Teaching and Learning Guide for: the Ethics of Human Enhancement

Alberto Giubilini*
Charles Sturt University


Authors’ Introduction

The notion of ‘human enhancement’ refers to the use of technologies, biotechnologies and medicine to improve humans’ capacities – in a way that increases the enhanced individual’s wellbeing – even when there is no pathology to be treated. For example, giving ‘smart drugs’ to people who do not have any cognitive impairment might improve their cognitive performances within or even above normal levels. Human enhancement is more controversial when practiced at the genetic level, e.g. pre-implantation genetic diagnosis and selection of embryos, or insertion or deletion of gene sequences. Often the term ‘human enhancement’ is associated with the idea of super-humans, or ‘post-humans’, but whether enhancement will lead to the creation of a new breed of humans depends on how enhancing technologies will be used and distributed. Many people think that enhancement will create justice issues and/or exacerbate current ones, adding a biological or genetic aspect to social and economic inequalities. But there are other types of objections to enhancement, such as critiques of the attempt to ‘play God’ with human nature or the risk of reviving (old) eugenic practices. Enhancement advocates typically base their arguments on liberal values, but also stress that enhancement could be used to promote equality among human beings – in other words, the problem is not enhancement per se, but how enhancements will be distributed. The current debate raises important philosophical issues such as the normative value of our idea of ‘human nature’, the meaning and value of equality among humans and, more generally, whether we should put limits on human striving to better ourselves.

Authors Recommend


Agar discusses the notion of ‘liberal eugenics’, a term meant to highlight the difference between the old eugenic practices of the early 20th century and what contemporary advocates of human enhancement propose. While the old eugenics was coercive and carried out by morally objectionable means, the ‘new’ or ‘liberal’ eugenics is characterised by the liberty of individuals to enhance themselves or their offspring.


A thorough analysis of the ethical issues raised by genetic knowledge and genetic technology, with a particular focus on issues of justice and equality of opportunities that might arise if people do not have equal access to enhancements. The book offers a limited defence of the moral relevance of the ‘therapy–enhancement distinction’, based on egalitarian considerations.

Habermas argues that our ‘genetic programming’ of a future generation may reduce the latter’s autonomy and violate the moral equality between the two generations. This is a short book-length discussion of various implications of this possibility.


John Harris, a prominent enhancement advocate, discusses whether and to what extent our knowledge of the human genome should inform reproductive choices. He argues that we can and even should modify the course of evolution and our human nature through genetic interventions. As well as being a philosophically dense book, it provides an overview of the relevant science and technology available and prospective.


This is possibly the most famous presentation of ‘conservative bioethics’, and in particular of conservative opposition to the use of biotechnologies to replace the natural processes of reproduction. Leon Kass proposes here that our feelings of repugnance at the idea of using technologies like cloning or assisted reproduction should be taken as a sign that a moral boundary has been crossed.


This is another popular expression of conservatism in bioethics. Genetic enhancement, particularly the selection of offspring with certain desirable characteristics, is opposed as a sign of the hubris of humans and as a threat to our sense of the giftedness of life. Sandel also provides a more general criticism of the contemporary analytical and liberal approach to ethics.


This is perhaps the most cited article in the literature on the ethics of human enhancement. Julian Savulescu, a prominent bioethicist, argues that parents using in-vitro fertilisation have not only the right, but a moral obligation to select the embryo that is likely to have the best life.


This is the most comprehensive collection of papers on the debate on the ethics of human enhancement. The book includes contributions from prominent enhancement advocates and opponents, who discuss human enhancement from ethical, political and metaphysical perspectives.


While some critics of human enhancement can be grouped as conservatives (Kass, Sandel), Sparrow is among the most important critics from outside this group. In this paper, Sparrow suggests that the ‘liberal eugenics’ advocated by enhancement enthusiasts would have implications very similar to the ones of the old eugenics.
Online Materials

http://blog.practicalethics.ox.ac.uk/enhancement/: The ‘enhancement’ thread of the weblog ‘Practical Ethics’ includes blog posts by prominent philosophers who are connected to four different centres in the Faculty of Philosophy at the University of Oxford. This blog fosters discussions among academics with different ethical views in a plain language that makes it accessible not just to students, but to the lay public and specialists working outside philosophy.

http://www.neohumanitas.org/?lang=en: NeoHumanitas provides updates on relevant developments in medicine and biotechnologies that are or have the potential to be used for human enhancement purposes, offering a pluralistic and neutral analysis of ethical, social and cultural implications.

Sample Syllabus

WEEK I: INTRODUCTION TO THE ETHICAL DEBATE ON HUMAN ENHANCEMENT

Definitions, Problems & Issues: What is human enhancement?

Reading:
Giubilini, Alberto and Sagar Sanyal. The ethics of human enhancement. Philosophy Compass

WEEK II: ENHANCEMENT AND JUSTICE

Reading:
Buchanan, Allen et al. From Chance to Choice: Genetics and Justice. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000, Chapters 3 and 4

WEEK III: ENHANCEMENT AND ‘EUGENICS’

Savulescu, Julian. ‘Procreative beneficence: why we should select the best embryos.’ Bioethics 15.5/6 (2001): 413–426

Focus Questions

1. How can enhancement be defined? Give three examples of medical interventions that can be considered forms of enhancement.
2. How can therapy be defined, as opposed to enhancement?
3. What are the implications of different theories of justice (such as egalitarianism, prioritarianism and sufficentarianism) for the ethics of enhancement?
4. What, if any, are the differences between the old and the new eugenics? Are the differences morally significant?
5. Do liberal values warrant a right to genetically enhance one’s offspring?