

Chapter 10

Reasoning about Human Enhancement: Towards a Folk Psychological Model of Human Nature and Human Identity

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ABSTRACT

Advances in bioscience and biotechnology move faster than our conceptual and ethical understanding of them. These advances may ultimately change human nature and our understanding of what it means to be human. Early attempts to understand the consequences of these advances were marred by overly thin conceptions of human nature and human identity. In particular, the precise meaning of these concepts was rarely explicated and arguments about whether enhanced humans would be superhumanized or dehumanized lacked clarity. The development of more complex models of humanness and human identity may facilitate deeper insights into the consequences of enhancement while findings from the emerging science of human nature are incorporated into our understanding of what it means to be human.

INTRODUCTION

Appeals to the concepts of human nature and human identity are frequent in the debate about the ethics of human enhancement. Although early attempts to understand enhancement raised a number of critical issues, the use of overly simplistic conceptions of human nature and human identity

tended to obscure rather than illuminate our understanding (Degrazia, 2005; Wilson & Haslam, 2009). Given that there is still no agreement about what human nature is (Fernández-Armesto, 2004) and that the science of human nature is in its infancy (Fowler & Schreiber, 2008; Ridley, 2003), the utility of concepts like human nature in conceptual and ethical analyses of human enhancement may be limited.

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Despite this, concepts like humanness, human nature and human identity are readily employed in the arguments of contributors to the enhancement debate. Whereas, ideally, the meaning ascribed to these concepts would evolve as our scientific understanding of them evolves, the delay between what Somerville (2000) calls “science time” and “ethics time” suggests that the gap between advances in biotechnology and our conceptual and ethical understanding of these advances will persevere and perhaps expand in the years ahead. Our prevailing cultural conceptions of human nature and human identity are therefore likely to inform our reasoning about the consequences of enhancement for some time to come.

Given the importance of the debate about the ethics of enhancement and the tendency of proponents and opponents of enhancement to talk past, rather than to, each other (Parens, 2009; Wilson & Haslam, 2009), it is crucial that: (1) provisional agreement be reached about the meaning of these concepts; (2) that the meaning ascribed is as rich and precise as possible; and (3) that the interrelationships between these concepts are well understood. The development of more complex conceptual models of humanness and human identity offers a means to gain deeper insights into the consequences of enhancement while findings from the emerging science of human nature are gradually incorporated into our understanding of what it means to be human. Our purpose in this chapter is to offer a preliminary sketch of such a model.

BACKGROUND

In a recent analysis of the use of the concepts of humanness and human nature in the enhancement debate, Wilson and Haslam (2009) argued that proponents and opponents of enhancement assigned distinct meanings to these concepts and that

these meanings evinced strong parallels with folk concepts of humanness. Implicit in this analysis was the idea that folk psychology undergirds the conceptions and schemas of humanness and human identity recruited by proponents and opponents.

Folk psychology, which is also called commonsense psychology, refers to a system of shared meaning that organizes people’s understanding of, experience in, and transactions with the social world (Bruner, 1990). Despite the utility of applying a folk psychological framework to the debate about human enhancement, we caution against any confusion of folk psychological conceptions of humanness and human identity with scientific conceptions. Moreover, in an analogue of the naturalistic fallacy, what *is*, folk psychologically, should not be regarded as an endorsement of what *ought* to be. Finally, given that folk psychology is often indistinguishable from cultural history (Bruner, 1990), there is nothing immutable about folk psychology, in general, or folk conceptions of humanness and human identity, in particular.

A folk psychological model of humanness and human identity, which reflects and integrates the views of proponents and opponents of enhancement, would, first, offer explicit characterizations of humanness, human nature, and human identity—as well as their interrelationships—and, second, make the use of these concepts in arguments about enhancement less ambiguous. Moreover, by tracing out the connections between humanness and human identity and the specific characteristics that are associated with these abstract categories, such a model could help focus the debate on issues of more limited scale by clarifying how specific enhancements relate to humanness. As Bostrom and Savulescu (2009) have argued, such developments are a priority in human enhancement ethics.

We begin by briefly reviewing the conceptions of humanness held by proponents and opponents. This section also describes recent research into folk beliefs about humanness that suggest that

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