

Political Minimalism and Social Debates: the Case of Human-Enhancement Technologies¹

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Abstract

A faulty understanding of the relationship between morality and politics hinders many contemporary debates on human enhancement. As a result, some ethical reflections on enhancement undervalue its social dimensions, while some social approaches to the topic lack normative import. In this essay, I use my own conception of the relationship between ethics and politics (which I call “political minimalism”) in order to support and strengthen the existing social perspectives on human-enhancement technologies.

Two Opposing Views

The two prevailing views on the relationship between morality and politics are sometimes referred to by the contrasting terms “political moralism” and “political realism.” Political moralism has predominated among moral philosophers from Plato to Kant, and beyond. Kant (1970, 124) summarizes such a stance by stating that all politics must bow to what is right. Williams (2005, 3) uses the term “political moralism” to refer to those “views that make the moral prior to the political,” and confronts them with the stances of authors (like Niccolò Machiavelli, Thomas Hobbes, Max Weber and Bernard Williams himself, gathered together under the label ‘political realism’) who accept the existence and legitimacy of a distinctively political thought.

The same terms, “political moralism” and “political realism,” are also employed to designate the two parallel metaphilosophical stances: for political moralists political philosophy would be nothing but applied ethics; for political realists, political philosophy and moral philosophy are mutually autonomous endeavours (Larmore 2013).

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Below, I will argue that political moralism is pervasive in controversies on human enhancement and is taken for granted by both sides of many debates on the subject, no matter how distant one side happens to be from the other. However, before describing the situation in the case of enhancement, I will discuss the shortcomings of political moralism and political realism and will introduce an alternative, political minimalism.

Political moralists agree that politics should be either oriented towards the implementation of certain moral goals (this is what Williams [2005, 1] calls the “enactment model”, the most outstanding representative of which would be utilitarianism) or, at least, constrained by certain moral values (“structural model”, exemplified by Rawls’ theory of justice). However, disagreements arise as soon as such aims or constraints are specified. According to the reading by Leo Strauss (1959, 36), virtue was the right goal of politics for Plato and Aristotle, in opposition to the (again, according to Strauss) “wrong and empty” modern option for freedom. When Strauss talks of modernity he is first and foremost referring to Kant, who can be read as defending freedom as the main aim of politics, a reconstruction consistent with his characterization of the state’s mission as a “hindering to a hindrance to freedom” (Kant 1991, 57; 6:231). Freedom is also the main goal for liberals, and indeed for libertarians. Utilitarians, instead, place *well-being* or happiness at the top of the hierarchy of moral goals for politics, while for Rawls (1971, 3) *justice* is the main constraint for political institutions and actions.

Political realists look on this plurality with contempt, and draw a key conclusion from it: no surprise that political moralists fail to agree on the correct hierarchy between moral goals and constraints, given that diverse, often mutually incompatible, moralities coexist in complex societies (particularly in contemporary societies) as well as in philosophical thought. In other words, morality cannot provide the guide or the limits for politics; morality is rather a source of conflicts, and one purpose of politics is to deal with social conflicts by solving, mitigating or transforming them. In still other words: politics should take morality into account not because of its normative import, but as a social reality. In particular, the relevant fact is the pervasiveness of disagreement concerning moral values, moral principles, and moral codes. The political realist’s solution consists in postulating a non-moral goal for politics, typically order and security (see, e.g. Williams 2005, 5).

In my view, it is as arbitrary to fix the substance of politics by mentioning certain moral goals or constraints, as it is to define politics in terms of a non-moral purpose. Hence I reject both political moralism and political realism as instances of what I call “political substantialism.” If we can talk of an essence of the political, it has to be kept minimal in order

to accommodate our shared intuitions on what politics is. This thin layer of intuitions, in turn, is conveyed in the statement that politics can be defined as *collective instrumental rationality*, or as the endeavour of looking for adequate means to implement people's aims. Far from postulating moral boundaries or imposing a (moral or non-moral) goal for politics, the activities of political actors would be reduced to the more modest (though still complex) tasks of (i) discovering the real priorities of a political community, (ii) giving coherence to disparate goals, and (iii) devising sound strategies to achieve them as much as possible. These are the main components of the proposal I label "political minimalism." I hasten to add that political minimalism does not amount to deliberative democracy. Both proposals are mutually and naturally compatible, but they respond to different questions. Political minimalism provides an answer to the question "What is politics?" Deliberative democracy is one of the possible answers to the questions "How do we learn what the aims of a political community are", and "How do we discuss the best means to achieve those aims?"

