



Review

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Human Enhancement: Perfection, Desire and Capabilities



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Abstract

Human enhancement theses are epistemologically confusing and ethically challenging; they have been triggering a wide variety of academic and public debates. The present paper is aimed at classifying the different types of arguments supporting the debate on human enhancement, which, in particular, have important implications for the concept of health. Therefore, contrary to a trend in human enhancement literature that points out perfection as the milestone to improve the lives of human beings, this study shows that this scenario is intrinsically linked to inconsistent, theoretically poor issues.

Keywords: Human enhancement; Perfection; Desire; Capabilities; Ethics

Introduction

The “human enhancement” thesis takes many different forms. However, the use of certain technologies to make it possible raises a series of ethical issues and, consequently, has a direct impact on notions such as authenticity, good life, human nature, normality, perfection, natural/artificial, therapy, and the role of medicine. The fact is that with the continuous advances in science and technologies, “people are beginning to realize that some of the basic parameters of the human condition might be changed in the future”[1] (p120). Therefore, it is not enough to affirm that the most important way in which the human condition may be changed is through the enhancement of basic human capabilities, as certain normative issues find in the ideas of perfection, desire, and imagination the elements to fix a possible deficiency of nature or to make the state of the organism better. In this sense, it is necessary to explain some misconceptions that permeate the unlimited defense of human enhancement and review the arguments that support the desire for perfection.

Discussion

The metaphor of the boundary between therapy and enhancement

A first problem lies in the idea that human enhancement is a concept typically opposed to therapy, as it not only allows fixing something that has gone wrong, but also healing the deficient

condition and potentiating it in order to overcome the very condition posed by nature [2]. Obviously, the distinction between therapy and enhancement is epistemologically problematic and ethically confusing. Thus, this is due to the scientific insufficiency in demarcating the border between natural and artificial and, also, to the forgery of an illusory metaphor that enhancement is constituted only by medical interventions, as well as improvements in external technology or support to the institutional structure that supports cognition.

Furthermore, one of the distinguishing features of human enhancement techniques is that they improve core cognitive abilities rather than merely specific skills, thus becoming necessary so that their consumers can intensify their brains and further explore the world. But would it be enough to establish imagination and desire as faculties to legitimize the steps towards a possible increasingly crystalline, colorful world? The argument of Bostrom and Sanders [3], for example, while acknowledging that in practice the distinction between therapy and enhancement is often difficult, is not clear enough to indicate the refusal of one over the other, or vice-versa.

Should unconventional techniques be regulated?

Then, a second misconception that hovers over the idea of human enhancement is the one that advocates a difference between conventional and unconventional enhancement techniques. Some arguments involving human enhancement

conventional techniques, such as improving the mental faculties of concentration, memory, and thinking, or the awakening of specific abilities such as the sense of alertness through caffeine ingestion, are not morally less complex than those unconventional ones deliberately involving created nootropic drugs, gene therapies, or neural implants [4]. Therefore, to assert that there must be a substantial difference between conventional and unconventional techniques, and thus that the forms of unconventional enhancement techniques deserve more serious consideration as they may possibly have important consequences for society means assuming intrinsically – and perhaps unintentionally – a normative system of evaluation.

Thus, assessing and classifying possible enhancement interventions seems to be insufficient without being able to understand the evolutionary progress of human beings throughout history. The sophistication of language was responsible for leveraging the quality of our cognitive processes. Should we, therefore, consider it a kind of conventional technique, as it was ‘naturally’ integrated, unlike more recently incorporated ‘techniques’? In opposition to the arguments of Bostrom and Sandberg [3] (p312), for which “findings need to be repeated in multiple studies and larger clinical trials before they can be fully trusted”, the argument of scientific efficacy must be separated with possible discussions of an ethical-normative nature about the evolutionary history and, of course, for not being able to analyze the reasons and impacts of each artifact used by human beings without which we would probably not be here or would be here in a different way.

Possible risks of the plurality of enhancement methods

Another argument that has proved unreliable is associated with the wide variety of enhancement methods, which suggest that biotechnological progress could impose on the future an increasingly powerful toolbox (or perhaps a Pandora’s box) to improve the extension of life and develop our capabilities. Aware of the fact that capacities continuously vary not only within a population, but they also change physically and mentally as we age, it becomes methodologically weak to justify choosing some methods and debating the exclusion of others. In this sense, what does it mean to say that “technologies that produce enhancement of greater objective magnitude are, all else equal, more valuable than technologies that produce enhancement of lesser magnitude”? [5] (p17). Absolutely nothing, unless we are attracted by the meta-ethical myth that there are moral facts in the world and, therefore, we should seek to find them at all costs, even if it means authorizing the selective improvement of enhancement techniques.

