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OPEN PEER COMMENTARIES



Personhood, Welfare, and Enhancement

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The debate on enhancement ethics cannot escape some of the deeper questions troubling the concept of personhood. That is, in a sentence, my reading of Robert Sparrow's target article (Sparrow 2022). This development is significant for enhancement ethics, because personhood has assumed the grounding role once played by human nature. Thinking in terms of effects on persons (instead of on human nature) fits in with liberal approaches to enhancement, where enhancements are either like life choices to be regulated along libertarian principles, or like goods such as education to be regulated along principles of fairness. Genetic enhancement in particular can be subsumed under parental autonomy: parents choosing the best for their child. However, insofar the liberal approach rests on the metaphysical fulcrum of personhood, problems with the latter reverberate throughout enhancement ethics. In this commentary I will add two problems to those already identified by Sparrow: one regarding person-affecting enhancement, and the other regarding identity-affecting enhancement.

A PROBLEM FOR PERSON-AFFECTING ENHANCEMENT

What is the object of enhancement? The standard answer is: a person, and more specifically, a person's welfare (defined as the total of benefits minus harms befalling that person). However, Parfit divorces welfare from personhood. According to Parfit, there is nothing more to a person than different gradations of "psychological connectedness" (Parfit 1984, 215). Parfit argued for this by means various futuristic puzzles regarding personal identity (brain transplants;

teletransportation; and so on), but his metaphysics ultimately concerned ethics: if one could adopt this reductionist stance on personhood, the impersonality required by genuine utilitarianism made sense. What matters is the quality of experiences being had, not whether those experiences are being had by you or by me, or even by someone at great spatiotemporal distance (Parfit 1984, 346).

Like many utilitarians, in no meaningful way does Parfit speak of how utilitarian calculations should be affected by the particulars of the social structures in which a person is contingently embedded, such as families, communities, or institutions. Experiences just are there. If one adopts the Parfitian reductionism towards persons, the social embeddedness of persons (or more exactly, the embeddedness of loci of psychological connectedness) poses a problem for the concept of "person-affecting enhancement". For when the subjective experiences of welfare are so connected with external social processes, how much sense does it still have to maintain that a "person" is the object of enhancement?

As a first illustration of what I have in mind, consider one of the most straightforward forms of human enhancement: athletic enhancement. Who are athletes aiming to benefit when they choose performance-enhancing drugs? Themselves? Not if the athlete is a true Parfitian. A Parfitian athlete would be moved by the prospect of giving millions of sports fans a more enjoyable experience, or of giving more prize earnings to charity. Most athletes, of course, are not Parfitian. They report on motivations to obtain a "hero status" and financial gain without any further goal beyond their own benefit (see discussion in Desmond 2021,

38). Nonetheless, we could question here who precisely is intended to receive the future benefit from the athletic doping. Is it the future person—constituted of a rich interconnectedness of memories, values, experiences? Or, a socialized idealization of their future self that the athlete has constructed?

Sparrow elucidates a structurally similar example when pointing out that acting as to maximize welfare would dictate that parents choose the embryos best adapted to racist, sexist, and heteronormative social environments. Here we can similarly question who precisely the parents wish to target with the enhancement intervention. A person as some rich, unique combination of traits, or an avatar consisting of a small number of desirable traits?

Such examples are not marginal considerations for the ethics of enhancement. Elsewhere I have worked to show how social status infiltrate many of our decisions—especially decisions to enhance—and how an ethics of enhancement should reflect this (Desmond 2020, 2021). The examples also point to the limits of an individual-focused ethics, since our ideas about what will bring us “welfare” or “benefit” is inextricably bound up with the evaluative judgments present in families, communities, or even online environments such as social media (for the latter, see Desmond 2022).

The problem I wish to raise for the category of “person-affecting enhancement” is that it is often ambiguous whether a *person* (and a person’s welfare) is targeted by an enhancement or rather a *representant* of a status class. Here I mean “representant” in the mathematical sense where persons are modeled as interchangeable members of “equivalence classes”. For instance, an advertiser might want the Olympic champion in the 100-meter dash—it would not matter *who* they are, just as long as the person being hired happens to have that title. The category of “fair-weather friend” encapsulates this idea: this type of friend does not care about who you are as a person, but merely who you are as a representant of a certain type of success or status.

