

Book Reviews

Beyond Humanity? The Ethics of Biomedical Enhancement

A. BUCHANAN, 2011

Oxford, Oxford University Press

xii + 286 pp, £20.00 (hb)

Allen Buchanan is an accomplished political philosopher and the lead author, with Dan W. Brock, Norman Daniels, and Daniel Wikler, of *From Chance to Choice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), which, to date, remains the single most important and comprehensive investigation of the ethical issues raised by the use of genetic technologies to select or modify our children. The publication of his book, *Beyond Humanity?*, on the topic of human enhancement more generally, is therefore to be welcomed by all those interested in what has become one of the most vigorous debates in applied ethics. The book is rich in ideas, philosophically informed, and clearly argued; it is undoubtedly destined to become an essential point of reference in future debates about the use of technology to improve human capacities.

The book sets out to answer the question ‘is it ethically permissible for a reasonably liberal and democratic society to embark on *the enhancement enterprise?*’ (p. 16, italics in original). According to Buchanan,

A society embarks on the enhancement enterprise if, through its regular political processes, it (1) allows considerable freedom to individuals and organisations to develop and choose to use enhancement technologies, including biomedical enhancement technologies, and also (2) devotes significant public resources (a) to research that can be expected to result in enhancement technologies, (b) to creating a vigorous and informed public debate about the benefits and risks of such technologies, and (c) to developing effective and morally sensitive policies and institutions for coping with the challenges of enhancement (p. 16).

Buchanan believes that this is the appropriate question to ask on two grounds.

First, Buchanan thinks it is a mistake to understand the enhancement debate in terms of being ‘pro’ or ‘anti’ enhancement because he denies that any of the leading figures in this debate may justly be characterised as ‘pro-enhancement’ (p. 13). This suggestion will surprise those who are familiar with the work of Julian Savulescu, who writes articles such as ‘New breeds of humans: the moral obligation to enhance’ (*Reproductive Biomedicine Online* 10 (Supp.1): 36–39, 2005), John Harris, author of *Enhancing Evolution: The Ethical Case for Making Better People* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007), or Nick Bostrom, who once penned a chapter entitled ‘Why I want to be a posthuman when I grow up’ (in: Bert Gordijn and Ruth Chadwick (eds), *Medical Enhancement and Posthumanity* [Springer, 2008], pp. 107–137). However, Buchanan’s point is that none of these authors support enhancement *without reservation*. The ‘enhancement enterprise’ allows that we might reject or regulate some particular enhancements. Thus, rather

than being ‘pro-enhancement’, Buchanan holds that we need merely be ‘anti anti-enhancement’ (p. 14) in order to embrace the enhancement enterprise. He therefore directs his criticism towards ‘those who appear to reject enhancement *as such*, rather than merely rejecting *some* enhancements in some circumstances, when undertaken for certain reasons or as the expression of certain values’ (p. 2, italics in original). I imagine readers may disagree as to the extent to which this is an accurate characterisation of the position of Kass, Sandel, and Habermas, who are the primary targets of his critique.

Second, his argument is framed by a profound pessimism about the ability of philosophical debate to shape social outcomes and about governments’ capacity to regulate technology. Thus, he insists:

The question of whether a society like ours may or should (provisionally) pursue the enhancement enterprise is the right question to ask, given that we will have enhancements no matter what any ethicist says and regardless of what political decisions are taken on enhancement (p. 20).

Buchanan’s case against the anti-enhancement position in *Beyond Humanity?* is aided by a certain flexibility about what, precisely, counts as ‘enhancement’. At various points, Buchanan construes enhancement so widely as to include ‘numeracy, literacy, and computers’ (p. 26), ‘agriculture’, and ‘science’. Elsewhere, however, the technologies under discussion are more outré, and include (p. 56): ‘enhancement of existing capacities for impulse control, sympathy, altruism, or moral imagination, through pharmaceutical or genetic interventions’; ‘the development of the ability to extract nutrients from items that humans have never consumed before’; and, ‘enhancements to help us adapt physiologically to climate change’. Indeed, it is hard not to worry that there is a form of philosophical ‘bait-and-switch’ going on here — ‘You want agriculture and literacy? Then you had better get ready to eat grass!’. Of course, this intuition presumes that it is plausible to make a relevant distinction between these familiar technologies and the more racy enhancements that quickly move to the foreground when advocates of ‘the enhancement project’ want to represent it as something more dramatic than the right to read books or to breed better turnips. Buchanan argues powerfully that critics of enhancement have, thus far, failed to do so.

