December 2008

Good, better, best?

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"Good, better, best?" In: J Savelescu and N Bostrum, eds., *Human Enhancement*, Oxford University Press, forthcoming.

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Keywords

anti-meliorism, enhancement, neuroethics

Comments

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Center for Cognitive Neuroscience

Neuroethics Publications

University of Pennsylvania *Year* 2008

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Good, Better, or Best?

Arthur L. Caplan

The rise of anti-meliorism

Excellence has come in for a lot of bad press recently. A torrent of books and articles have appeared [see list of References, 1–10, 20] all raising serious ethical questions about the wisdom and morality of trying to use new biomedical knowledge to perfect ourselves or our offspring. Of course, beating up on the literal pursuit of perfection is silly. As the artist Salvadore Dali famously pointed out, "Have no fear of perfection—you'll never reach it".

Critics of those who allegedly seek to perfect human beings by means of bioengineering know this. Nonetheless, they often invoke the rhetoric of 'perfection' in their critiques since the pursuit of perfection seems arrogant at best and silly at worst. Perfection, however, while an easy target, is not their real target. What they really are attacking is the far more frequently expressed, albeit far less lofty, and, notably, far less controversial goal—improvement. The critics are very concerned about the drive to improve or enhance particular human behaviors, traits or features by the application of emerging biomedical knowledge in genetics, neuroscience, pharmacology and physiology.

Those who I will lump together as 'anti-meliorists' wonder how we will ever resist the obvious temptation to put the explosion of biomedical knowledge to use for the aim of improving ourselves. They are quick to note that we are already edging down the melioristic road. Breasts are being augmented, wrinkles smoothed, fat suctioned. Blood doped and moods calmed. Where the anti-meliorists wonder will this all end?

Why is the drive to improve ourselves so disturbing to anti-meliorists? Their arguments cluster around these key worries; that the pursuit of perfection by biomedical means is vain, selfish and unrewarding [1, 2, 3, 6, 7], that improving ourselves is unfair [1, 3, 4, 10], that the happiness achieved through engineering with an eye toward improvement will lead to a deformation of our character and spirit [1, 2, 4, 9], improvement in performance that is bioengineered is not authentic and therefore not morally proper [1, 2, 9, 10], accepting enhancement will undermine and deform the role of parent [9] and, that enhancement or improvement violate human nature [2, 4, 5, 7, 8, 9] or worse still, may actually destroy it [2, 5, 7, 9].

I am going to spend little time examining concerns about vanity. Vanity and self-regard are not the same things. Self-regard, in moderation, is not a moral evil. And when examined carefully the anti-meliorist invocation of vanity seems to me to be based on the assertion that the pursuit of improvement by means of bioengineering is of necessity vain rather than simply an instance of legitimate self-regard. Wanting to look better or function more efficiently cannot justifiably be dismissed as mere vanity. The anti-meliorist must first tell us how to recognize morally suspect vanity from morally legitimate self-regard.

I will also pass over anti-meliorist arguments about inequity since they miss the relevant mark. When it comes to worries about fair access to melioristic biotechnologies, those concerned about equity worry either about the creation of more 'haves' and 'have nots'—as the rich get better, the poor will languish or, the inequity of private companies earning massive profits by seducing us all into frivolous efforts to improve ourselves (10).

Equity and fairness are major problems in this and every society. But, concerns about equity do not speak to why improvement is wrong. Rather equity arguments tell us whether a pattern of inequality or a particular distribution of resources is right or wrong. It is important to decide what is fair in the distribution of access to enhancement technologies or what to do about greedy, manipulative pharmaceutical or cosmetics industries that fool us into wasting our money on silly things when real health needs go unmet—but these are matters that are quite distinct from and hardly unique to improvement via new biological knowledge. Equity arguments do not show what is inherently wrong with the desire to use biotechnology to improve ourselves and our children (11).

The remaining arguments of anti-meliorism do engage improvement on its own terms and thus do merit a response. It is the last of these arguments, which I believe is at the core of anti-meliorist concerns. So I will engage the view that it is wrong to tamper with human nature first and then return to the remaining concerns of anti-meliorists. I do not think that any of the arguments that have been brought forward provide a convincing case against improvement.

Human nature inviolate?

It cannot simply be the pursuit of improvement that is making anti-meliorists nervous. Many religious traditions, self-help, and spiritual movements seek improvement, even perfection [12, 13, 14] but these evoke no negative commentary from the anti-meliorists. Nor, interestingly enough, do recent and sustained efforts to improve animals and plants using biotechnology evoke much more than an ethical yawn (with the exception of McKibben [2]). Rather, it is the use of biomedical knowledge applied to you and me that is the crux of their concern. Those who worry about what will become of human nature fear that in applying new biomedical knowledge to improve human beings something essential about humanity will be lost. If biomedical tinkering is allowed we will destroy the very thing that makes us human—our nature.