According to political minimalism, the relationship between politics and morality consists in a "reciprocal containment."² This containment means that politics takes priority over morality from the political viewpoint, and morality takes priority over politics from the moral perspective. In other words, this doctrine allows politicians not to feel committed to obey any particular moral code. Instead, they should take people's moral codes, and their outcomes, into account as social facts. But, on the other hand, anybody has the right to evaluate political actions from any moral stance, and people making such evaluations would not see themselves doing so from just one of the many moral codes that happen to coexist in our society: typically we make moral statements that we believe are true. Political minimalism, then, does *not* entail moral relativism or moral anti-realism. I am a moral realist, and hence I accept that there are certain moral truths. However, this is compatible with the claim that politics is, and must be kept, separate from ethics. It is compatible, too, with the claim that politics is a field in which the moral diversity in our societies needs to be treated as a fact, and as one of the main premises for political argument. The latter is, in turn, consistent with a robustly normative political philosophy. Political philosophy is normative, according to political minimalism, because it provides a criterion to distinguish good politics from bad. Good politics delivers good means for the ends favoured by people, while bad politics fails to do so. In summary, political minimalism does not entail relativism concerning either morals or politics.

² I borrow the term from Quine (1969, 83). He coined it to characterize the relationship between ontology and epistemology.

So far, I have sketched the theoretical framework for the discussion. Now I will show that the choice between political realism, political moralism, and political minimalism is relevant to discussions on moral enhancement, and I will document the advantages of approaching these debates with the tools of political minimalism.

Political Realism and Enhancement

Following Cabrera (2012, 3), I will interpret human enhancement broadly as “any intervention or activity by which we improve or augment in any sense (e.g. performance, appearance) our abilities, bodies, minds and well-being”. What can be said on moral enhancement both from the viewpoints of political realism and political moralism?

Let us consider political realism first. In this essay I will pay little attention to political realism because political moralism is the prevailing attitude among philosophers dealing with the social and political aspects of human enhancement. In fact, we would not expect political realists to have much to say on enhancement. Political realism, as characterized above, contends that order and security are the only legitimate goals for politics and that politics should be neither oriented nor constrained by moral considerations. Consequently, political realists should, as political philosophers, remain silent regarding the evaluation of the social consequences of human-enhancement technologies, except when such technologies pose a threat to national order and security.

For other contexts, the attitude of political realists would be equivalent to what Savulescu, Sandberg, and Kahane (2011, 3-4) call “the sociological pragmatic approach to enhancement,” and which would amount to plain relativism. The authors use this label to refer to a stance on the specific issue of the *definition* of the term “enhancement,” which can be found in Parens (1998) and Canton (2002). Nevertheless, we can broaden the use of the label to include the related, equally non-normative, sociological pragmatic attitude that describes but does not value the diverse social views on enhancement. Both the sociological approach and political realism would abstain from pronouncing normative judgements on the social implications of human-enhancement technologies. However, such policy, in its two aforementioned varieties, is too narrow: a great distance separates the strictly moral judgements on human enhancement and the limited political adjudication of its consequences for national order and security. In between, there is a long list of issues that require normative treatment, but these are ignored by political realism.

At this point, the valuable contribution by Ferrari, Coenen, and Grunwald (2012) bears mentioning. These authors disapprove of the fact that ethical reflection on human enhancement often takes technological determinism for granted and recommend adopting the perspective of Science, Technology and Society (STS) studies. This perspective would provide two advantages: first, the awareness that multiple futures are possible in the field of technological change, and, second, the realization of the social dimension of technologies and the need of paying attention to social decision procedures. These possibilities have the virtue of taking us away from political moralism, which will be criticised below, although they leave unanswered the normative questions about the correct criteria for decision-making in socio-political contexts.

Moralism and Enhancement

The various sides debating human enhancement often take political moralism for granted. This is not surprising, since the theoretical frameworks most commonly advocated by philosophers (utilitarianism, liberalism, virtue ethics, communitarianism, ethics of care, religious moralities, etc.) incorporate moralistic conceptions of the relationship between ethics and politics. I will illustrate this situation with several examples in which the prospects for human enhancement have major social and political implications. Then I will show that, far from being a correct or at least harmless metaphilosophical presupposition, political moralism is a hindrance for an adequate approach to the issue. Of course, I am not denying that there are important moral considerations to be addressed in each of the cases I will refer to. But I contend that an autonomously political examination of the issues would be more productive, or at least complementary to the moral perspective, and that such a distinctively political outlook is often missing.