What should we argue, for example, to a person who intends to increase their physical resistance, longevity, and selfishness in order to self-benefit in the face of a potentially threatening society or, based on what Agar [6] explores, editing eugenic practices to preserve only their genetic descendants? Therefore,

it seems unlikely that sustaining the argument of the variety of enhancement methods will suffice to declare that they can be deliberately supported without a scale of public concern. Then the potential risks and issues surrounding their security cannot be analyzed only in the concentration of internal risks that are intrinsic to the intervention [7].

Dissecting the vague concept of ‘Enhancement’

A fourth misconception is that human enhancement, in general, works with vague concepts of values, such as happiness, well-being, kindness, among others. And despite this vagueness, there seems to be a tendency in the literature to define that the objective of human life should be thought in terms of what is greater, stronger, faster, smarter, or even more resilient. Hofmann [8] (p5) stated that “human enhancement does not challenge health when defined in terms of the ability to set new norms in response to challenges of the situation, for example, when increasing human margins to specific diseases through immunization”. The problem with this argument is that “increasing the margin of tolerance”, as subsequently complemented by Hofmann, may be a disguised way to cure the fear of death as well. It is precisely at this point that imagination, desire and perfection come into play, and the possibility of overcoming traditional health concepts and increasingly widen their “margins” begins to be considered. Thus, to morally justify human enhancement it is necessary to expand the concept of overcoming and, consequently, establish new contours for the concept of health.

Contrary to what authors such as Harris [9,10], Koch [11], Melo-Martin [12], and Hofmann [8,13] argue, new technologies that facilitate the enhancement of dispositions, capabilities, and skills need to set limits in the face of traditional distinctions such as therapy-improvement, health-illness, capabilities-disabilities. Therefore, what is at stake is not that enhancement would be based on vague or semantically imprecise conceptions, but the way we deal in a normative manner with some concepts in the sphere of public discussions. Explaining why it is better to get older, stronger, and smarter presupposes that we would be able, firstly, to normatively clarify its permissiveness or prohibition, and then ethically discuss whether any type of genetic, biomedical, or pharmaceutical intervention aimed at improving the dispositions, capabilities, or well-being must be implemented at all costs [14-20]. On the other hand, Hofmann [13] is right in stating that advocates and critics of enhancement tend to rely more on unjustified preconditions and strong beliefs than actually on security and justice issues or, as pointed out by Danaher [21], on burden and distribution of responsibility.

The false disengagement between enhancement and public sphere

And, finally, a last misconception in the arguments that illustrate the debate about human enhancement is the one

that insists on a disengagement between biotechnological development and the rational conceptions that we have about capabilities, disabilities, and a possible normal functioning of the species, as if the epistemic concept of doing science were a neutral, impartial, and ethically responsible horizon on (unpredictable) future events [4,22]. Authors of critical epistemology from the second half of the twentieth century, including T. Kuhn, P. Feyerabend, G. Bachelard, or even more recently, the sociology of science of Bruno Latour, have already drawn attention to the fact that science does not have the candor aspired by our common sense, as the political role of scientists or the effects of their production or performance in a free society are intrinsically connected. Laboratory Life, paraphrasing one of the works of Latour, is responsible for the production of scientific facts and, therefore, may be a space for literary production in which the microscopic, artisanal character of criticism can be easily ignored, becoming an expression of ideological interests.

Therefore, the micro of science and its internal and contingent limits to the daily life in the laboratory may mean breaking with ethical issues and then, encouraging the solidification of absolutely nebulous enhancement practices [23]. Therefore, the ubiquity of human enhancement inherits fundamental problems surrounding the philosophy of technology and, consequently, the boundaries that science still needs to demarcate on its own activity.

Conclusion

Although the debate on human enhancement has received significant attention in recent decades, its ontological, epistemological, and ethical bases remain challenging, particularly due to the fact that they directly affect the way we should think our abilities and shortcomings. At all events, based on the arguments presented, it seems to be rationally impractical to suppose that such limitations should be defined in relation to normality or the 'normal functioning of the species', as this would represent revising normative conceptions of both health and values. Both bioconservatives and liberals must explain their assumptions about ideas of perfection and what would make this a good life, seeking to measure the desires to improve a responsible scenario in the face of impacts on the public life sphere. Without this, both bioconservative and liberal positions contain ambiguities that make them untenable in the use or rejection of perfectionist assumptions and in enhancement biotechnologies.

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