How Should We Think About "Enhancement"? : Beyond the Proponents vs. Opponents Scheme

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[Discussion Paper]

How Should We Think About "Enhancement"?
Beyond the Proponents vs. Opponents Scheme

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Abstract

This paper outlines a new scheme for bioethical arguments of "enhancement" by introducing the concept of "form of life." Many authors have argued about the morality of enhancement technologies, but their conflict seems unsolvable because there is no common ground to discuss the morality of enhancement as long as they adhere to their approval or disapproval. This paper proposes the concept of form of life as a common ground, and then studies that concept in two parts: reflection on our desire, and philosophical investigation of some forms of life.

1. Introduction: Beyond the "Proponents vs. Opponents" Scheme

Many literatures in bioethics discuss the morality of "enhancement." They argue about how enhancement affects safety, equality, liberty, virtues and other ethical concepts, and also how we can understand the new technology through these concepts. Clearly, there seems an unsolvable controversy between the proponents and the opponents of enhancement: generally speaking, the proponents appeal to our basic right of liberty to pursue our own happiness through every possible means, including enhancement technologies, while the opponents are emotionally apprehensive about enhancement's corrosive effect on our authentic lives. Compromise seems impossible because, in a pluralistic society, it is difficult to have any rational discussion between those with different value systems. In other words, when one regards liberal values as the highest, while the other regards conservative values as the highest, we can only apparently leave them in conflict.

However, the real gap is not between the proponents and the opponents

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(or “liberal view” and “conservative view”) of enhancement, but rather between two ethical approaches to its “morality.” For convenience, I call one “approach A” and another “approach B.” Daniel Callahan clearly describes the distinction between the two approaches (parenthetical numbers and italics mine).

> While it was less easy to see at the time, bioethics quickly came to a crossroad in the 1970’s. One route lay in *(1) the direction of increased patient autonomy, the dominance of rights language, the possibilities of enhanced personal choice and a richer life through medical means, and a scanting of an ethic of responsibility*. The other route lay in *(2) the direction of asking about the cultural and social significance of the medical developments, and inquiring in particular which kinds of technological innovations, with what kinds of choices, might lead to better human communities.* … In the end, the field of bioethics mainly took the first route.[1]

Temporarily, I define the two approaches as that (1) above is the characteristics of approach A and (2) is that of approach B. It is very important to note here that A and B do not necessarily correspond to approval or disapproval of any particular biotechnologies. That is, there should be a proponent and opponent of enhancement technologies approaching the problem of its morality through both approach A and B.

In this essay, I describe the contrast between approach A and B by quoting some examples from literatures of enhancement arguments. I elaborate their definitions and articulate the current state of enhancement discourse.

I treat the different kinds of enhancement technologies as a whole in this paper: genetic, neural, pharmaceutical, surgical, etc., because their arguments share a basic ethical framework, though the social, legal, economic, and technological details are different.

Also, in this paper I use the word “enhancement” in common sense of using medical technologies in a way beyond treating illness. The exact borderline between treatment and enhancement may be drawn by a sociological study on medicalization, otherwise it is merely a technical

[1] Callahan (1996), p.27-28.

distinction for health care providers and insurance companies. We surely need that kind of study, but it is not undertaken here.

Third, to focus on the enhancement of one's self, I will not deal with the problem of enhancing a baby. As for the difference between enhancing oneself and enhancing a baby, the latter requires the standpoint of the baby who was enhanced or even was born by someone else's will, and would complicate the argument beyond recognition. Since the enhanced baby must be made by someone else's intention, the arguments must involve a philosophical exploration of the foundation of the baby's existence and identity. Surely, the argument of enhancing oneself involves the concept of existence and identity in some sense, but such application of the technologies does not affect the *foundation* of one's existence; it is still something *given*, not *made*. As for parents who want to have an enhanced baby, the difficulty is if it could be possible for them to enhance a baby for the baby's own sake. If parents regard their baby just as means to satisfy their own desire, it is not enhancement of the baby, but of the parents after all. Thus, to argue about an enhanced baby we need a philosophical reexamination of the meaning of having a baby. In any case, I leave this difficult problem for now.

