Human Enhancement

Summary of CEC Bioethics Working Group 2009 discussion paper and some personal reflections, by Dr Donald Bruce, rapporteur for the study, Edinethics Ltd. (formerly Church of Scotland SRT Project)

Distinctions

We made a number of distinctions to clarify the sense in which we would address human enhancement. We would see an inherent difference between tools, in the broadest sense of the term, which we use to attempt to make our life better, and making enhancing modifications to the human body itself. We would also make a first order distinction between medical interventions and human enhancements unrelated to medical treatment and prevention. The existence of 'grey areas does not invalidate the distinction; they must be examined on their merits. Thus, in principle, we could support many kinds of 'enhancements' for example, to develop better means for the body to combat disease, to detect in advance of symptoms, to be less subject of the more distressing degradations of extreme ageing, and so on. But in this report we wished to examine primarily enhancements that would go far beyond the medical context.

Transhumanism

In so far as it seeks a kind of *technological* salvation without God, we regard the transhumanist project as a quasi-religious but erroneous endeavour. It is a false hope which will not work, yet it has the potential to mislead people.

It correctly identifies human aspiration to better ourselves from our present situation, but wrongly conceives of the nature of human beings, and wrongly diagnoses both the problem and the solution, of what should be changed in our humanity. In that sense the discourse about human physical enhancement is very interesting, but it rather misses the point?

Our view of the Human Being in God's image

We drew rather from the revealed concept view of humans being made in God's image. In this sense we are like God and this includes our desire to know and to create, and to intervene and we talk very positively about the role of science and technology, but not without limit.

But it also implies for us that the human being is an indivisible unity of body, mind and spirit. But whilst we affirm the importance of the body, our humanity is not to be defined merely by how well or badly our bodies or minds function. God is not more interested in 'superman', but with 'everyman' and with the unique response each human being can make.

This gives us a tension in our nature. On the one hand, to be human is both to want to exceed what we are. On the other, to be human is also about what we do with what we have. The aim of seeking to enhance our capacities is always vulnerable (inherently) to the possibility of its failure. As a concept, enhancement takes insufficient account of the

role of suffering in the human condition.
We would not glorify or desire suffering but would recognise that it is part of our human experience. We acknowledge the spiritual experience of countless Christians down the ages that, paradoxically, in the experience of suffering, painful and unwelcome as it may be, God the Redeemer is at work in us, and, by faith, through it we may come to a deeper knowledge and love of God.

In this context, we also take seriously that the image of God in humans is also spoiled, in the concept of the 'fallenness' of human nature from what God intended it to be, so that even the best we do and aspire to is affected by a moral and spiritual poison that technology cannot provide the antidote.

We consider that what is wrong with the human condition is not a lack of strength, longevity, intelligence, beauty, athleticism, art, science or even education, but in the moral and spiritual shortcomings of humanity, individually and collectively, as the world's ongoing conflicts show. Our deepest problems are less in any physical limitations we may have, than in our moral, relational or spiritual failings.

From the view of Christian anthropology, no matter how much we enhanced ourselves, inherent human failings would remain because they lie beyond technical fixes, but require solutions of a different sort entirely.

Can a case be made for a more limited Human Enhancement?
If these technologies can be dissociated from the ideological framing in which they have often been presented, should we object to making more limited enhancements of the human body? If we do not look to become superhumans and if we duly recognise our human failings, would enhancements of body or mind reflect our God-given creativity and inventiveness, or go beyond what we should do?

This raises some major questions of what is meant by 'enhancement'

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- At first sight the idea of enhancement is presumed to be self-evident.
- On reflection, how do we judge what improves a human being? In what sense and against what criteria is something deemed to be an enhancement?
- It is interesting that the English term 'enhancement' does not translate simply into other European languages, e.g. French, German, Danish.
- Indeed, can anyone claim to know, on a reliable basis, what would be *better* than the current design, other than as a purely *personal* judgement? It's self-referential.
- We need to assess an 'enhancement' by wider range of understanding than simply an improvement in some function of body or mind. From a Christian point of view, it should be viewed against an integrated and holistic understanding of the human person rather than merely mechanistic concepts like performance.
- Many "improvements" might not *necessarily* improve us. For example, having near infrared vision might enable me to drive more safely at night, but instead, I may use it to *drive faster* but not more safely.

- I might seek to used a technology developed for Alzheimer's patients to recover lost memory, to enhanced my normal memory function. But there are many things I am very glad that I do not remember very often, so how would I be sure I would only remember what I wanted?
- How do I know the enhancement I am offered will do 'what it says on the packet' and is guaranteed to enhance me? How can we be protected against snake oil salesmen. (c.f. Jan Steen's painting 'The Quack Doctor'), given the lack of any regulation of this area? In other fields, 'cowboys' have launched products and services simply because it will make money, without regard to human need, risk, wider issues, etc. (c.f. the purely commercial motivation for offering to create a cloned cat that would not even resemble one's dead pet).

Risk

There are serious risks in many aspects of intervention in the human body, of implants – of infection, failure or rejection, or of the inevitable side effects in long term use of all serious chemical drugs. To imagine a situation without substantial risk would be fantasy.

- There are also risks from upsetting the overall balance of the human body and its systems. The genetic modification of animals for growth rate, side effects of drug and exercise regimes in athletic sports provide clear examples of the harms that may result from accentuating and stimulating one aspect too far.

This question indeed focuses the issue of whether there is a distinction between medical uses and enhancements. In medicine such risks as these may be balanced sufficiently if there is the hope of treating a terminal illness, or allieviating chronic distress. In enhancements, there is no balancing good except the hope of some improvement in a capacity of the body, for which it is very much harder to justify taking the risks.