To illustrate my theses, I shall start with a simple example, not related to enhancement technologies, and I will immediately turn to human enhancement. I borrow this first example from Nicholas Agar (2004, 154 ff.). The example is intended to illustrate what he calls “the ought-implies-is fallacy” (the reversal of the “is-implies-ought fallacy”, a widely recognized error denounced by David Hume and other philosophers). The example is as follows:

Suppose a friend comes to visit. On the evening of his arrival, he proposes to go jogging through an area of town that you know to be dangerous. Should you tell him? Certainly, it ought to be the case that every part of town is safe at all times for anyone not engaged in an

immoral purpose; furthermore, frequent warnings that people should not go to the dangerous area have made it even more dangerous. Your warning would, in some small way, reinforce this trend. But I suspect that few would let this perception of the moral facts stop them from advising a friend to find somewhere else to run (Agar 2004, 154).

Similar moral dilemmas can be found in many different contexts. For instance, a relatively wealthy person who favours a strong public health system, and who believes that wealthy people in the country should subscribe to the public system in order to reinforce it, might nevertheless hesitate to send his or her child to the nearby public hospital when the child needs critical surgery. After all, the impact of this decision on the public health system would be minimal and the wealthy parent who can afford a better private hospital might feel the moral obligation to provide the child the best possible health care. Similarly, an anti-racist parent who supports the integration of immigrant children in multi-ethnic and multi-cultural schools might decide not to send his or her child to a neighbourhood school full of immigrant students who have difficulties understanding the local language. The parent might feel morally obliged to provide his or her child a high-level education, despite contributing to the conversion of the school into an educational ghetto.

I am not pondering here the solution to these moral dilemmas. I only intend to point out that all three situations can be viewed quite differently if we adopt a political outlook, instead of a moral one. First of all, a public official or institution (a city council, for instance) is typically more able than a single individual to change a situation by making a decision. Besides, a public official or institution should aim at promoting the will of a political community, even if this in some cases implies certain drawbacks for particular individuals. A city council, for instance, might decide to encourage runners to jog through riskier areas of the city as part of a campaign to make these areas safer, knowing that the risk for individuals should not be too high if many participate. Similarly, local authorities might have good reasons to encourage wealthy people to make use of the public health service, and urge upper and middle class parents to send their children to multi-ethnic schools.

Now, could these political actors invoke truly good reasons to support such policies? A libertarian thinker might be inclined to answer “no,” because these decisions would run counter to the individual rights of the citizens. A utilitarian might be inclined to say “yes,” considering the foreseeable overall benefits of the policies. In any case, both answers would be moralistic answers (in the sense of taking for granted the framework of political moralism). The right policy, from the standpoint of political minimalism, would be the one most likely in each case

to promote the will of the political community. This stance does not preclude that the answer might finally be “no,” if the community values freedom above other considerations; but it allows each community to decide its priorities at a given moment and recommends that politicians and institutions adopt the policies most likely to promote such priorities.

Let us now move towards the debates on human enhancement. Agar (2004, 155) poses a case that is analogous in some respects to that of the friend who intends to jog in a dangerous area. Suppose, Agar says, that parents are given the possibility of choosing the skin colour of their children. They might want either to use gene therapy to darken their children’s skin (in order to protect them from the sun rays in the context of growing ozone depletion), or to use dark-to-light skin therapy to protect them from marginalization in a racist society. As in the jogger’s case, the moral conviction that ozone depletion and racism are reproachable facts resulting from morally defective behaviour does not make them less real. What should we do in the event of being forced to face such situations?

Again, these dilemmas can be viewed from a moral outlook or from a political perspective. Agar (2004, 156) provides moral, though different, answers to both cases. In his opinion, although we might wish that effective measures were taken to prevent ozone depletion, if such measures are not enacted, then people should be granted the right to protect their children by using light-to-dark-skin gene therapy. The reason, Agar points out, is that letting people darken their children’s skins is not incompatible with fighting to reduce harmful emissions. However, the case of the dark-to-light would be different:

Prospective parents may succeed in sparing their child the burden of prejudice, but, in doing so, they increase the burden on children who continue to be born with the dark variants. Whether they intend it to or not, their complicity with prejudice will be seen as endorsing the idea that moral value really is determined by one’s skin colour. The complicity is likely to make racism more efficacious, encouraging the very idea of prejudice (Agar 2004, 156).