I have taken the time to set out how Buchanan refigures the enhancement debate because I suspect that, ultimately, how readers will respond to Buchanan’s arguments will depend upon whether they see the intellectual landscape as Buchanan does. Yet the philosophical meat of his discussion is found elsewhere in the book, which is filled with more arguments than I have space to discuss here. Highlights include: a sophisticated exploration of the implication of an evolutionary perspective for debates about enhancement; an extended argument that we would do better to abandon concerns about human nature in favour of independent normative grounds for evaluating the consequences of enhancement; and a discussion of the possibility that enhancement will lead to the development of ‘post-humans’ who may possess (or claim) superior moral status to unenhanced human beings. Particularly welcome is a treatment of conservatism and enhancement: Buchanan argues that conservatives should actually be in favour of enhancement because the radical alteration of human nature would allow us to remove the limits on human social reform currently due to our various weaknesses and character defects. In the final chapter, Buchanan addresses the questions of institutional design he thinks are necessary to ensure that biomedical enhancements are not available solely to

the wealthy. He advocates the creation of a ‘Global Institute for Justice in Innovation’ (p. 255), with the power to authorise compulsory licensing of biomedical enhancements to entities within member nations, in order to create competitive markets that would encourage the diffusion of these technologies.

In the course of these discussions, Buchanan acknowledges various ethical concerns about enhancement but none that, he believes, would justify giving up on the ‘enhancement enterprise’. Given the heavily qualified nature of this project and Buchanan’s conviction that — because (he holds) prohibition of enhancements is effectively impossible — the only alternative to the enhancement enterprise is the unregulated uptake of enhancements through the ‘backdoor’ (p. 60), this conclusion is arguably over-determined. Moreover, Buchanan’s pessimism about the efficacy of philosophical argument in generating good public policy suggests a partial defence of the ‘grand sounding . . . catchphrases and slogans’ (p. 3) of the authors he criticises. We may be more likely to achieve the ‘effective and morally sensitive policies and institutions for coping with the challenges of enhancement’, which Buchanan believes are necessary, if at least some of those concerned about these challenges continue to argue against ‘enhancement’ rather than join wholeheartedly in the ‘enhancement enterprise’. Despite the powerful response to recent critics of enhancement set out in *Beyond Humanity*, then, there is cause to hope that the ‘enhancement debate’ will continue.

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Enhancing Human Capacities

J. SAVULESCU, R. TER MEULEN & G. KAHANE eds., 2011

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xviii + 557 pp, £60.00 (hb)

Much as the rise of modern science brought about a revolution in our relation to nature, radical advances in biomedical science have ushered in a revolution in our relation to ourselves. A cohort of human enhancement technologies is already available, including anti-depressants, steroids, and prosthetic limbs. Rapid progress in genetics, neuroscience, biogerontology and nanotechnology presents new opportunities and new risks, at the individual and collective level. *Enhancing Human Capacities* equips us to understand these opportunities and risks, and assess their social and ethical significance. The book is an expanded collection of articles, edited by Julian Savulescu, Guy Kahane, and Ruud ter Meulen, based on presentations at workshops organized by the ENHANCE project. The volume consists of thirty-seven chapters distributed in six parts: four chapters address general issues such as the treatment/enhancement distinction and the concepts of nature and autonomy, five chapters focus on cognitive enhancement, eight on mood enhancement, seven on physical enhancement, nine on lifespan extension, two on moral enhancement, and the final two chapters are devoted to general policy.

