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Reconciling Eugenics for the Sake of Human Survival

Conor O'Keefe

ABSTRACT: This paper will attempt to argue for the moral permissibility of genetic enhancement through the ethical lens of principlism, which necessitates the consolidation of positive and negative eugenics as therefore equally permissible. I will argue that through modern medicine and technology we have a moral obligation to establish a more fair baseline of human functioning, and that giving consent to such enhancement is morally justifiable.

Throughout history, humans have constantly been capable of sufficiently adapting to new changes in their environment. Whether this be explained by means of Darwin's theory of evolution, or highlighting humanity's rational nature to solve problems, humans have found the means with which to thrive. However, we now find ourselves in a time and place (spatiotemporal position) that faces some serious global issues, such as the possibility of nuclear warfare, global warming, resource scarcity, etc. In order to guarantee survival in such a position, we must formulate new solutions to these problems, otherwise our continuation as a species on this planet could be threatened. One such solution is the therapeutic enhancement of our cognitive capacities through the development and subsequent implementation of what is called synthetic biology. At the outset of this paper, I recognize that my argument can be construed as ableist, but that I will attempt to counteract this notion through appeals to principlism to resolve the issue of human extinction in a moral sense, along with advocating for scientific progress as a means to resolve the issue in an existential sense.

In this paper, I will argue that genetic enhancements to the cognitive capacities of modern man could provide a plausible solution to guaranteeing the perpetuation of our species, which would involve a shift in current paradigmatic thought, as well as the consolidation of negative and positive eugenics in application to cognitive enhancements. These factors would then give rise to a development in the field of synthetic biology which would equip scientists with

cognitive enhancement techniques, such as identification of the neural properties in our brains that are responsible for critical thought, critical analysis, and reasoning. If implemented, our cognitive capacities would outmatch our moral reasoning, which would then require a more explicitly developed sense of morality, what is later identified as moral bioenhancement.

Admittedly, if an enhancement evolution were to arise and we augmented our current selves through moral and cognitive enhancements, we would surely not be able to identify as human in the same sense we do now since our current conception of our humanity lies in the boundaries that such enhancements would hope to resolve, which is exactly the kind of answer we need in response to our present dilemmas.

A few key bioethical concerns can be raised in response to the position I am taking in this paper, so in turn the ethical framework I am applying to support my argument is the lens of principlism. According to Lewis Vaughn, there are four principles within this viewpoint: Autonomy, Beneficence, Utility, and Justice. Autonomy describes the common human's ability to make his/her own decisions and enjoy self-sovereignty. Beneficence is the desire to only produce good outcomes and an abstention from causing bad outcomes throughout life, passively and actively. Utility is a dual concept which tries to ensure the most people the most amount of good possible in any scenario or context, but simultaneously accepts that there some harm can be generated in order to create the utmost amount of good. Justice invokes the concepts of fairness and equality, which are applicative in almost all scenarios. I rely upon the concepts of beneficence and utility the most in my argument. Beneficence is the instinct to remove harm, which I propose is analogous to the preventative measures that motivate the techniques of negative eugenics. Utility is vital also because the concept recognizes that the best outcome is one that can create a minimal amount of bad as long as it secures a maximum amount of good.

Justice and autonomy are secondary principles that I address after verifying the plausibility of the principles of beneficence and utility. I appeal to the principle of autonomy in my argument through proposing that any genetic enhancements of therapeutic cognitive optimization would have to involve the inclusion of informed consent. My argument merely points to the desirability of enhancement, which is inherent in respecting the autonomy of others. I resolve concerns of justice by means of endorsing a distributive model of justice, which would mean that the genetic enhancements would have to be made available for everyone, otherwise my argument for utility and beneficence don't put a dent in their proposed theoretical applications.