I am not discussing the moral merits of these divergent diagnoses of the two cases. I simply point out that, although Agar’s solution may be consistent with his moderately liberal moral stance, it will not be unanimously accepted. A libertarian philosopher, for instance, might argue that prospective parents should be allowed to use genetic skin therapy with their children in any circumstance, if this is their wish; and other thinkers might reject any gene therapy of this sort altogether (see, for instance, Sandel 2009). I have my own opinion

concerning each of those moral frameworks and their respective implications for the case of genetic skin therapy; but I do believe that it is necessary to approach cases like the ones above from a distinctively political perspective, which philosophers commonly ignore.

What would be the right political answer to the dilemmas posed by the possibility of changing the skin colour through gene therapy? It is hard to say, until we specify the political community and the period we are talking about. Only then will it make sense to discuss which policies on enhancement will be more likely to promote the aims of that particular community at a given time. Perhaps the right political answers to the questions posed by Agar concerning light-to-dark and dark-to-light-skin gene therapy will coincide with Agar's answers if the political communities that have to manage such technological possibilities are liberal Western democracies; but it is difficult to foresee the correct answer for each society by the time such technologies are ready, if ever.

I have made frequent references to the "relevant political community". But what is this? Today we live in a world politically dominated by nation-states, so that the relevant political community would typically be a community encompassed by the borders of the agents' nation-state, or by those sub-national authorities (local councils, regions, etc.) or supra-national entities like the European Union, to which the nation-state has partially transferred its sovereignty. However, political minimalism does not preclude other possible forms of political community. Political minimalism is compatible, for instance, with political cosmopolitanism. A political cosmopolitan might argue that decisions concerning human enhancement have consequences beyond the borders of the nation-state in which they are made. Also, it might be pointed out that in this era of advanced globalization the sovereignty of nation-states is challenged by the power of multinational corporations. So the political cosmopolitan would be providing arguments for the creation of strong supra-national institutions, and even for the abolition of nation-states in favour of a world-state. In this essay, though, I do not aim to discuss the merits of cosmopolitanism or other alternatives to nation-state sovereignty, so I will keep the concept of "political community" deliberately open.

The Pervasiveness of Political Moralism

Debates on human enhancement that would be natural and productive to formulate as political debates are nevertheless often formulated *exclusively* in moral terms, and I think that this is a result of the pervasiveness of what I have called *political moralism* in the discussions related to biotechnology. Some might be inclined to think that political moralism is more characteristic

of thinkers who reject the implementation of human-enhancement technologies and other biotechnologies. However, this is a mistake. The debates on moral enhancement do not pit “moral” opponents of enhancement against its “immoral” defenders. Moralism is equally pervasive between the two opponents and their adversaries, from liberal eugenicists to post-humanists. The main difference is not provided by the presence or absence of a moral framework, but rather by the particular moral framework chosen by each side. Parens (2009, 180) formulates this idea in slightly different terms when he states that proponents as well as critics of enhancement technologies share an appeal to what he calls a “moral ideal of authenticity.” The difference, Parens (2009, 190-191) claims, lies in the particular manner by which each side interprets this moral ideal, one side in terms of “gratitude”, the other in terms of “creativity.” In particular, he emphasizes an idea which is very close to my claim above: although proponents of enhancement sometimes see themselves as morally neutral, they presuppose as many moral assumptions as opponents do. For instance, the plea of Robert Nozick (1974, 315n) for a “genetic supermarket” is grounded on a libertarian moral framework, and constitutes a clear instance of “political moralism.” In particular, such a libertarian framework would be an example of what Bernard Williams calls the “structural model” of political philosophy (see above). The reason is that morality would, in the case of Nozick, provide the main constraints for political action, such constraints being individual freedom and private property.

If we move from libertarians to more moderate liberals, the particular stances regarding human enhancement are different but equally moralistic. Nicholas Agar (2004, 44) summarizes the main question that his book *Liberal Eugenics* aims to answer as follows: “Does consistency demand the banning, the mere toleration or the encouragement of enhancement technologies?” In turn, “consistency” here means “treating morally like cases alike,” so he is clearly formulating in moral terms the problem posed by enhancement technologies. Agar (2004, 9) also uses moral terms to describe his differences with other stances, in particular the difference between the “liberal” eugenics he advocates and the sort of “authoritarian” eugenics promoted by the Nazis. In both cases, politics is subordinated to pre-established moral goals: racial improvement in the case of the authoritarian eugenics, and parents’ free choice in the case of liberal eugenics. Here we find, then, a clear difference as far as the aims are concerned, but a clear similarity in the moralism of their corresponding theoretical frameworks.

In some cases, authors are aware of the difference between the individual and the social perspectives. One example would be Bostrom and Sandberg (2009, 393-394), who point to a source of value discordance in the area of human enhancement: the fact that characteristics that

would maximize an individual's inclusive fitness nevertheless differ from those that would be best for society. However, this realization does not result in a distinction between the moral and the political approaches to enhancement similar to the one I am advocating here.