Finally, I must quickly review the "inevitability thesis" of genetic enhancement claimed by Françoise Baylis and Jason S. Robert. They give many reasons for the inevitability of development of genetic enhancement technologies and conclude that "genetic enhancement technologies are inevitable because the future is ours for the shaping." [2] I agree, but this is just the start of the argument, not the end. The problem is not whether enhancement is inevitable, but how we should develop it. For example, development of transportation is an inevitable trend in society, but that trend itself cannot suggest any particular way to develop it: motorization and highway system, or public mass rail transportation system. Similarly, although enhancing our performance is an inevitable trend for us as creative beings, we need to figure out how we should carry out that project, which is the very problem I begin to answer here.

[2] Baylis and Robert (2004), p.23.

2. Two Approaches in Ethics to Enhancement Technologies

Here I describe the typical form of approaches A and B and their reasoning. Although there are some variations, approach A tends to be adopted typically by the proponents of enhancement technologies, and approach B by the opponents. In doing so, I combine some literatures to make typical arguments; no authors claim exactly what I describe, and the texts quoted do not represent their authors' view as a whole, verbatim. These examples of the two approaches are quoted to show the styles of the approaches, not the judgments on enhancement their authors claim.

2.1. Approach A

One typical example of approach A is Richard H. Dees' paper on neuroenhancement. He articulates his reasoning of the morality of neuroenhancement:[3]

(1) People have a right to autonomy.
(2) If a person has a right to autonomy, then if she deems something important and if pursuing it does not harm others, then it is morally permissible for her to do so.
(3) Some people will find that neuroenhancements are important to them.
(4) Neuroenhancements cause no one else harm.
(5) Therefore, the use of neuroenhancements is morally permissible.

Then, he argues that "the key to this argument are obviously premise (2) and (4)."[4] For Dees, the key to enhancement ethics is the general ethical concept of autonomy and the harm principle: "as long as an enhancement technology is safe and effective and as long as it does not harm others, then individuals should be able to decide for themselves how they should live their lives."[5]

Dees examines some objections against enhancement based on these

[3] Dees (2007), p.373.
[4] Ibid.
[5] Ibid., p.372.

premises: safety and equality in using them, possible coercion in competitive circumstances, human dignity it may erode, and so on. He does not claim that every enhancement technology is already safe, that it may not cause any inequality and coercion, and that it dehumanizes nobody. What he argues is that, although we should mind the possible harms that enhancement might cause, they do not tarnish the intrinsic nature of "(neuro)enhancement as such,"[6] as his term, but with the circumstances around them or immature technique. Some authors share Dees' reasoning.

> We arrive at the best internal and social arrangements by allowing informed prospective parents to be guided by their values in choosing enhancements.[7]

> Technology in itself isn't driving us in any particular direction – I believe that we decide where it should go.[8]

The first quotation is "liberal eugenicist" Nicholas Agar about the enhancement of a baby. When we replace "prospective parents" with "agents" we grasp his general idea on enhancement. The second quotation is Arthur Caplan from his debate with Carl Elliott. By combining them, we can see their strong belief in autonomy of agents and neutrality of technology, which is the basis of approach A.

We can now fully formulate approach A.[9] As we see above, it presupposes the agent's autonomy and technology's neutrality from any ideology. Its moral principle is a combination of the liberalistic right of individual choice and the harm principle. Its typical terminology is safety, fairness, equality, rights, utility, which can work as a constraint on an autonomous agent. Then, the argument unfolds along the lines that if it is not safe or fair to use enhancement, or if it violates someone's right or equality in general, or if it causes more harm than benefit, these uses should be prohibited. Otherwise agents have the right to do anything they want

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[6] Ibid.
[7] Agar (1998), p.139.
[8] Caplan and Elliott (2004), p.174.
[9] Biologist E.O. Wilson, and others, take approach A and partly oppose (genetic) enhancement technology because it might reduce genetic diversity. Since this kind of objection to enhancement is not philosophically relevant here, I leave it to another time.

with enhancement. Under what condition agents can use enhancement safely, harmlessly, fairly, is left to further practical studies. For approach A, therefore, the morality of enhancement is reduced to its certain permissibility. Then, the staple answer to the ethical question is "enhancement is not intrinsically wrong and we do not need any blanket ban on it. Whether a particular use of enhancement technologies is permissible or not depends on whether it's safe, fair to use, harmless to others."

