedical technologies should occupy a prime place in conversations pertaining to justice. Innovation is morally significant from the standpoint of justice because it has the potential to pose polarizing consequences. Depending on the type of technology created and to whom it becomes availed, existent injustices can either be exacerbated or ameliorated. Justice thus demands effort to form the innovation process, either to thwart innovations that would aggravate existent injustices or to promote innovations that would abate those injustices, subsequently cultivating a morally-level playing field. Hence, justice in the context of biomedical enhancement requires a spirited stance, not one which expects to grapple with moral issues ex post facto.\(^ {22}\)

At least two concerns of the anti-enhancement camp vis-à-vis distributive justice trickle down from logic embedded in its arguments regarding moral character and human nature. The first is that the pursuit of biomedical enhancements would pose poor consequences for society by diminishing values, character, and relationships that are

---

essential to human identity. The second is that enhancements made on a large scale would maximize choice to the extent that society would become inordinately obsessed, using biotechnologies to serve newfound tastes and preferences in order to achieve a “competitive edge,” consequentially plunging society more deeply into the abyss of inequality.\(^2\) With regard to the first concern, the operative idea is that participation in enhancement is unnatural or “transnatural.” Since what is natural is moral, acting against or transcending nature in effect destroys values, character, and relationships. As such, it cannot be considered morally licit.\(^3\)

The logic embedded in the second concern is that the availability of enhancements will unavoidably prompt people to utilize them to the extent of competing with others in the pursuit of perfection or mastery. “Keeping up” will be difficult, and the race to do so will unavoidably include unjust practices, thereby increasing rather than decreasing the instance of injustice. Further, because some members of society will not possess (or may run dry) the means to keep up, existent discriminations will multiply. Those who do not participate (or continue to participate) in enhancement will be left behind and forced to suffer the consequences of being “unenhanced” (or “underenhanced”). These factors render enhancement a zero-sum\(^4\) affair in the context of distributive justice.

This essay rejects these arguments for reasons beyond their unfortunate tendency to paint the unflattering portrait of all forms of enhancement as intrinsically immoral and the people who pursue them as flawed, selfish, free market participants.\(^5\) The position here is that enhancement can be seen to promote justice for at least two reasons. The first concerns the idea that enhancements may be used to correct existing injustices. The second concerns the development of a system by which to ensure equitable distribution of, and access to, enhancement biotechnologies. To exemplify the former, consider the deductive truism that cognitive drugs would be of most use to the least intelligent. To the extent that socio-economic structures discriminate against those of lower intelligence, cognitive enhancement can be seen as a step in the direction of distribute justice. Moreover, it might be argued that cognitive enhancement is more economically effective in comparison to the cost of traditional forms of education.\(^6\)

The second reason turns on the possibility—indeed, the necessity—of developing a system by which access to enhancements is equally allotted, thus securing justice in distribution. This is conceivable to the extent that access to enhancements is first availed to the poorest—broadly understood—in society. Vaccine delivery to impoverished countries is one such enhancement that contributes to the moral well-being of others and oneself. Operating on a set of principles that inherently protect the values of distributive

---

23. To be sure, there are numerous projected manifestations of injustice on this context. The most immediate centers on economic injustice: the inability to participate in enhancement by virtue of financial shortcomings.


25. For the argument in favor of enhancement on the basis of foreseen network benefits and human development, see Buchanan, *Beyond Humanity*? 48-54.


justice is at the heart of this second reason: establishing a firm structure of distributive justice will significantly diminish, if not effectively eliminate, the possibility of perpetuating injustice in the enterprise of biotechnology. In light of these reasons, distributive justice can be seen as quite clearly plausible in the enhancement context.29-30

5. CONCLUSION

Moral character, human nature, and distributive justice are but three issues of principal significance in the debate over the moral licitness of biomedical enhancement. These issues raise questions regarding the integrity the person, the sum and substance of what it means to be human, fair and effective resource allocation, and how to understand these notions in light of a deep-seated communal mission to heal a broken world plagued by disease. Through the lens of an anti-anti-enhancement framework, the aim of this brief essay has been to address the aforementioned issues with the intention of positing the argument that biomedical enhancement promotes moral character, is complimentary to human nature, can secure justice in distribution, and can therefore be morally justified in controlled contexts. To that end it has been successful.

The implications here are significant. To be sure, the reality of enhancement extremism is a genuine and growing fear. But rather than allowing it to terminate dialogical progress, may it instead serve to remind that while the benefits of biotechnologies are important, how and how far they are utilized is more important still.

REFERENCES


30. For a more comprehensive overview of the plausibility of such a system, see Buchanan, Beyond Humanity? 255-77.