Moralism is present even in authors who call our attention to the social aspects of enhancement technologies. This happens, for instance, when Singer (2009, 281-283) questions the social consequences of Nozick's aforementioned genetic supermarket. This concern could, of course, provide grounds for leaping from a moral to a neatly political approach to the topic. However, Singer does not make this leap, although he discusses several social problems possibly posed by the genetic "supermarket." One of them is the pursuit of merely "positional" goods (i.e. goods that when possessed provide an advantage to the owner only if they are not enjoyed by others; "being tall" is Singer's example).³ The problem here is that the genetic supermarket might encourage competition among parents in order to have, for instance, the tallest children, and such competition would involve heavy social costs with meagre social benefits. A second problem is that the genetic supermarket might jeopardize equality of opportunity. Singer (2009, 284-289) rightly points out that future states might face momentous political decisions concerning these issues. For instance: should the state promote equality of opportunity by providing genetic-enhancement technologies to the poor while restricting access to the rich? Should the state fund only genetic enhancement that provides "intrinsic" goods,⁴ and not genetic enhancement that provides positional goods? The latter implies another task for the state: it should distinguish between positional and "intrinsic" goods, since these are not always clear-cut. Not to mention the problems arising from hypothetical divergent decisions made by different governments in a globalized world.

Nevertheless, although the problems are rightly identified as social and political, the answers remain moral, as we might expect from a political moralist. When discussing the possibility of a "genetic supermarket," Singer's initial guide is Mill's harm principle, according to which the state would be justified in restricting the freedom of individuals only with the aim of preventing harm to others (see Singer 2009, 280). Thus, Singer would agree with Nozick that the state should let parents enhance their children provided that neither the children nor anybody else is harmed. Disagreement arises when unwelcome social consequences may result from parents' pursuit of enhancement. In such cases, libertarians would prioritize parents' freedom to do whatever they deem best regarding their children's life, while a utilitarian like Singer would judge the contribution that different sorts of enhancement represent for the

³ The concept is borrowed from Hirsch (1977). See also Sandberg (2011, 83).

⁴ Agar (2004, 127) wisely prefers to talk of "independent" value as opposed to "positional" value, instead of using the expression "intrinsic" value, which is certainly misleading in this context.

general welfare. Singer does not need to differentiate between a moral and a political perspective on this dilemma because utilitarianism is (as much as libertarianism) a variety of political moralism, and for a utilitarian the ultimate moral aim and the ultimate political aim are the same (happiness, well-being or the like). Nevertheless, there is, in my view, a previous question to answer, a question that becomes apparent once we adopt a genuinely autonomous political perspective: how do we reach policy agreements on enhancement if members of our society disagree concerning the relative priority of, say, personal freedom and general welfare?

In this section I have argued that political moralism is widespread in discussions on human enhancement. I have mentioned several examples concerning *general* evaluations of enhancement technologies. Many other examples could be added, including discussions on *particular* forms of enhancement. See, for instance, Sandberg and Savulescu (2011, 93-95), as well as Savulescu, Sandberg and Kahane (2011), 7-8, and Bostrom and Roache (2011, 140-144) for a welfarist and, hence, moralistic discussion on the social consequences of cognitive enhancement. See also Arrhenius (2011, 369-370), where the social choice between life extension and replacement is addressed using the criterion of the respective contribution of each option to the total welfare, thus taking for granted a utilitarian and, consequently, moralistic stance. Although in some cases the authors take into account the social aspects of enhancement technologies, many end with a moral judgment on the adequacy of the technologies from the standpoint of certain moral goals or constraints, not with a discussion on how to handle in political terms the diversity of moral stances that can be found in society concerning these particular issues.

Getting closer: the “social” approaches

Some authors (e.g. Kamm 2009 and Cabrera 2012) have taken stances similar to mine concerning the evaluation of human enhancement technologies. In this section I will describe their views, and then I will explain why, although such social approaches are preferable to the individualistic ones, they still have some shortcomings from the perspective of political minimalism.

Let us begin by considering a further example, provided by Michael Sandel’s views on enhancement. I will focus on his contention that human enhancement and genetic engineering are morally wrong because through them human beings would be playing God:

The deeper danger is that [enhancement and genetic engineering] represent a kind of hyperagency—a Promethean aspiration to remake nature, including human nature, to serve our purposes and satisfy our desires (Sandel 2009, 78).