Although no one might disagree with that statement, approach A should not satisfy those who are concerned with the morality of enhancement because permissibility is not equal to moral goodness. Dees recognizes (2) and (4) as key, which represents his liberalistic value. However, considering moral goodness, (3) is the key premise: "Some people will find that neuroenhancements are important to them." Moral goodness asks *why* and *how* agents think that neuroenhancements are important to them, but approach A (Dees) disregards that question to personal preference, not ethics. (3) seems to presuppose that agents are competent to judge what is important, but this cannot be presupposed at all.

In other words, since "that we choose is best" is different from "what we choose is the best" unless we regard free choice itself as the highest value regardless of its content, motive, and purpose, to discuss the morality of enhancement we should examine not only its permissibility in terms of autonomy and the harm principle, but how enhancement could help us live better lives in terms of virtue and human flourishing. To do so, we have to explore what drives agents to use enhancement, what makes us think enhancement is good for us, and what is ultimately good – approach B.

2.2. Approach B

The proponents of approach B are mainly those who are called "conservatives," but that does not mean that approach B is the approach taken only by "conservatives" and that approach B is defined as a conservative approach. Exemplars of approach B include Leon Kass, Michael Sandel, Francis Fukuyama, Carl Elliott and Daniel Callahan. They succinctly express the central idea of approach B.

Sandel writes:

> I am suggesting… that the moral stakes in the enhancement debate are not fully captured by the familiar categories of autonomy and rights, on the one hand, and the calculation of cost and benefits, on the other. My concern with enhancement is not as individual vice but as habit of mind and way of being.[10]

To paraphrase Sandel, neither deontology based on autonomous rational individuals nor utilitarianism which calculates consequences caused by enhancement technologies are sufficient to grasp the morality of enhancement, because "the moral" is not merely permissibility, but the way of being good.

Kass writes:

> Mastery of the means of intervention without knowing the goodness of the goals of intervening is not, in fact, mastery at all. In the absence of such knowledge of ends, the goals of the "master" will be set… by whatever it is that happens to guide or move his will…[11]

Kass is concerned with the "end" of our lives, which cannot be dealt by approach A. Unlike the approach A, the purpose of approach B is not to draw the line between the permissible and impermissible, and not to produce a method for such drawing, but questioning how agents can live better with enhancement. It does not leave the determination about what is good and bad to individualistic personal choice, which approach A presumes to be immune from public discussion. Instead, approach B tries to discuss what should be regarded as good life and bad life, and why.

Fukuyama writes:

> The deepest fear that people express about technology is not a utilitarian one at all. It is rather a fear that, in the end, biotechnology will cause us in some way to lose our humanity – that is, some essential quality that has always underpinned our sense of who we

[10] Sandel (2007), p.96.
[11] Kass (2003), p.18.

are and where we are going,…[12]

Fukuyama's view of enhancement is somewhat unusual because he advocates liberalistic values despite being skeptical of "liberalistic use" of enhancement. Sandel and Kass agree that we should value tradition and community, that these values should guide us in dealing with enhancement. Fukuyama points out that "liberalistic use" of enhancement should spoil the liberalistic values themselves: enhancement that flattens our diversity and simplifies our complicated emotional activity makes our democratic society dysfunctional by reducing us into scientific mechanisms, not treating us as rational agents that compose liberalistic, democratic society.

For all three authors, the discussion on enhancement should not be based on the permissibility or the right of free choice, but on how we can live well with such technologies – the basic concern of approach B.