Through the development of increasingly dangerous weaponry throughout the world, we as a species have put ourselves in risk of total annihilation, if issues of resource scarcity and global warming don't kill us first. With that being said, it is evident that we need a means by which we can counter being in a constant position of global turmoil, and one way to do so is through intellectual enhancements (which are innately therapeutic, which I touch upon as necessary elsewhere in the paper). Intellectual enhancements would give our species an advantage on being able to problem-solve contemporary dilemmas outlined above. Another possible product of intellectual enhancements would be the evolution of humans as more cognitively capable beings. In his article "*Taking the 'Human' out of Human Rights*" Harris calls this transition into cognitively enhanced beings an indication of the "enhancement evolution" through the use of synthetic biology: "a hybrid discipline between biology and engineering" (Harris 2011, 8). This desire to replace ourselves with beings more suitable for existing in a progressively complicated environment is not an abandonment of humanity as a whole, but is rather a "part of the curiosity and need that drives science, one of the oldest and most valuable of the things that characterize persons" (Harris 2011, 9). So if science is in part driven by a desire to

better ourselves, and genetic enhancements enables us to better ourselves, then rationally we should be able to embrace an enhancement evolution for the sake of continuing our existence in our current and future environments. It is important to distinguish between prolonging our continued survival purely for egotistical reasons and the desire to prolong our existence as indicative of our humanity in itself: that through prolonging life by means of genetic enhancements we are exercising a deep-seated intuition of caring for ourselves and our species. In summation, human rights basically create a list of entitlements for our species, which Harris claims can be viewed “in terms of a rather more abstract capacity to value existence. . . . If creatures who can value themselves and can value others can claim respect are to continue, it may be vital . . . for those creatures to further evolve” (Harris 2011, 10). By enhancing ourselves intellectually, we have the increased capacity with which to exercise our morals, and continue our human existence as moral beings.

The next part of my argument that I am going to introduce as a necessity for fully accepting genetic enhancement is dyadic in nature; it is the flip side of cognitive enhancement, a term coined by Swedish bioethicist Ingmar Persson and British bioethicist Julian Savulescu: moral bioenhancement. In their article titled “*Getting Moral Enhancement Right: The Desirability of Moral Bioenhancement*,” moral bioenhancement is an idea developed “to reduce these risks [of global destruction by means of nuclear war, resource scarcity, global warming, etc.]. It is imperative to pursue moral enhancement not merely by traditional means, such as education, but by genetic or other biological means” (Persson and Savulescu 2013, 125). The essence of the ethics that is progressed by Persson and Savulescu is “altruism” combined with “a sense of justice”, both of which have evolutionary origin[s]” (2013, 129). Therefore, according to the authors Persson and Savulescu, it is plausible to deduce that if our cognitive faculties have

foundations in our neurobiology, then our moral faculties must also be local to our neurobiology. In this article, the authors endorse Harris's call for cognitive enhancement, yet propose moral bioenhancement as a necessary supplement to prevent what they call "ultimate harm" (Persson and Savulescu 2013, 127) which is synonymous with what I have described as global destruction. Without any attempt to adjust our morals to our intellectual capacities, we would surely become more prone to committing ultimate harm to our species and our environment.

A counter-argument that was addressed in the Savulescu/Persson article was that if we were to enhance ourselves morally, we might become subservient to our new moral code, as if we were as restricted to thought as automatons. The authors respond to this critique perfectly; that any person we see as being morally upright does what they consider to be morally just not because their morals override their thinking, but because they choose to act morally. It is sufficient to claim, then, that our newly found moral codes developed from moral bioenhancement would be just as commendable as our current ethical viewpoints, but would be better suited to match our cognitive capacities. It is for this reason that moral bioenhancement and cognitive enhancement go hand-in-hand and are dyadic; they are two sides of the same coin.