This is, of course, a moral objection, derived from a moral outlook that, in Sandel's (2009, 78) words, gives precedence to "giftedness" over "striving." Using the above-mentioned terms by Erik Parens (2009, 180), we could say that Sandel formulates the "moral ideal of authenticity" in terms of "gratitude", not in terms of "creativity." Frances Kamm (2009, 127-128) has replied that although enhancement poses serious troubles, we should not worry about those put forward by Sandel, but rather about other concerns that I would label as social and political concerns. Among them, Kamm mentions the question of the relative priority of enhancement in societies with poor resources, and the problem of the fair distribution of both the benefits and risks posed by enhancement technologies. To these concerns, Kamm (2009, 128) adds the danger of excessive homogenization possibly brought about by our limited imagination as designers, and the difficulty of reaching an agreement concerning the goods to be promoted by enhancement. Now, all these relevant problems are social and political, and the last one mentioned by Kamm reinforces my point (to which she comes quite close, but never states explicitly in her essay) that we need a distinctively political, not moralistic, approach on how to handle both human enhancement and the diversity of moral stances concerning it.

This political perspective, by the way, allows us to see the idea of "giftedness" in a new light. Singer (2009, 279) doubts, in his discussion of Sandel's thesis, whether the image of life as a "gift" makes sense independently of belief in God, and suggests that, for those who do not believe in God, life can be seen as a gift that children receive exclusively from their parents. But I would like to add that human life is made possible not only by biology, but also by society, even when sophisticated enhancement technologies are not in use. Societies not only make it possible for individuals to come into existence and flourish but maintain some control over the ways in which individuals are born and live, because the choice of those particular ways has social consequences. Both circumstances (the importance of the social environment for human life, and the unavoidability of certain social regulation on human reproduction and upbringing) might be intensified with progress in gene technologies. Perhaps the development of human-enhancement technologies will make human beings more aware of the fact that they received the gift of life not only from their parents, but also from the society that developed the technologies and defined their terms of use.

Kamm (2009) is not the only one to arrive at a “social” approach to human-enhancement technologies. For instance, Barazzetti (2011, 342) also draws quite close to my proposal with her distinction between “individual morality” and “social morality.” I think that this distinction is useful, but I maintain that it is necessary to recognize an area of genuinely political questions that go beyond the reach of “social morality.”

Also close to my proposal is that of Laura Cabrera (2012), who distinguishes between what she calls the biomedical, the transhumanist, and the social views on human enhancement, and argues for the third of such views. The two predominant understandings of human enhancement, the biomedical and the transhumanist, would perceive the individual as an isolated and abstract being and, as a consequence, would focus on individualistic technological interventions, “aimed at directly changing the individual’s body and mental features” (Cabrera 2012, xiv). By contrast, the social-enhancement paradigm would hold a relational view about the individual, prioritizing “social- and community-oriented interventions” over other strategies (Cabrera 2012, xiv-xv). I agree with Cabrera when she points out the advantages of the social understanding of enhancement as compared with the biomedical and transhumanist views, because I find her argument compelling when she states that it is necessary to recognize “the rich and complex relations that shape who we are as well as the social factors that currently contribute to our understanding of what it means to be healthy” (Cabrera 2012, 85).

Nevertheless, Cabrera’s proposal is not completely equivalent to mine; first of all, because she continues to view the difference between the three paradigms as a difference between diverse moral stances. This is clear when she writes: “we have *morally* compelling reasons to prioritise enhancement interventions according to the social enhancement paradigm” (Cabrera 2012, xvi; my italics). Besides, she establishes a fixed hierarchy of human enhancement interventions. The paradigm shift she condones does not involve the abandonment of biomedical and transhumanist interventions but “a prioritisation scheme in which social enhancement interventions would be prioritised over biomedical and transhumanist enhancement ones” (Cabrera 2012, 141). On the other hand, my own proposal does not argue for any particular ordering, but holds that such prioritization ought to be specified, for each political community, taking into account its predominant goals and values.

Why not Give Priority to the Moral Perspective?

I have distinguished between a political approach and a moral approach to enhancement. I have added that in certain circumstances (i.e. whenever a collective decision is

at stake) the political perspective should have priority. Why? One reason is the commonness of disagreement between moral viewpoints within societies. Of course, I admit that there is a similar degree of disagreement at the political level, but one of the aims of politics is to provide procedures to facilitate decision-making (e.g. by voting, or through the election of representatives who make the decisions for us), even if the disagreement persists. In this respect, a “political” solution to a debate is different from a “moral” solution to the same debate. If we think we have found the right answer to a moral question, we may keep on thinking that this is the right answer, regardless of whether other people, using the same moral theory or not, have arrived at different conclusions. A satisfactory political solution, on the contrary, has to reconcile the diversity of moral answers to a particular dilemma in a particular society.