Anti-meliorism rests, however, on a very shaky foundation. To support their position the anti-meliorists must state what human nature is. Despite a great deal of hand-waving about this they do not. They must also be very clear about why they see human nature as static. They are not. And they must advance an argument about why human nature, which has evolved in response to an enormous array of random forces, accidental environmental contingencies, and stochastic genetic events, tells us anything about what is good or desirable in terms of the traits humans should possess. They cannot.

The products of the 'random walk' of evolution, where a series of contingent events intersect to produce the patterns of life we call organisms, do not teach any lessons about what we should become any more than they can tell us what is right or wrong, good or bad. They merely are what they are.

Is there a 'nature' that is common to all humans both those that exist now and those that have existed in the past? The fight over whether there is any such thing as human nature is a long-standing one [15, 16]. But one can concede that we have been shaped by a causally powerful set of genetic influences and selection forces and still remain skeptical as to whether these have produced a single 'nature' that all members of humanity possess. What exactly is the single trait or fixed, determinate set of traits that defines the nature of who humans are and have been throughout our entire existence as a species on this planet? Unless they can articulate this Platonic essence, anti-meliorists who invoke the sanctity of human nature as the basis for their moral concerns about improvement lack a foundation for their argument. If one surveys all humans, across cultures, those of all ages and varieties of congenital defects, and those from different times in the past it becomes hard to believe any single trait is defining of human nature.

Without a demonstration of a 'nature' there is no basis for the claim that change, improvement, and betterment always represent grave threats to our essential humanity. In fact, perhaps the only lesson that evolution teaches is that adaptation to change is the key requirement for life on this planet.

Worse still for anti-meliorists, even if there is an amalgam of traits that might be roughly described as constituting human nature, that does not show that it is wrong to tamper with those traits to try and improve upon them. We are creatures who have long tinkered with ourselves using all manner of technologies from clothing to medicines to agriculturally produced foods to telescopes to computers and to airplanes.

Our view of our 'nature' is closely linked to the technologies that we have invented and to which we have adapted [17]. We don't think of ourselves as being engineered for improvement but we are. We have already engaged in systematic meliorism using science and technology. We are traveling, eating, flying, computing, and perceiving in ways that are distinct improvements upon what would be possible using only our natural endowments. Each of these 'improvements' comes at a price but it is not clear that it is a price not worth paying [18]. And more to the point, there is no reason to think that this creative manipulation of our environment, including our own bodies and minds, is any less worthy of inclusion as part of human 'nature' [19].

Nor is there any normative guidance offered by our evolutionary history that shows why we should not try to improve upon the biological design with which we are endowed. Augmenting breasts or prolonging erections may be vain, self indulgent, trivial, and a waste of scarce resources but seeking to use our knowledge to enhance our vision, memory, strength, learning skills, immunity, or metabolism are not obviously any of these things.

Ultimately, anti-meliorism posits a static vision of human nature to which the anti-meliorists mandate we reconcile ourselves. If anything is clear about human nature it is that this is not an accurate view of who we have been or what we are now, or a view which should determine what we become (16). So, if human nature does not provide a foundation for anti-meliorism what other arguments are there? The inadvisability of settling for 'cheap' thrills and the importance of resisting the lure of the inauthentic are two prominent lines of argument in the anti-meliorist camp.

The 'loss' of authenticity

It is estimated that nearly one and a half million Americans have undergone laser surgery to improve their vision. The purveyors of this procedure often promise that those who have it will see better than they ever have before, even with the aid of glasses or contact lenses. Laser surgery sometimes can give eyes better than 20–20 vision. So, have those who have undergone this type of procedure and achieved enhanced vision done something immoral? If you were to read the report of the President's Council on Bioethics entitled *Beyond Therapy: Biotechnology and the Pursuit of Happiness* (1) you might think so.

Admittedly the eye is not the only part of the brain that people want to improve. Interest in brain enhancement is enormous. Already a number of pharmaceutical companies are interested in selling drugs such as Provigil, that allow individuals to go without sleep for longer periods of time than they otherwise could or Ambien that provides sleep with fewer side-effects than older sleeping aids. Herbal and nutritional companies are also peddling substances that allegedly can improve memory, mood, or sexual enjoyment. Many students are keenly interested in any drug, say Atavan or Ritalin or Prozac, that might improve their performance on tests or in musical, dramatic, or athletic performances by allowing for greater attention span, increased short-term memory, fewer muscle twitches or

reduced anxiety. The military has an interest in seeing mental performance improved so as to increase the combat effectiveness of individuals or entire units. And not a few of us drink coffee, tea, colas, and other stimulants to try and enhance our cognitive performance. Many take various drugs, foods and herbs, or utilize technology such as virtual reality to try to enhance their mood, emotional state, or sexual enjoyment. While these activities can and sometimes are abused, it would hardly seem self evident that it is morally wrong to seek to try and improve one's mental abilities. Surely it is the critics of efforts to improve or enhance what the brain can do that bear the burden of showing why this is wrong.