The most striking feature of the book is its comprehensiveness. Human enhancement technologies are relatively under-explored in the philosophical literature and their study tends to be divided into separate areas of specialization, such as the ethics of gene therapy, the ethics of doping, the ethics of aging, neuroethics and nanoethics. *Enhancing Human Capacities* is the first collection to bring all these issues together with such breadth and depth. While it provides a superb survey of the science and the myriad issues raised by new enhancement technologies, the range of normative positions it offers is less extensive than one might expect or wish of a collection on this topic. Unlike *Human Enhancement* for instance, the previous volume edited by Savulescu and Nick Bostrom (Oxford University Press, 2009), the present collection does not strike a balance between supporters and critics of enhancement technologies. A majority of the authors argues in favor of the research and use of enhancements, while arguments against enhancements are typically limited to a specific set of technologies in a specific context, and grounded in the narrow welfarist approach introduced by Savulescu, Anders Sandberg and Kahane in the first chapter. To take just one example, Larry Temkin's case against longevity research in 'Is Living Longer Living Better?' is broadly welfarist since he argues that a radically extended lifespan would not increase well-being while raising serious questions of intergenerational justice. On the welfarist account, human enhancement is defined as 'any change in the biology or psychology of a person which increases the chances of leading a good life in the relevant set of circumstances' (p. 7). Whether we should research and use a particular human enhancement technology further depends on concerns of justice and fairness. In general, the arguments against enhancement technologies featured in this volume build on assessments of the risks and benefits to the individual and society, rather than, say, on bioconservative worries, such as those Michael Sandel associates with the pursuit of perfection (*The Case Against Perfection*, Harvard University Press, 2007).

The editors' ambition is not simply to present the latest scientific developments in human enhancement and a panorama of the ethical and social issues they raise; it is also to dispel the confusions that mar the current literature on enhancement, especially regarding the distinction between enhancement and therapy, which often serves as the basis of anti-enhancement arguments. Authors of the first part of the volume do an outstanding job in this respect. Savulescu, Sandberg and Kahane show that the distinction between enhancement and therapy is indeterminate and hinges on equally indeterminate and complex concepts, to wit, medicine, health and disease. The point is not that one must abandon these concepts, but that they cannot ground objections to human enhancement. In the second chapter, Lisbeth Witthøft Nielsen makes a similar point about the concepts of 'nature' and 'naturalness'. In the fourth chapter, Russell Powell and Allen Buchanan show that the widespread presumption against intentional genetic modification (IGM) is grounded on a distorted picture of evolution. After debunking the notion that nature is like a master engineer, they show that IGM is both more effective, and morally preferable to, nature's unintentional genetic modification.

Cognitive enhancement involves increasing intelligence, memory, and attention. 'Upgrading' human cognitive capacities can be done through a variety of practices, from 'conventional' means such as education, mnemotechnics, caffeine intake, and the use of external information processing devices, to collective cognition techniques made available through the internet (e.g., wikis), to neuropharmacology and genetic intervention.

The chapters devoted to cognitive enhancement all stress that one's general cognitive capacity correlates with one's well-being and that cognitive enhancement could offer significant social and economic benefits, at the individual and collective level. Several authors argue that there is at least a negative right to cognitive enhancement (i.e. a freedom whose exercise should be protected from interference) based on cognitive liberty, privacy interests, and the interest of persons to protect and develop their own minds and capacity for autonomy (pp. 108, 142). Bostrom and Rebecca Roache recommend in chapter 9 a set of 'Smart Policy' proposals to protect and support cognition that include promoting cognition enhancing infant nutrition and addressing the problem of iodine deficiency. In this article and others, authors go as far as suggesting a case for a positive right to (publicly subsidized) cognitive enhancement, based on fairness and equality.

Mood enhancement involves the use of pharmacological agents such as selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors, which are conventionally prescribed to treat depression, for the purpose of 'feeling better than normal'. With their potential to disable our responsiveness to affective reasons, i.e. the reasons we have to feel certain emotions in response to a situation, mood enhancing drugs raise issues of inauthenticity. Of the numerous chapters addressing this worry, 'Reasons to Feel, Reasons to Take Pills' is the sharpest. In it, Kahane shows that, rather than corrupting our emotional lives, positive mood enhancers such as anti-depressants might help us improve our responsiveness or at least conformity to affective reasons.

Physical enhancement includes a broad range of practices, from diet and training, to cosmetic surgery and tattoo, to the use of prosthetic limbs, genetic technologies, and doping. Physical enhancement technologies challenge our understanding of the distinction between talent and effort, the ethos of sport, and responsibility for one's own performance. Most authors focus on doping in elite sports. The highlight of this section is Savulescu and Bennett Foddy's chapter, a thoroughly reasoned argument in favor of regulated permissive policies in doping. The authors show that the current system set up by the World Anti-Doping Agency (i) is bound to fail given the development of new drugs that are extremely difficult to detect, (ii) is unfair, since it rewards the competent cheater, the fortunate, and the rich, and, (iii) is unsafe for the athletes. Savulescu and Foddy address the concern that doping is cheating by arguing that it is up to us to set rules, and 'performance enhancement is not against the spirit of sport; it is the spirit of sport' (p. 311).