A critical notion that is a bit of a bullet to bite for my argument is one urged by John Harris in his article titled "*Is Gene Therapy a Form of Eugenics?*", which operates off of the logic that the disabled are in a "harmed condition" (Harris 2010, 572), and anyone in any harmed position would be better off protected from that reduced quality of life. This concept also relates to the other Harris article I utilized earlier, in arguing that not only are the disabled in an unfavored condition, but they have a more restricted sense of human rights. Thus, we should not create individuals "who will be significantly harmed by their genetic constitution" (Harris 2010, 574). It follows logically that my argument for the consolidation of negative and positive

eugenics in the case of cognitive genetic enhancement is an extension of the desire to better ourselves through science. Thus, the intent to prolong life is synonymous with what Harris calls “death postponing [which] is after all just ‘life-saving’ redescribed, then call it what you will, eugenics or not, we ought to be in favor of it” (Harris 2010, 575). If we truly wish to ensure the continuation of our species, we must eliminate any possibilities of genetic predispositions to death, to which mental disabilities belong. Consequently it must follow that as a species, we would want to eradicate mental handicaps because disabilities are “somehow disabling and therefore undesirable”, and that “a disability is surely a physical or mental condition we have a strong rational preference not to be in” (Harris 2010, 572).

I will now address the necessary consolidation of negative and positive eugenics. Negative eugenics typically refers to the restoration of functioning, or the pre-emptive prevention of disabilities. Positive eugenics refers to enhancement, and is therefore therapeutic because such services are not mandatory for survival. But what if therapeutic enhancements would lead to overall solutions that prevent negative eugenic practices altogether? Couldn't cognitive genetic enhancements (if effectively executed) essentially eliminate mental disabilities? Please note that I am only referring to mental handicaps that people are born with or develop as a consequence of some predetermined biological condition, mental handicaps that are received through traumatic incidents are not considered by my argument. So on one hand, we would still need negative eugenic services such as somatic and germ line tools in order to exterminate or at least prevent biological threats such as autoimmune diseases, but cognitive enhancements would adequately remove cognitive handicaps.

I have argued for the moral permissibility of cognitive enhancements by means of endorsing a positive eugenic framework in compliance with appealing to ethical principlism.

Utility combined with justice would allow us to distribute these treatments for everyone, which would be considered therapeutic for the abled and restorative to the disabled, which is the minimum amount of harm created for the sake of the greater good. Beneficence tells us that the progress of science aims to ensure the prosperity of the human race by means of enhancement and undergoing an enhancement evolution process. Autonomy allows us to accept or reject my claims, but pushes us towards the desirability of cognitive enhancement in combination with moral bioenhancement. Ultimately I believe that the propositions I have given are plausible means for which we can achieve the end of species survival in a world where our global predicaments outmatch our concomitant aptitude of problem solving.

Editorial on Ableism

In reviewing my paper, I have to take off my philosopher's cap and address the argument made by my paper in a more humanitarian lens. Although my paper tried to acknowledge the rights and feelings of the disabled community, it failed to recognize their right to sustain their lives as they are now. My paper is trying to convince an intellectual community to overlook the potential pride a disabled individual may have in their disability, such as how there are strong communities of deaf or autistic people. In overlooking such pride my argument overrides the autonomy of the individual, and tries to act in the best interest of the individual, assuming that the common individual would want to ameliorate their disability.

The problem with my ethical framework from a critical humanitarian perspective, is that utilitarianism assumes that an agent is capable of making decisions that will definitively benefit others. Even neglecting epistemological concerns regarding such an assumption, utilitarianism tries to create a type of utopic society that is determined by the arbitrary conception of a single

individual based on what they think is best for the world, a rather lofty and unrealistic conception of how one can affect the world around them. Such a conception assumes that one agent knows what's best for another agent better than that agent does. This ethical framework is inherently wrong because for one agent to subordinate the feelings, rights, and desires of an innocent agent under their own is to miss the mark of ethics. Although it is difficult to conceive of a world where an ethical decision doesn't step on anyone's toes, to start to divulge in the subordination of other's wills and agency is a slippery slope. In reality, ethics should be guided by a sense of idealism; for if ethics did not attempt to consider everyone's feelings, we would not have any inclination to consider the feelings of anyone. Such is the challenge that ethics must face as challenged by Aristotle's "*Nicomachean Ethics*": why practice justice and focus on the benefits of other if you could practice injustice and focus on the benefits for yourself? For an ethics that can handle this challenge should be the ethical framework that everyone endorses, however unrealistic such a desire might be.

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