Sandel, Kass, and Fukuyama are basically skeptical of enhancement, but Donna Haraway, the author of *A Cyborg Manifesto,* welcomes enhancement within the framework of approach B. Haraway is not specialized in bioethics or medicine, and her writing is dated. Also, since her writing are in the so called "post-modernistic" style, it seems very different from the other examples above. However, her insight into enhancement (cyborg) still has great importance. She writes, "it is crucial to remember that what is lost, perhaps especially from women's point of view, is often virulent forms of oppression, nostalgically naturalized in the face of current violation."[13] This is an acute criticism against an opponent of enhancement like Kass. For Haraway, enhancement could enable us to reform current oppressive social structures, like gender order. From her point of view, a conservative writer who is skeptical of enhancement – Kass – becomes a protector of current oppression.

Between Kass and Haraway, for example, there can be an effective discussion of the morality of enhancement, in spite of their differences, because they share a concrete idea of good life and of how it is affected by enhancement. However, Dees and Kass (or Haraway), cannot have such a discussion because they ask different questions.

[12] Fukuyama (2002), p.101.
[13] Haraway (1991), p.172.

2.3. Introducing Form of Life

How we should consider the goodness and the badness of our lives? To answer that question, one basic concept should be taken as the foundation of approach B: *form of life*.[14] In any discussion of what should be good or bad in our lives, we inevitably presuppose some form of life as the foundation on which we value things, because goodness and badness do not make sense if our lives are amorphous: no beginning, no purpose, no peak, no conversion, no end.

Table 1 shows the framework of this argument. My argument is not that we should oppose enhancement or abandon approach A, but that we should see the problem through another scheme, in addition to approach A. In Table 1, the row of "'Form of Life' Oriented Scheme" does not have the distinction between proponents and opponents of enhancement, because approach B does not aim to approve or disapprove certain enhancement technologies; it implies that approach B is purely the way of thinking.

Table 1. Two Schemes of Thinking about Enhancement

	Proponents	Opponents
Conventional Scheme	Right of Free Choice & Harm Principle (Approach A)	Emotional Antipathy
"Form of Life" Oriented Scheme	Reflection on Our Desire & Philosophical Investigation into Forms of Life (Approach B)	

3. The Importance of Approach B

Approach A is an attractive way to talk about enhancement because it is about safety, fairness, and equality; approach B may seem less attractive. Some might think that it is better to leave the questions of approach B to

[14] Ludwig Wittgenstein introduced form of life as the key concept of philosophy of language. He writes that the meaning of a word is its use. Because the use of a word is not something we decide arbitrary but instead depends on our forms of life (how we live), a word cannot have an arbitrary meaning. This paper employs the concept of form of life because the concept endows a life with the basic framework for meanings (of words, actions, objects, images, and so on).

personal conscience, that it cannot be a public affair. Approach B, however, should be public for three reasons.

First, proponents of enhancement might ask: Who in the world does not think that being smarter and more attentive is good? Does anyone actually think it is better to be dumber and less attentive? Dees says, “a world in which people have greater intellectual skills, have shaper memories, and can control their moods is a world in which people are more productive and happier.”[15] Why and how enhancement should benefit us seems obvious. But I raise four questions against them. (1) What do “smarter” and “more attentive” in question means? Does being smarter mean simply higher grades in class, or is it more complicated? (2) Do being smarter and being more attentive with drugs have the same meaning and value, as those without drugs have? Do the users of the drugs really think of themselves as so? Is that (self-)deception? (3) How do we get to think a certain type of smartness and attentiveness is better? Are they universally good, or are we just possessed with them? (4) How are they able to result in a “happier” life? Is forcing a child to be attentive to a boring lecture by using drugs making the child’s life happier? What is the happier life? To answer these kinds of questions, the proponents of enhancement must illuminate their idea of goodness and badness actually, which is the key to approach B. That is, when we try to answer those questions, we must enter the domain of approach B.