So what is the basis for the moral concern of those who authored the Council's Report about efforts to improve, enhance or optimize our brains, vision, or any other human trait? To some extent they worry that since the brain is the seat of our nature then altering it is to alter our very nature. But as we have already seen this argument presumes both a clear, static, and inviolate nature that is not consistent with any evolutionary view of how our brains came to be what they are. So what other arguments do the anti-meliorists make? Among other concerns are these:

1. the happiness or satisfaction achieved through engineering is seductive and will lead to a deformation of our character and spirit,
2. improvement in performance that is engineered is not authentic and is, thus, not earned and is, therefore, not morally commendable,

Neither of these arguments provides a sufficient reason to oppose enhancement or optimization of our vision or our brains, our own or our children's. Each argument carries some emotive force, but is not a sound basis for rejecting choices that individuals or parents might make to improve or optimize their children. That is not to say that every choice for enhancement or optimization is beyond moral criticism or even morally valid. But it is to say that those who would have us turn away in principle from all forms of enhancement or optimization have not made a convincing case.

Consider these questions from the President's Council which suggest that all efforts at enhancement will distort or deform the nature of our experience,

> Indeed, why would one need to discipline one's passions, refine one's sentiments, and cultivate one's virtues, in short, to organize one's soul for action in the world,

when one's aspiration to happiness could be satisfied by drugs in a quick, consistent, and cost-effective manner? (1)

The concern expressed here is that, if we enhance ourselves and our pleasures and achievements and enjoyments come easily, then why would we strive to be good or virtuous people?

The problem with this argument is that many people now do not strive to be virtuous or good, and they are not biologically or biotechnologically enhanced or optimized in any way. Laying the blame for vice, sloth, or the willingness to settle for cheap thrills at the feet of enhancement ignores the inconvenient fact that the desire for quick returns, easy money, and instant gratification have nothing at all to do with whether some or all of us choose to use biotechnology to become enhanced beings with different experiences. Vice is a trait of many if not all human beings. The notion of what we must seek and what we must avoid to facilitate character development and what that character should be that is implicit in the President's Council report has deeper roots in fictionalized accounts of young men at boarding schools, then anything that accurately describes how human beings actually evolve the character traits that they manifest or what psychologists and social scientists tell us about the process [18].

Still, the Council broods in *Beyond Therapy*, easy pleasures and cheap thrills will likely make us weak and spineless. There is nothing like misery to make us stronger. Sorrow, courageously confronted, can make us stronger, wiser, and more compassionate.

To what extent might the new antidepressants, the serotonin reuptake inhibitors or SSRIs, when used to reduce our troubles and sorrows, endanger this aspect of affective life? Although they do not prevent psychic pain, SSRIs may generally dull our capacity to feel it, rendering us less capable of experiencing and learning from misfortune or tragedy. They may make it difficult to empathize with the miseries of others. If some virtues can only be taught through experiencing very trying circumstances, those virtues might be lost, or at least less developed in a world of biological enhancement.

Put aside the fact that sorrow can also drive some to suicide and bring others to dysfunction and despair. And ignore the fact that using drugs to dull or blunt experience is not clearly linked in anyway to the goals of enhancement or improvement. After all one might use drugs to intensify

experiences that lead to the formation of virtue or empathy rather than to avoid such experiences. Putting these points aside, is it really true that improvement and virtue cannot co-exist?

This argument is a bit like those who worried what the airplane would do to the virtues of the combat ground soldier. The improved technology would make obsolete the kind of courage needed for a frontal assault. Oh really? Tell that to the fighter pilot who needs to evade a ground to air missile or land on an aircraft carrier at night, or to the helicopter pilot evacuating a wounded soldier under a barrage of ground fire. Improving performance is not necessarily toxic to virtue. It simply shifts how virtue is manifest. It is highly unlikely that those with enhanced vision, muscles, or brains would lack for challenges in the real world.

So the case is not made that improving our brains will destroy our 'authentic' character. What then? The Council wrings their collective hands at the prospect that enhancement of the brain or optimization of brain performance will cheapen the value of our experiences:

> But seldom do those who win by cheating or who love by deceiving cease to long for the joy and fulfillment that come from winning fair and square or being loved for who one truly is. Many stoop to fraud to obtain happiness, but none want their feeling of flourishing itself to be fraudulent. Yet a fraudulent happiness is just what the pharmacological management of our mental lives threatens to confer upon us (1)

Translation: If you don't really earn your performance, if you do not sweat and toil at it, then it will not be authentic and it will ultimately prove unsatisfying. One is tempted to ask who is writing this stuff—is the Council somehow psychically channeling our Puritan ancestors?

