

1. Introduction

This handout is based on chapter 3 (“Character”, pp.69-70, 77-83, 90-98, 101-109) of Allen Buchanan’s 2011 book *Beyond Humanity? The Ethics of Biomedical Enhancement*.

The bio-conservative might (i) *agree* that our current stage of enhancement is the result of a long history of technological advancement and this is continuous with emerging enhancement technologies, (ii) *agree* have the potential to increase productivity, and thereby allow us to increase well-being (ii) but still *reject* the claim that we should promote enhancement technologies.

In addition, the bio-conservative might argue that we ought to reject that the decision to use certain biomedical ETs should be determined by a kind of **balancing approach**, i.e. the approach of weighing the pros against the cons and trying to make an informed decision on the moral permissibility of ETs.

The bio-conservative might do all of this by saying that use or development of ETs will destroy our **moral character** in some significant way and that such a destruction overrides any consideration of the possible benefits that might come with using ETs.

Moral character: the stable traits that an individual has that make them worthy of praise, blame, criticism, and determine whether they are a good or bad person.

Intuitively, we think that the moral character of individuals should be *developed* in some way. The traits that individuals ought to cultivate are *virtues* while the traits that an individual should avoid cultivate (or seek to eradicate) are called *vices*.

VIRTUES	VICES
Courage	Cowardice
Temperance ¹	Intemperance
Honesty	Dishonesty
Benevolence	Malevolence

In saying that we should aim to acquire virtues and avoid vices, there are two further points worth making:

(1) Habits: good (virtuous) / bad (vicious) character is the result of repeatedly performing good actions.

N1: Just because you do something good /bad one time does not make you a good /bad person

(2) Well-Being: good (virtuous) character is a necessary condition for a proper (or full) human life.

N1: You could live a life full of happiness and avoid all pain and you could always avoid violating people’s rights and freedom, but you won’t be a *full* human being. For that you need to be courageous, temperance, honest, kind, etc.

¹ The ability to control one’s self, to abstain or withstand temptation, the ability to avoid overindulgence

Intuitively, we think that certain activities may not be damaging to our health or the environment, but can skew our moral development in a way that should be avoided.

E1: You are a good person. You don't lie or cheat or steal. But, you start to associate with known liars, cheaters, and crooks. If you begin to lie, cheat, and steal, *your character has been corrupted.*²

E2: A child who plays video games all day instead of reading an occasional book. *There are, of course, concerns that this may not be healthy for a child, but there is also the concern that only doing one particular activity will hinder the development of the child's character.*

So, one concern of bio-conservatives is about what would happen to our **moral character** if biomedical ETs become common place. The worry is that widespread use of these ETs will damage our moral character and keep us from becoming *fully human*. Even if biomedical ETs offer us tremendous economic and social goods and minimal social risks, such an evaluation is irrelevant because the protection of our moral character is of fundamental importance.

2. Four Arguments from Moral Character

Buchanan covers roughly *four* arguments from moral character in chapter 3. These are:

- (1) The Argument from Giftedness, pp.77-90
- (2) The Argument from Objectification / Manipulation, pp.90-94
- (3) The Argument from Atrophy of Moral Powers, pp.94-98
- (4) The Argument from Inauthenticity, pp.101-109

We have already addressed different forms of (1) and so we will turn our attention to (2)-(4)

2.1. The Argument from Giftedness

We have already looked at this argument, but it is worth reading what Buchanan has to say about this, especially if you plan on writing on Sandel's arguments against Bionic athletes.

2.2. The Argument from Objectification / Manipulation

ARGUMENT FROM SELF-MANIPULATION

- P1** Enhancement technologies have tremendous *attractiveness* since they offer the potential to increase productivity, and thereby allow us to increase well-being
- P2** **Biomedical enhancement treats human beings as things to be manipulated (as objects)**
- P3** **We should not engage in actions which treat human beings as things to be manipulated.**
- C** Therefore, we should not engage in the use/development of biomedical ETs.

² Do not be misled: "Bad company corrupts good character." (1 Corinthians 15:33)

CDQ: What reasons are there to think that **P2** is true? Take a minute to explore / defend this premise by coming up with a grizzly or horrendous or shocking scenario where biomedical enhancement technologies allow individuals to be treated as *objects to be manipulated*.

O1: Buchanan seems to accept **P2** but reject **P3**. Here writes that “*not only is nothing wrong per se with regarding oneself as an object or with manipulating oneself, but also there are cases in which it is morally obligatory to do so.*” (*Beyond Humanity*, p.91). Buchanan’s claim here is supported by cases of “rational self-binding”:

Rational self-binding: the act of putting external constraints on one’s own autonomy in order to achieve some desired end.