The possibility of radical lifespan extension, the object of the volume's fifth section, disturbs our understanding of aging, death, and the meaning of human life. Medicine has already successfully reduced the symptoms of aging and increased both the average and the maximum human lifespan; biogerontologists are now researching ways to arrest aging. At the individual (intra-personal) level, enhanced longevity questions our understanding of personal identity, threatens our appreciation of human life's frailty, and raises the possibility of unbearable boredom (as Bernard Williams pointed out in 'The Makropoulos Case', which four of the nine chapters discuss). Gaia Barazzetti and Massimo Reichlin argue that, whether personal identity is understood as 'sameness' or 'selfhood', substantial life extension is not desirable for the individual. The prolongation of the human lifespan further generates serious problems of distributive justice between age-groups. Christine Overall shows that 'aging and life stages are neither wholly constituted by biological givens, nor wholly understandable in terms of biological parameters.

Instead, aging and life stages are, in crucial ways, socially constructed.’ (p. 386). She argues that oldness and other life-stage concepts vary across cultures and incorporate normative judgments about, e.g., life milestones, as well as gendered expectations about women’s biological and cultural roles (e.g., as caregivers, not recipients of care). She concludes that the prolongation of the human lifespan should be promoted, based on concerns for well-being and gender and age equity. According to Kenneth Howse, answer to the question whether public funds should be committed to support the development of lifespan extension technologies turns on our assumptions about the marginal utility of additional healthy life years.

Individually, several chapters of the volume suffer from weaknesses, as their authors present and try to respond to all the relevant issues on a single topic in quick and broad strokes. In general, the more ground the authors try to cover, the cruder the arguments. Some chapters thus give the impression of cataloguing rather than critically engaging with the issues.

The book as a whole offers a fascinating survey of the debate that might leave the reader optimistic and excited about human enhancement, or frustrated at too rosy a picture. A similarly comprehensive, but more heterogeneous, collection, which would include more critical perspectives on enhancement thus remains called for.

The *novum organum* that the modern scientific revolution brought about was the inductive method of logic. What new normative framework does the biomedical revolution necessitate? The answer appears in leitmotif throughout the volume: an autonomy-centered model of medicine to replace the disease-focused one. Its program: to make room for enhancement technologies, promote their research, and destigmatize their use.

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Group Agency: The Possibility, Design, and Status of Corporate Agents

CHRISTIAN LIST & PHILIP PETTIT, 2011

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238 pp., \$45.00 (hb)

Some groups qualify as agents — real, non-metaphorical agents capable of a kind of belief, desire, reasoning, and rational action. This is the fundamental claim of List and Pettit’s (L&P’s) *Group Agency: The Possibility, Design, and Status of Corporate Agents*, and they provide a solid and plausible — if preliminary — explanation of how this can be so. They also give good, preliminary arguments in support of their further claims that such groups qualify as moral agents and even as persons. Additionally, the authors have provided a very thorough treatment of the aggregation of intentional attitudes (beliefs and desires), and concerns about aggregation are a constant presence throughout. I found the pervasive focus on aggregation unfortunate, if unsurprising, given the authors’ prior work:

it made many of the discussions needlessly technical and, as discussed below, it was ultimately rather misleading. For those interested in the intricacies of aggregation, *Group Agency* will probably be an excellent resource with immediate real-world implications; for those interested in the broader question of collective or corporate agency, it is a good introduction to the issues with some interesting commentary.

Summary

The book opens with the standard: a group qualifies as an agent to the extent that it has ‘representational states, motivational states, and a capacity to process them and to act on that basis in the manner of an agent’ (p. 32). Put another way, it must have its own beliefs and desires (p. 26), its own intentional attitudes, and the ability to act rationally on that basis. One way to develop such group attitudes is to aggregate the beliefs and desires of the members, and L&P specifically (if quietly) limit their discussion to group agents which do so — specifically, those that ‘form and enact their attitudes on the basis of communication among the members’ (p. 37) via deliberation, voting, or various forms of ‘dictatorship’ in which one member’s attitudes establish the attitudes for the group (p. 38). Chapter 3 provides some welcome detail about the relationship between the members and the group attitudes: group attitudes supervene ‘holistically’ rather than ‘proposition-wise’ on the members (pp. 66–71). As discussed below, it is somewhat unclear whether the group attitudes supervene on member activity or member attitudes; either way, this means that the ‘set of group attitudes across propositions is determined by the [full set of] individual sets of attitudes across these propositions’ rather than the group attitude on *each* proposition being determined by the member attitudes on *that* proposition (p. 69).

