

Human enhancement and moral improvement

Bert Gordijn

Abstract

Human enhancement technologies are already being used for the improvement of physical appearance, athletic performance, cognition and mood. Examples can be found in nonsurgical cosmetic procedures (botox, laser hair removal), cosmetic surgery (breast implants, liposuction), cosmetic dentistry (tooth bleaching, veneers, tooth reshaping), sports medicine (cocaine, steroids, erythropoietin), psychopharmacology (modafinil, ritalin, prozac) as well as neurotechnology (brain-computer interfaces). These current developments and the prospect of even more drastic future enhancements, facilitated through progress in genetics, neuroscience and nanotechnology amongst others, have triggered an interesting ethical debate about human enhancement. The most recent development in this debate focuses on “moral bioenhancement”, biomedical ways of improving our moral behavior.

This presentation reviews and assesses Ingmar Persson’s and Julian Savulescu’s view on moral bioenhancement as presented in their interesting book *Unfit for the Future: The Need for Moral Enhancement* (2012). They argue that education and legislation have not sufficed to improve human moral behavior to the extent that it can tackle the main ethical challenges of the 21st century. Over the last few millennia there has hardly been any significant improvement of our moral dispositions and capabilities whilst the ethical challenges, especially those triggered by massive technological developments, have only grown larger. Therefore, we are morally deficient and unfit for the future, or so the authors argue.

Against this backdrop they claim it makes sense to explore biological ways of enhancing our moral qualities (for example through drug treatment of genetic engineering), to be applied alongside more traditional vehicles of moral improvement, such as education and legislation.

For the assessment of their position it is important to distinguish between their diagnosis of the problem and their proposal for a solution. On both fronts there are a couple of critical problems that demand further analysis. Prominent amongst these are the problem of dual use and moral hazard, the bootstrapping problem as well as the authors’ denial of any significant progress in our moral capabilities and traits.