Similarly, if we strive to enhance ourselves in order to achieve a type of welfare that ultimately consists of the approval of others, we can become our own fair-weather friends. I do not wish to deny that the pleasure we feel at receiving praise, recognition, or honor from others may be genuine. However, if an enhancement that is directed at one’s future self is driven (even if unconsciously) by a desire for social status, the target is not a *person* but rather an abstract representation of a person. One could call this

representation by various names: a socialized idealization, an avatar, or a representant of a social status equivalence class. However, the upshot is that such enhancements may increase welfare without being genuinely person-affecting in even the reductionist, Parfitian sense of “person”.

IDENTIFY-AFFECTING ENHANCEMENT AND THE LIBERAL APPROACH TO ENHANCEMENT

That being said, genetic enhancement, as it is currently implemented, is not person-affecting. Phrases such as “knocking out a gene” are misleading in this regard, since they suggest that genetic enhancement is akin to pressing a particular switch in the internal mechanisms of a person’s body. The science is much more complicated than that, as Sparrow emphasizes. The latest genome engineering technologies (CRISPR-Cas) merely affect the *probabilities* of how an embryo will develop. From the perspective of philosophy of science, this is not surprising: cells are highly stochastic and the common textbook representation of them as complex machines is a significant idealization of reality (Nicholson 2019). For many epistemic challenges this idealization does the job, but for others it does not and the ethics of CRISPR-Cas seems to be one of those. Whether following the technique of editing the genome of a live embryo, or of inducing gametogenesis of gene-edited pluripotent stem cells, it is necessary to conduct several attempts and subsequently select the most desirable embryo. In other words, genetic enhancement for the foreseeable future will involve generating and selecting between multiple embryos. Instead of increasing the welfare of existing persons, genetic enhancement *de facto* selects which persons can come into existence.

Such identify-affecting enhancements may not seem very puzzling for a Parfitian ethics. Parfit argues that one should simply select the persons with highest expected welfare (Parfit 1984, 356–360). One could of course question how helpful this prescription is: the idea of being able to make total expected welfare calculation of an entire person calls to mind an omniscient God on judgment day. However, even if we bracket such concerns, the category of identity-affecting enhancements runs into fundamental problems.

The first problem is that liberal principles are not necessarily respected when selecting persons with highest expected welfare. Think of how eugenicists justified measures such as forcible sterilization with reference to a utilitarian calculation where the short-term pains of administering cruel treatments and of

suppressing instincts of sympathy were outweighed by the long-term benefit to the human stock. Similarly, if we stipulate that some type of trait, such as “intelligence,” is an intrinsic good because it raises the welfare of the person involved, one could use utilitarian reasoning to justify the genetic enhancement of such a trait through methods that are equivalent to improving human stock. Of course, there is a significant moral difference between the artificial selection on embryos and the artificial selection on fully developed human beings. Nonetheless, there is nothing in this line of reasoning that should preclude the endorsement of widespread social programs to improve human stock at the embryonic stage.

So it would be desirable (for ethicists) to be able to conceptualize identity-affecting enhancements in a way that safeguards basic liberal principles. However, which principles are applicable? It makes no sense to refer to the autonomy of the enhancee given that the act of enhancement brings them into existence. One cannot refer to parental autonomy either, because genetic enhancement does not involve acting in the best interests of a specific offspring in the way that guardianship, where parental autonomy is paradigmatically appropriate, does. Could we then say that one should select those persons that have the best chance of *flourishing*? Unfortunately, the concept of flourishing is intertwined with concepts of human nature, and it would seem unsatisfactory for a person-based ethics of enhancement to bottom out in human nature. Alternatively, one could invoke an older meaning of the word “liberal,” namely that it refers to respecting the intrinsic value of a person. In this older sense of liberalism, respect of human autonomy is merely one way of respecting the intrinsic value of a person. However, what is the “intrinsic value” of a person? With this type of language, we are approaching a Thomistic mindset, where the concept of human nature is precisely what grounds the intrinsic value of persons (Eberl 2014). This line of reasoning also bottoms out in the concept of human nature, raising the same problem for a person-based enhancement ethics.

In this way, if one accepts that genetic enhancement is not a person-affecting enhancement, but must be an identity-affecting enhancement, it becomes unclear how precisely liberal approaches to enhancement should reason about such cases. As a final remark, this problem suggests a different diagnosis (compared to Sparrow’s) why person-affecting enhancements have received outsized attention in the literature: they neatly fit into a liberal approach to enhancement. By contrast, it is not clear how identity-affecting enhancements fit in, if at all.

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