The above-mentioned pervasiveness of disagreement on moral matters is a well-known social fact. Now I will document this situation in the case of human enhancement and show how political moralism on such matters creates problems that can be circumvented by adopting a political perspective.

One author who, like many others, acknowledges the coexistence of diverse moral perspectives on enhancement is Nicholas Agar. He does so, for instance, when he compares the rival moral visions of transhumanists, conservatives, and liberals (Agar 2004, 19). The method he envisages in order to overcome such moral disagreement is the method of moral images (Agar 2004, 43-45). Using this method, we can judge the rival solutions to a new problem (for instance, in the novel area of genetic enhancement) by choosing an analogous moral image we are more familiar with, in order to safeguard consistency. His initial example is as follows: the debate about the appropriate response to the 11 September 2001 attacks set those who saw the attacks under the moral image of CRIME against those who subscribed to the rival image of ACT OF WAR. This situation illustrates, Agar claims, how a moral image can help us towards the moral understanding of an unfamiliar situation. The moral discussion could be formulated then in terms of finding out which of these two rival images is more similar to the new events in the relevant respects.

First, I think Agar too optimistically limits the scope of moral images that a given situation can evoke. If we stick to the same example, I am sure that we can find other moral images in the reactions of the people around the world to the terrorist attacks of 9-11. For example, incongruous as it may sound, we can find the moral images of HEROISM, REVENGE or ANTI-IMPERIALISM among some people who publicly celebrated the collapse of the Twin Towers (Brown 2011). To dismiss these latter images as immoral of

course begs the question: in fact, these incompatible moral images coexisted, and the moral task involves deciding which label best fits the facts; in other words, placing the labels is the puzzle, not the solution.

Agar could reply that he is not wondering about any possible moral image that anybody could apply anywhere to the case, but only about those images taken seriously into account in the mainstream of *our* society. In this example, Agar may remind us that we were trying to discover the appropriate response of the US government and its citizens to the attacks. However, in doing so, he transforms the question into a political question: what should we do, given the aims and values of *our* society? This is, of course, a legitimate question. The problem with Agar, as is often the case with political moralists, is that he mixes ethics and politics. He does so, for instance, when he chooses consistency “with the values of the citizens of contemporary liberal democracies” (Agar 2004, 48) as his *moral* criterion. But a moral perspective should look for consistency with the *right* values, period. Agar provides, then, the example of an author who, confronted with the social aspects of enhancement technologies, comes close to adopting a political attitude, but refuses to accept all its consequences. Closer to my proposal is the one of Coenen, Schuijff, and Smits (2011, 532), which claims that, in the context of the European Union, “human enhancement technologies need to be evaluated on the basis of *shared* European values and beliefs.” The reference to *European* values transforms the problem of the evaluation of such technologies into a political, not a moral, problem. This is even more the case when we take into account that the same authors have described previously the European value system as “internally diverse, and in some respects even incoherent” (Coenen, Schuijff, and Smits 2011, 525). If this is true, then the existence of shared European values becomes the possible outcome of a political process, not the initial moral constraint for any possible debate on enhancement. Clearly, the authors don’t explicitly support every tenet of political minimalism, but this kind of political approach is indeed a step in the right direction.

We can find many additional examples of differences in moral diagnoses on enhancement technologies. Some arise out of philosophical conviction, as we have documented already confronting the verdicts of authors such as Sandel, Agar, and Singer. Others can be explained by the presence or absence of certain religious beliefs. Others, finally, are caused by cultural diversity; for instance, Shimazono (2009) claims that the Japanese attitude towards genetic selection and enhancement differs from the Western attitude because of the acute scepticism of the former towards the benefits of scientific intervention in nature and the human body.

The situation described above makes me ask why Housden, Morein-Zamir, and Sakahian (2011, 122) recommend that neuroscientists working in the field of cognitive-enhancing drugs should be given instruction in neuroethics, in order to deal with the foreseeable social impact of such technologies. The difficult question here is: whose neuroethics? Shall we hire Michael Sandel or rather Julian Savulescu to teach the lessons? Are we looking for a Western atheist or an Eastern Shintoist? Of course, I am not denying the value of raising the level of moral debate, and under this perspective it would be rewarding to have a panel of moral philosophers with different convictions advising neuroscientists on the main trends in contemporary bioethics. However, if we seek a social consensus, or at least a sound social decision on human-enhancement technologies, then it would be more useful to adopt a distinctively political viewpoint. Regarding social debate on technologies, the perspective of a moral philosopher is only one among many other factors to be taken into account, while the standpoint of political moralism is confusing and does not help to clarify the issues.