Second, enhancement literature frequently includes arguments that we have used “traditional enhancement” before “new enhancement,” which has been brought by high-tech medicine. A common example is education, which can be called “intellectual enhancement” in terms of new enhancement. Some argue that we should not worry about the new enhancement technologies more than old ones like education. Even those who question the benefit of enhancement sometimes accept the idea that education is a kind of enhancement.[16] But regarding education as enhancement is a “retrospective fallacy” in that one interprets something that has existed for long time and so has a long history only in a contemporary sense. For example, although coffee contains caffeine which

[15] Dees op. cit., p.373.

[16] “We applaud individuals who seek excellent schools to *enhance* their intellectual development” Parens (1998), p.1. (Italics mine)

is a stimulant, it is irrelevant to reduce the old habit of coffee drinking into the practice of “enhancing attentiveness,” because the coffee drinking is embedded in larger social, historical, and cultural context. Likewise, before “new enhancement technologies” emerged, we might not have considered education as a kind of enhancement in the sense of new enhancement, because it has had public, communal values that cannot be reduced to enhancement in the contemporary meaning – solidarity, social welfare, and cultivation of social elegance were also involved. In contrast, the contemporary examples regard education as only a kind of enhancement to develop professional skill to build one’s career. Thus, we should not only discuss the morality of “new enhancement,” but also our habit of mind that reinterprets even long standing social and cultural activities like education as a sort of personal enhancement.

Third, it may be said that we should distinguish the distinction between individual well-being and social well-being, and that approach B should be left to the domain of individual well-being, which is pursued individually rather than publicly. However, the distinguishing characteristics of approach A/B are not equivalent to those of individual/social well-being. We should think of both sides of well-being in terms of both approaches. It is impossible to untangle the complicated relations among them here, but I can give some basic arguments on the distinction between individual and social well-being, and show why understanding their relation is so difficult.

For instance, living a longer and healthier life might be better for individuals, but might disturb the “proper” alternation of generations. Or, taking advantage on an exam by taking a pill might be good for individuals, but it makes a fierce competition desperate. These are two separate cases. The first case is that enhancing the individual is actually good for the enhanced and causes social influence that could leave society in confusion temporarily, as vaccination has done. Then, we should incorporate that new individual good into society. On the other hand, in the second case, the individual good brought by enhancement that seems apparently good for the enhanced is not good for the society as a whole. The student might be able to take advantage on the exam by using drugs, but if that becomes a common social practice it may create a circumstance that reinforces the needs for stimulants. In terms of approach A, we should revise the rule of the exam to cover the use of drugs. In terms of approach B, however, we

should ask if the goodness of individual well-being which is bought at the expense of social good is really good not only in terms of social well-being, but also in terms of individual well-being.

The concept of *complicity* is helpful here. Margaret Olivia Little, in the context of cosmetic surgery that is regarded as a kind of enhancement,[17] argues that, when one has a cosmetic surgery to alter one's appearance, one might consciously or subconsciously be doing so in conspiracy with the "suspect social norm"[18] of beauty, because that surgery might reinforce that norm of how one should look. As the norm is more suspicious, the surgery is more guilty; Little's worst-case example is an African-American who wants to look whiter.[19] If we examine the case only in terms of approach A, we do not find any reason why that treatment is suspicious as far as it is safe and easy to access, and a client is well informed and autonomous. When we consider the harmful social consequence of such a treatment in terms of approach B, however, we ask about what kind of society we want to live in. The question evolves into individual well-being again – if one's action, which is apparently good for oneself, causes bad social consequences, is one's action ultimately good for one's self?

Let's take a look at the example of a gun, which could be called an enhancement technology. Having a gun is apparently good for its owner because it makes possible for him or her to have more power and security. But the society in which everyone has a gun might not be a good society and might not be secure at all. As for individual well-being also, it is doubtful that having a gun to protect oneself is better way to live because the human relationship is fundamentally based on trust in others. If we think about the gun case in terms of approach A, and if the gun is cheap and easy to access and people are supposed to be autonomous and responsible enough to use it only in self-protection, there is no reason to regulate individual gun ownership. When thought of only in terms of approach A, the argument of the new enhancement technologies follows the same line.[20]

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[17] See also Parens (1998).