- There are also risks, from hubris of some scientists, overclaiming, or from commercial, political or military pressures, to proceed faster than we understand.

Social

- The concept of human enhancement tends to be presented individualistically and seems to be inherently unjust in an already divided and unjust world. It might have a stronger case if it was directed towards improving the lot of the 'have-not's' of the world. But the rhetoric of human enhancement rather points the opposite way.
- Enhancements should be the subject of decision making at a societal level, in the first instance. The implications are too serious to be treated just as matters of personal preference, for example, in the unintended social engineering that could result from individual use of chemical cognitive performance enhancers.
- Case of using Ritalin for concentration in revising for an examination. If the rewards are limited : competitive places at University. You might lose out if everyone else uses it but you don't. It puts pressure on *everyone* to use it, perhaps against their values? Yet if *all* the students used it, it loses its competitive advantage. But then

no one dare *stop* using it. The result is that no one gains. It has achieved a useless social change, people are locked into technology which has not value. Is the only 'improvement' in pharmaceutical company profits? This has been called an ethical race to the bottom.

Aspiration and Satisfaction

Are we better humans for having cosmetic surgery today, or perhaps becoming smarter, faster, longer lived tomorrow? Would we agree, in retrospect, that the enhancement had been genuine, or did it make little difference, or maybe made one thing better but something else worse? What is motivating us? There seem to be several impulses.

- Practical: to overcome the sense of one's own limitation, in some activity – not to get tired so easily, or to think more quickly, to run faster, or whatever;
- Competitive: to win the race against one's rival next time;
- Hubristic(?) : to perform better than *any* human could
- Aesthetic: that one might do a good job better – make better music or a tastier dinner, be a sharper mathematician, or a more skilled woodworker or scientist;
- Altruistic: to serve or help someone else better.

For all of these, would we be satisfied, compared with not having been enhanced? If one at last beat one's rival, because one used better drugs than him, not because one was a better runner? That one had achieved a goal, but only with the aid of some added kick? Perhaps the most compelling satisfactions would be something like the sense of making a finer work of art or craft, just for the sake of it, or for the sake of someone else. Ironically, these are the least to do with enhancing *myself*, and the most to do with loving my neighbour or loving God.

However, it is misleading to think that any technology would achieve moral or spiritual enhancement. This would make a fundamental category mistake.

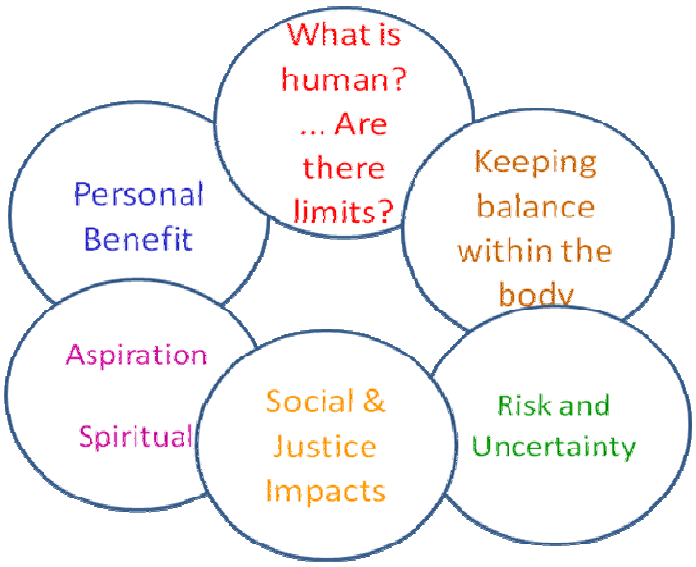
The aim of a human life with God

The internal logic of enhancement is its own undoing. Logically, one would have no reason to be satisfied with *any* enhancement one made to oneself, because there would always be another one. You would be less enhanced if you didn't take it ... *ad infinitum*. In that sense, enhancement would become a treadmill which has no place to stop, and thus no final satisfaction. Our Christian theology teaches us that we are created by God for relationship with God, and can never be satisfied with merely created things, even with ourselves. Good as these may be in many ways, they still leave us wanting what only God can meet through relationship with Jesus Christ.

Postscript : Two Models for Consideration

By way of a postscript I add some reflections of my own, suggesting some models for assessing human enhancement. Our discussion highlighted a number of aspects which need to be taken into account in assessing something that is claimed to be a human

enhancement. One way of summarising these is an idea of balancing different aspects represented by circles. Taking an idea from environmental ethics, just as sustainable development seeks to balance the three overlapping circles of economic, environmental and social, so also human enhancement should be treated as (perhaps) six circles representing different aspects which need to be considered in balance with one another.



Another insight from environmental ethics is to consider a range of different attitudes to nature and intervention in God's creation attitudes, and apply these to the notion of changing our human 'nature', in which a Christian view would approximate to the Partnership and Stewardship attitudes.

Attitudes to Altering Nature & Human 'Nature'

Attitudes	Values and concepts
• Ownership	• Mastery, no external constraints, autonomy, manipulation (to human ends)
• Worship	• Minimal intervention, sacredness, givenness
• Partnership	• Intrinsic value in nature and humans; holistic more than functional; co-operation more than manipulation
• Maintenance Engineer	• Pragmatic rather than inherent value; efficacy and safety; responsibility
• Stewardship	• Divine ownership, human accountability, relationship, bias towards the 'have not's'