Conclusion: the Virtues of Political Minimalism

It should be clear by now that my proposal is not a mere change of words. I am not simply switching “politics” and “political philosophy” for the terms “social morality” and “social ethics”. For instance, when welfarist philosophers such as Savulescu, Sandberg, and Kahane (2011, 14) address the question of whether the average IQ ought to be raised, they evaluate such policy in terms of its contribution to the improvement of well-being in a given society. However, despite that the problem is a social one, the stance is moralistic because the question is formulated in terms of what would be morally right to do, and because the criterion to judge the answer is provided by a moral theory (in this case utilitarianism, or something very close to it).

Savulescu, Sandberg, and Kahane (2011, 13), though, introduce some elements of another moralistic tradition in political philosophy: liberalism. For example, they point out that if you discover that the lead pipes in your house might reduce your child’s IQ by a few points then you are morally obliged to remove the old water pipes (and the state should not prevent you from doing so). And the same holds, they argue, in the analogous case of a genetic enhancement technology allowing you to increase your children’s IQ. The possible tension between utilitarianism and liberalism is addressed by Savulescu, Sandberg, and Kahane (2011, 16) in the same way John Stuart Mill tried to solve it nearly two centuries ago by accepting that freedom is not valuable for its own sake, but as a privileged means for happiness or well-being.

However, this solution faces a problem, either if its defender is Mill or a contemporary author: the problem of showing why well-being ought to be accepted as the main goal by *any* society at *any* time. Instead of “well-being” we can write X, where X is any moral aim, and then we have formulated the common problem of any form of political moralism.

The solution advocated by political minimalism is different. One thing is the moral perspective of parents that judge whether or not they have the moral obligation to change the water pipes in order to protect their children’s IQ; a political decision on water lead content is quite a different matter. We can easily imagine different societies with different priorities (e.g. a predominantly liberal, welfarist, egalitarian, or environmentalist society), and different contexts (e.g. a wealthy nation, a poor country facing a famine, a state in war, and so on) choosing different solutions to the problem of the water pipes: from paying for the replacement of the pipes with the national budget to forbidding replacement; from forcing parents to change the lead pipes at their own expenses to allowing parents to choose.

My proposal differs also from the version of “liberal” eugenics recently advocated by Fowler (2015). This author agrees with Agar in rejecting authoritarian eugenics, but his statist and perfectionist view grants the state the legitimacy to limit parent’s choices to a greater extent than Agar would wish. Still, Fowler’s view is moralistic as far as his main concern is whether, as Agar holds, the pursuit of liberal values transforms eugenics into a morally acceptable doctrine. On this point he agrees again with Agar, although they disagree over which liberal values are most important.

Political minimalism does not specify a set of values that any society ought to pursue. Nevertheless, political minimalism provides a guide on how to approach social and political conflicts concerning human-enhancement technologies; but its general recommendation allows each society to respond in its own way to any dilemma. On the contrary, political moralists seek to provide an answer to every political dilemma, and this strategy sometimes results in inconsistent guidelines. For instance, Sandberg and Savulescu (2011, 107) call first for a liberal morality to defend the right of individuals to take risks and, still on the same page, a utilitarian morality to justify the use of public funds for research on enhancement technologies. Political minimalism would let society decide the extent to which individuals ought to be allowed to take risks (given that individual risks may have social consequences), and what the priorities should be, with respect to public expense.

Political minimalism, then, provides better advice than political realism and political moralism do regarding moral enhancement. As we have seen, several authors (e.g. Kamm 2009, Singer 2009, Cabrera 2012, and Barazzetti 2001) have rightly demanded that reflection

on human enhancement should take into account not only the moral problems related to individual choices and consequences, but also the social aspects. I have added that this examination of the social aspects cannot take only the form of a moral, but also of a distinctively political reflection. Nevertheless, as we saw at the beginning of this essay, political realism eschews the normative evaluation on the social implications of human-enhancement technologies, except when such consequences have to do with the narrow agenda of security. On the other hand, political moralism can preserve the normative judgement only by unduly moralizing it. Contrarily, political minimalism provides a perspective that is at the same time genuinely normative and distinctively political. This is the main reason why political minimalism provides a better framework than does either political moralism or political realism for dealing with the social aspects of human enhancement.

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