[18] Little (1998), p.163.

[19] She surely adds that it is not fair to burden only those who got surgery with the responsibility to change the harmful social norm that certain skin color is more beautiful and valuable than others.

[20] As Haraway argued, there is the case in which objecting against enhancement is a complicity with questionable social norms with the intention of maintaining these norms – contraceptives vs. oppressive gender order, for example. That is, the complicity is not always the proponents'

In summary, not publicly discussing approach B encourages the wrong use of enhancement technologies. The liberalistic argument implying that we are allowed to pursue whatever we want might foster the use of enhancement technologies according to the stereotyped ideas of beauty, smartness, and any other imperfect ideas of good. When our environments are doubtful, it is wrong to adapt to them by changing and enhancing ourselves, even though doing so should not be prohibited. We must change the environment based on the basic idea of human life, which is what approach B is about.

4. Conclusion: Two-Sided Approach to Approach B

At the end of the section 2, the concept of *form of life* was introduced as the foundation of approach B. We must take it as the foundation because, in this world of pluralistic value systems, we should first ensure that we do not fall into nihilistic relativism. There, anything can be valuable for those who value it, otherwise nothing can be valuable, and then nothing can ground one's sense of value besides one's own desire. One possible way to avoid nihilism is based on human nature, which is thought to be substantial and universal.[21] However, even if a universal human nature was proven, it would not suggest any goodness or badness unless it was true that following that nature is good.[22] Therefore, we should think about what we should regard as good.

This requires the concept of form of life to give our life a form, which is essential regardless of the definition of good, as an amorphous life is not a life that can live meaningfully. To get rid of this amorphousness, two kinds of study should work cooperatively.[23]

One is a reflection on our desires behind free choice, which is regarded as the only source of value by some proponents of enhancement. Each case differs according to what drives us to use enhancement technologies. If there is a naturally skinny man, for example, does he possess the same desire to use steroids if he wants to be a bodybuilder for his own satisfaction, or if he wants to be a fire fighter because his family was lost in

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fault.

[21] See Cook (2005).

[22] Kass op. cit., p.19-20. See also Hansen (2008).

[23] The following is partly inspired by Callahan (1996).

fire? Or, if we invented the technology that makes it possible for us to hibernate, is the desire to use it for prolonging life to wait until a new treatment for a currently incurable cancer equal to the desire to use it enable astronauts to explore outer space? All of these kinds of cases can be based on autonomous free choice that harms no one. Their desires behind their choices, however, may be morally different and thus we must take their desires into account to assess their actual form of life.

The other study is rethinking of our finiteness, communality, fellowship, and other concepts that may constitute a basic frame of our form of life together. Kass, Sandel and Callahan worry that enhancement technologies erode our essential and indispensable form of life, which enable us to live flourishing lives together.

According to Sandel there must be two domains of our lives; *giftedness* in which we must not try to change things arbitrarily but accept things as such, and *willfulness* in which we are trying to create, transform, and destroy things to make them cohere with our plan. It would be dubious to turn everything into the domain of willfulness by enhancement technologies. For example, having a baby without a sense of giftedness may make it impossible for parents to build a healthy relationship with their children.

According to Kass and Callahan, death and community as ultimate limitations and indispensable conditions of our lives should give our lives clearer shape. Making children calmer by medicating them may make it difficult to have a sense of education as communal cooperation. Or, taking an antidepressant may get in the way of a healthy grief process that recognizes death as the ultimate end of life.

To be sure, there are many enhancement technologies which do not affect a form of life like the improvement of eyesight. There are also some concepts, such as that of gender order, that play an important role in our lives but are not indispensable. We should explore what our essential form of life is, and how enhancement technologies affect it.

Those two studies – defining desire and form of life – should work cooperatively so that we can resolve the issue of enhancement technologies. The ethics of enhancement is not an abstract object of conceptual ethics, but a socio-cultural entity within which we live our daily lives.

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