E1: Ulysses and the Siren’s Song

E2: Subjecting yourself to penalty

E3: Allowing yourself certain indulgences if you perform an action

One key idea is that cases of rational self-binding often treat the human being (ourselves) **as an object to be manipulated**. We recognize that we are limited in various ways and so try to manipulate ourselves (by subjecting us to various forces) in order to do something we normally would not be able to do.

CDQ: Devise your own example of rational self-binding. For example, think of something that it would normally be difficult for you to do, then come up with an incentive or punishment if you do / don’t complete that task.

CDQ: Are all cases of rational self-binding wrong? What benefit or good do you see coming out of engaging in rational self-binding?

Buchanan’s objection then is takes the following form:

ARGUMENT AGAINST SELF-MANIPULATION

- P1** Assume that biomedical enhancement treats human beings as things to be manipulated.
- P2** If what makes biomedical enhancement wrong is that it treats human beings as things to be manipulated, then rational self-binding is also wrong.
- P3** But, not every case of rational self-binding is wrong.
- C** Therefore, not every case of the use of biomedical ETs is wrong.

This argument does not say that *all cases of rational self-binding are morally acceptable*. In fact, some cases are likely wrong, e.g. if I punch five innocent bystanders then I will allow myself to punch a sixth.

And so, if there are some cases where it is **acceptable to treat yourself as an object to be manipulated**, then we need to ask a different question:

Under what conditions and for what reasons is it morally permissible (or even obligatory) to treat oneself as an object of manipulation? (*Beyond Humanity*, p.93)

CDQ: Buchanan’s focus is largely on *treating one’s self as an object* rather than *treating someone else as an object*. Let’s see if his idea holds up when applied to the others. Suppose the following “enhancements” were given to someone at birth. First, state whether or not you think giving someone one of these proposed enhancements would be to treat them as an *object to be manipulated*. Second, state whether (and why) this would be an acceptable manipulation.

- (1) enhanced 20/5 vision
- (2) super strength
- (3) large calves (chosen because a particular society views this as sexually attractive)
- (4) super hearing (you always hear every conversation in a room)
- (5) extremely emotive, e.g. always feel strong sympathy when you see a sick puppy
- (6) super soldier, e.g. a set of characteristics given to an individual so they can expertly fight wars
- (7) super worker, e.g. a set of characteristics given to an individual so they can expertly put together iphones.

2.3. The Argument from Moral Atrophy

A third argument from moral character stems from the effect that biomedical ETs will have on our ability to do good and resist evil.

Moral power: the diverse capacities we use in order to make correct moral judgments and perform correct moral actions.

Consider the following moral powers / capacities:

- (1) The *cognitive capacity* to know how we should act
- (2) The ability to control one’s self (*self-control / moral will power*) to act in a way that we know we should.
- (3) The *emotional capacity* to understand when another person has been harmed.

Consider that biomedical ETs might be employed for moral ends.

E1: cognitive enhancements might increase our ability to know the future consequences of our actions and thereby determine which action would increase happiness and decrease sadness.

E2: ingesting glucose will allow you to resist temptation (*Beyond Humanity*, p.95)

ARGUMENT FROM THE ATROPHY OF MORAL POWERS

- P1** Biomedical ETs will lead to the atrophy of our moral powers.
P2 It is wrong to use a technology that will lead to the atrophy of moral powers.
C Therefore, the use of biomedical ETs should be avoided.

What reason do we have to believe **P1**? One reason is that technologies seem to have led to the atrophy of other powers.

E1: Perhaps GPS has led to the decline of traditional navigation skills (*Beyond Humanity*, p.94)

E2: While there isn’t evidence to support this, we might say that “spell check” or “auto-correct” has made people worse spellers.

E3: Perhaps texting & emailing has made people less able to give grand speeches.

O1: Even if **P1** is true, **P2 is false**. Yes, the individual who can navigate to location X without GPS is more praiseworthy, but that doesn't mean the person who uses GPS has done something morally wrong. Likewise, the person who has the *will power* to avoid temptation is better off and deserves more praise, but this doesn't mean the person who uses the glucose moral resistance pill has done something wrong. "Life is not", Buchanan writes, "a contest in which the goal is to do everything in the most difficult way" (*Beyond Humanity*, p.95).

O2: If we assume that **P1** and **P2** are both true, then other, more traditional methods of enhancements are wrong.

E1: Take two individuals B and C. Whenever B faces a morally questionable situation, B carefully deliberates about what to do. Whenever C faces a morally questionable situation, C relies on various moral rules (e.g. "don't lie, do unto others as you would have them do unto you, don't kill, etc.).