Chapters 2 and 4 assess the costs and benefits of different approaches to aggregation, the latter focusing on those which aim to ensure accurate group attitudes. Chapter 5 explores ways to ensure ‘a happy alignment’ between individually rational behavior and desired behaviors, especially in the expression of member beliefs and desires, and chapter 6 looks at methods for ensuring that members have protected ‘spheres of control’ in which to act. This last is especially important for L&P because they recognize political states as group agents (pp. 13, 40, 168) — something they acknowledge as a controversial move.

The remainder of the book considers some of the implications of the theory. Chapter 7 argues that such group agents — which are sometimes called ‘corporate entities’ at this point — are fit to be held responsible on the same terms and for the same reasons as human agents. The tricky part is to demonstrate that corporate entities have sufficient control over their actions, but L&P make a good showing (pp. 159–63). Chapter 8 argues that corporate entities *do* qualify as persons, if only on a ‘performative’ understanding of personhood drawn from the political literature (rather than from ethical theory). L&P quickly add (pp. 179–84) that corporate persons are not entitled to equal standing with natural persons and should be subject to special restrictions (though their justifications are a bit thin). Chapter 9 closes the book with a discussion of ‘identification’ which includes the corporate entity’s ability to self-identify (pp. 187–89) and the ways in which individuals identify with the corporate entities of which they are members.

Discussion

There are two very important two points to keep in mind while reading this book, neither of which is clearly marked: First, the book addresses a rather small subset of group or ‘corporate’ agents — specifically, those that develop their commitments exclusively by aggregating their member’s attitudes via communication. This will undoubtedly include smaller groups like boards and committees, but based on my experience as a corporate attorney, I doubt it will include many corporations of any size. Second, the pervasive references to members’ ‘attitudes’ do not, in fact, refer to the members’ *attitudes*, their beliefs and desires. Instead, for the most part, they refer to ‘attitudes’ that are — intentionally or unintentionally, accurately or inaccurately — manifest in member behavior. A member who cares passionately about the environment but doesn’t happen to express it at work does not, for these purposes, care about the environment. The authors mention this in a footnote (p. 221 n 64), and acknowledge several times that manifested attitudes are often different from actual attitudes (pp. 63, chapter 5, and elsewhere), but nonetheless continue the discussion in terms of member attitudes. Thus, most discussions about member ‘attitudes’ are really discussions about member *actions*.

The second point may sound like a quibble but it’s actually quite important. For one thing, suggesting that actual member attitudes fix group attitudes hearkens back to the ‘spooky’ organicist version of group agency that the authors repeatedly try to distinguish from their own. For another, it means that many of the basic claims are presented in language that makes them — on their face — false. For example, when the authors say that ‘the beliefs and desires of a group agent generally supervene on the beliefs and desires of its members’ (p. 76), what they really mean is that the group beliefs and desires generally supervene on the actions of the members, *regardless of the members’ actual beliefs or desires*. That’s a rather important distinction, as the latter claim is true while the former is false.

The decision to present claims about member actions as claims about member attitudes is quite frustrating, as it is both unnecessary and misleading. It misleads the reader about the actual claims that L&P are making, many of which I agree with and would like to see more widely accepted. And it misleads the reader about the nature and mechanics of group agency in general, across a broader class than the authors have explicitly addressed. Corporate attitudes derive from member behavior — all *kinds* of member behavior, not just member behavior that aims at establishing corporate attitudes — and it does so without any necessary connection to member attitudes. This is not the picture that L&P have painted, and I’m not sure it is one they themselves fully accept, despite the fact that they acknowledge it occasionally (e.g. p. 66). There is a lingering sense that they are attached to the attitude talk, and reluctant to surrender it. This shows up in their choice to use such misleading language in the first place, and in their periodic suggestions that the nigh-inevitable divergence between member and corporate attitudes is a *problem*. It is only a problem if they *ought* to be aligned, and the most likely reason for such a preference is that the two are closely linked.

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