Certainly it is exciting to achieve satisfaction by testing one's limits, by seeing what one can achieve by striving, struggling, and working to overcome innate limits. But it also very satisfying to have benefits that simply come from out of the blue or through good fortune. No one who has enhanced vision as a result of laser surgery whom I have ever encountered feels the least bit of guilt, shame, or doubt that the improved vision they enjoy is fraudulent because they did nothing to deserve or earn it except pay their money and let a laser do its thing. Life is full of many pleasures that are not earned by testing our limits but which are fully and thoroughly enjoyed. Think of the joy in winning the lottery, or in finding

out that your friends like you even though you cheat at cards, cannot stop smoking, eat too much, or are sometimes boring, or the pleasure you can find in solving problems using computers and every form of technological assistance you can muster to aid your fallible brain.

We do not always have to "earn" our happiness to be really and truly happy. Nor do we always reject as fraudulent those things that make us happy that we do nothing to earn. In fact it could be argued that a mix of both types of experiences, the happiness that is earned and the happiness that we enjoy as a matter of good fortune, is a more accurate reflection of authentic human experience. An enhanced brain or improved cognitive functioning would not in principle undermine the ethos of authenticity that undergirds human satisfaction because that infrastructure is not as the Council depicts it. Nor is it clear that improvement through bioengineering must always be inimical to authenticity.

Neurotic parenting and improvement

Lastly, consider the concerns of Harvard's Michael Sandel writing in the Atlantic (9, 20) and in this volume. He is worried that if we seek to perfect our children, to enhance them and optimize them we will no longer see them as "gifts". They will instead become objects, things to manufacture.

> In a social world that prizes mastery and control, parenthood is a school for humility. That we care deeply about our children and yet cannot choose the kind we want teaches parents to be open to the unbidden. Such openness is a disposition worth affirming . . . it invites us to abide the unexpected, to live with dissonance, to rein in the impulse to control. (9, p. 60)

Put aside the irony of a Professor at a school to which parents devote enormous resources to enhance their children's capacities and abilities so that they may enter there counseling acceptance of the impulse to control the fate of their children. Ignore the fact that the vision of parenting that is put forward seems unduly bound by an upper class, American vision of what makes for desirable parenthood—no collective parenting or parent-child estrangement cloud this vision. Is there value to be found in accepting the random draw of the genetic lottery with respect to one's children? Should a point mutation that produces a slight change in a trait or a recombination of genetic material really be seen as the source of value in

creating the unexpected in our offspring? If the genetic endowment of our children is a gift then to whom ought we feel grateful—our microbial forbears, the dinosaurs, Neanderthals for not wiping our ancestors out? The metaphor of the gift makes no sense in the secular context such as Sandel proposes. Gifts require a giver but nature offers no likely suspects to occupy this role.

Much of what parents try to do is shape and control their children. They do not value much about their design but rather try to work with the tools and abilities that nature has given to parent a child that can be happy and productive. Would changing what the accidents of nature produce in terms of a child's endowment of traits and behaviors at birth really result in a child that is less the object of parental design or less on parental affection for a child (21)? Is it self evident that this must be so?

No doubt there are neurotic parents. And no doubt some parents can and do get caught up in trying to 'perfect' their children. We are all familiar with the stereotypes of the demanding soccer parent or the overbearing parent who forces their child to do piano, math, tennis, or gymnastics regardless of the child's own wishes and even at the cost of the child's emotional and physical health.

But, adding more bioengineering possibilities to what is already there in terms of environmental and social tools that parents can use does nothing except broaden the armamentarium available to parents. The parents who are neurotic, overly demanding, and compulsively driven to change and shape their children according to their own values will be trying to do this with or without biological tools. The fact that there are some neurotic parents around should not be enough to prohibit the use of biological engineering to improve eyesight, enhance memory, or allow a child to learn languages with greater facility. The problem is bad parenting, not bad technology.

The case against all enhancements, in adults or children, is not made. Which, again, is not to say that all enhancement is, of necessity, good or desirable. But it is to say that, in principle, objections to perfection and enhancement should not deter those who seek to improve or better using biotechnology for themselves or their children. What we must do is take each proposed enhancement technology under consideration and decide whether what it can do is worth whatever price it might exact.

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Queries in Chapter 9

Q1. We have captured references in same style as in other chapters here also (we have not captured here numbers for items). Please confirm.

Q2. Closing Quotes is missing here. Please check.