CDQ: Do you agree with Buchanan's objections to the Argument from Moral Atrophy? Imagine you were trying to decide how to raise your child to be a morally good person. You have two options: (i) traditional methods of reward, punishment, learning various moral rules, and so forth and (ii) some traditional methods along with a computer-brain interface that released spurts of glucose whenever the child believed s/he was facing moral temptation. Are there any reasons for not choosing (ii)?

2.4. The Argument from Inauthenticity

A third and final argument concerns living an inauthentic life and having inauthentic relationships.

Authenticity: x is living an authentic life if and only if it x is "true to herself", x can claim that life as her own, if x habitually acts in a way that is true to the *real* x .

Inauthenticity: An individual is living a life that is *inauthentic* when they aren't being true to themselves, when they are just parroting what someone else says, when their behavior deviates from their real behavior, or when their life goals, dreams, beliefs, and values are set by someone else.

CDQ: Come up with a concrete example of an *inauthentic* life.

ARGUMENT FROM INAUTHENTIC EXISTENCE

- P1** Those who use biomedical ETs will not be living authentic lives.
P2 We should not use a technology that will cause us to live inauthentic lives.
C Therefore, the use of biomedical ETs should be avoided.

O1: **P1** is not universally true. If someone takes a drug and they become a "different" person and that person is not someone who, upon reflection, they would want to be, *then YES* they would be living an inauthentic existence. But, it is also possible that someone takes a drug so that they behave in a way that better corresponds to who they want to be.

E1: Suppose John is always tempted to cheat on his wife. He feels as though he cannot control himself in the face of temptation. He knows that cheating is wrong. He loves his wife. He thinks she is the love of his life. He has used a variety of other means to try to not cheat, e.g. various forms of

rational self-binding, but they have not worked. Now suppose John finds a new drug called *Forever Faithful*. Intuitively we think that John would still be “true to himself” by taking the drug and that taking the drug would allow him to acquire a habit that is more in line with the real John.

E2: P2 is not universally true. Suppose Liz has decided that she doesn’t care for the real world, for real friendships, or for real experiences. She would rather be interfaced into a virtual environment where she could take on a wide array of different personalities that are subtle or even extreme deviations from her normal self. For example, Liz is a shy person but in the virtual world, she is a swashbuckling pirate capturing people on the open sea. No doubt, Liz’s various virtual personalities are *not her own*. And, the extent to which she is immersed in this world, she is not living an inauthentic life. But, is there anything morally wrong with living a completely virtual world?

2.4.1 Inauthentic Relationships

The example of *Forever Faithful* raises another worry about living an inauthentic life, namely that ETs will allow us to have *inauthentic relationships*. Consider that there is a biochemical basis to pair-bonding, this biochemical basis decays after one’s reproductive years, and individuals often become estranged, divorced, etc.³ Some people wish to reduce the risk of this happening and so one way to do this is through biomedical ETs or “love drugs”. More generally, we might wish to preserve a marriage / relationship by avoiding infidelity or maintain / create friendships. One way we might do this is by using biomedical means. However, there is the concern that relationships preserved or formed in this way are **inauthentic**.

ARGUMENT FROM INAUTHENTIC RELATIONSHIPS

- P1** Those who use biomedical ETs for the purpose of maintaining or creating relationships will not have authentic relationships
- P2** We should not use a technology that will cause us to have inauthentic relationships.
- C** Therefore, the use of biomedical ETs should be avoided.

O1: P1 is not universally true. Suppose two people are married for 40 years, they begin to drift apart but upon reflection wish to preserve their relationship. To do so, they take love drugs *not to create love* but to preserve the love they have. They are trying to gain *rational control* over their relationship and doing this via biomedical means is no different from various traditional methods of trying to preserve marriages, e.g. “alcohol, flowers, provocative clothing, poetry, beach vacations without the kids, second honeymoons, etc.” (*Beyond Humanity* p.106)

O2: P1 is not universally true. The worry in **P1** may be that love drugs will become mindless love slaves with no way to escape a relationship. But, less extreme versions are available, e.g. decreasing the likelihood of infidelity rather than eliminating its possibility altogether.

CDQ: In the above, we have raised objections to *preserving* relationships via love drugs. Let’s say it is acceptable to preserve relationships via biomedical means, but what about *creating* relationships (whether it be to find a new love or to make friendships)? Suppose two people become lovers and then wed by deciding they wished to be biomedically programmed to love each other. Would such a relationship be inauthentic? Would it be less genuine or real than two people who met in a non-biomedical way?

³ See Julian Savulescu and Anders Sandberg 2008. Neuroenhancement of Love and Marriage: The Chemicals Between Us. *Neuroethics* 1(1):33-44.