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Bioscience and the Good Life

Debates about the use of the biosciences and enhancement technologies can have a tendency to be dominated by optimistic enthusiasts on one hand, telling us how we should embrace new technologies (perhaps remaking human nature in the process), and more pessimistic conservatives on the other, warning us about the moral pitfalls into which we could too-easily stumble. I hope that this book has, on the whole, managed to avoid those poles. I've tried to make the case that there is nothing wrong with the use of most enhancement technologies, but that we should not get carried away by their potential, and that there is certainly no obligation to embrace them. The moral reasons that we have to endorse therapy – the kind of intervention that aims to raise a life, or an aspect of a life, to a level of flourishing at least minimally acceptable – do not beget reasons to endorse enhancement. And where lives can be made better, perhaps by technological means, it doesn't follow that it has to be by biotechnological means. The kinds of silicone-based cognitive enhancer that we carry around in our pockets obviate the need for cognitive enhancers that we carry around inside our skulls, for example. In the last two chapters, I've tried to push this claim a little further, to deny that there is any particular obligation to support scientific research. A significant part of that is the hypothesis that, while there is no obligation to improve already-good-enough lives, even where there is an obligation or desire to improve lives, we can do so in ways that do not require biotechnological innovation.

The first three chapters were essentially directed at clearing the path for the next four. I took as my starting point the idea that ethics concerns itself with the examination of human behaviour. Sometimes this examination is concerned with whether a particular practice is right or wrong, and with the standard by which we're supposed to judge that. But Aristotle points to another role for the ethicist, which is to ask whether, granted certain claims about the end to which an activity is directed, that activity is really going to help us realize it. For Aristotle, all roads lead to the same end: human action is directed (admittedly, sometimes indirectly) at securing the good life – something that is captured by the idea of flourishing or *eudaimonia*. The potential problem with this is that what constitutes the good life is only vaguely defined (there's a nagging worry that there's nothing more to it than the circular 'whatever it is at which all action is directed'), and there's lots of scope for conflict about the means to realize it. Yet if one is suspicious of this kind of Aristotelian picture, in

which we have to accept that securing the good life is the *sole* end of human activity, that isn't necessarily too big a problem: one can still take seriously the weakened idea that it is one of the things at which the biosciences are designed to secure. Either way, if one of the things that ethics can do is to help work out whether or not some activity is conducive to the good life, then it follows that ethics can have something to say about the biosciences – and something that is potentially richer than a set of statements about what is and is not permissible.

An advantage of this approach is that it allows for a narrower and hopefully more focused ethical appraisal of the biosciences to be taken than might otherwise be possible. Given the range of bioscientific endeavour – from deepening our understanding of cancer genetics to synthetic biology – the range of things that might warrant questioning is vast, as is the range of ways in which they might be questioned. (Questions about permissibility would invite higher-order questions about how that permissibility is to be measured, for example: are we consequentialist or non-consequentialist, for starters.) Taking it as read that one of the things that the biosciences is supposed to do is to improve the lives of humans, and asking whether that aim is likely to be achieved, means not having to worry about any of that.

Still, questions about permissibility are hard to avoid entirely. If the applications of the biosciences at which I was planning to look – enhancements in particular – were impermissible from the start, there would be nothing more to say. But, as we've seen from Chapter 2, arguments that enhancements are impermissible are very hard to make work. At the simplest level, to be against enhancement means to be against therapy, since therapy is a kind of enhancement. But even if – as I think we should – we think that there's a tenable distinction to be drawn between therapy and enhancement, and interpret the anti-enhancement arguments as being against interventions that are directed not at putting right something that's gone wrong, but at 'supernormal' improvements, the arguments don't amount to all that much.

I am satisfied that there is no obligation not to enhance. But neither is there an obligation to do so, as I argued in Chapter 3. Partly this is because 'enhance' is just too broad a category. But it's also because there would only be a duty to enhance if it could be shown that it would be blameable not to. It's unlikely that this can be shown, at least when 'enhancement' is treated as indicating something non-therapeutic. Enhancement, properly so-called, would refer to interventions beyond what is required to make a life minimally acceptable. But establishing that there is a duty of beneficence that manifests in this way is harder than it looks – and the reasons for this played a significant role in the argument of Chapter 8, as well. Bluntly, a duty to enhance amounts to a duty to make the world better than that which reasonable people would agree to be acceptably good. I do not see any reason to suppose that there is such a duty.

The moral status of enhancements is that they're permissible, but nothing more. With that in mind, I turned to the question of whether, and to what extent, they might contribute to flourishing or the good life – whether there's much of a reason short of a duty to pursue them. Though it's impossible to talk in much detail about every possible enhancement, by looking at enhancement technology in the broadest terms, it's been possible to say that it's unlikely that there is. Few would contribute substantially to the good life, if at all.

The prospect of indefinite life extension – which I take to be the paradigmatic enhancement – turns out to be less desirable than we might instinctively think. The reason for that is derived from the idea (which I think we should accept) that being alive is not its own reward, but is rather the foundation upon which the edifice of a life is built – and it's the edifice that matters. This, of course, takes us back to the 'projects' claim from Chapter 1. It's *doing* these things that counts, though, more than having the opportunity to have done them. It's being engrossed in a project or activity that is desirable. It is, I think, better to go out while doing something fulfilling, than to have to find something else to make life fulfilling. What should concern us is that we are living a good life when we die; and dying later will not make that life any better. Indeed, worrying about the proximity of death might itself erode the quality of the life being lived.

Perhaps counterintuitively, I think that the biosciences are more likely to make a meaningful contribution to a good life when they are used in the pursuit of things that we might think less essential. In Chapter 5, I looked at the possibility of making alterations to the body for the sake of sporting ambition, and for the sake of artistic endeavour; but the principle extends more generally. Once we've accepted, first, that the extension of life for life's own sake is not all that desirable a use of the biosciences, but, second, that the pursuit of projects of some sort is a significant consideration in what makes a life good, and that opens the way to seeing what one of the roles of the biosciences could be for making life better.

None of these projects has (or need have) any particular moral weight of their own: all that matters is that a person might adopt such-and-such a project, and treat the opportunities afforded by developments in science and technology as tools in the realization of that project. However, I am more confident that this assertion would be truer in respect of some enhancements than others. Notably, I think that it is much less likely to be true in respect of cognitive enhancers – again, somewhat in contrast to some of the more convinced of the optimists.

Not all enhancements are pursued for the sake of the enhancee's flourishing. Something like moral enhancement, and the idea that we might be able to take advantage of knowledge about the neurological, neurochemical and genetic correlates of propensities towards desirable and undesirable behaviour, fits into this category. Yet there's a number of problems with an overhasty

adoption of moral enhancement. The big problem with moral enhancement is that it runs the risk of being much too certain about what traits are desirable and ought to be promoted; but if there's a reasonable chance of fallibility here, we run the risk of making people less morally lithe than they would need to be to reboot and refresh their moral proclivities. Maintaining the distinction between acting *for* and *from* a cause keeps the possibility of such a reboot higher.

And even if we bite the bullet and say that what we're interested in is not so much *moral* enhancement as heightened pro-sociality, this might lead to independent moral objections of three sorts. One would be that we stand in danger of preferring to limit some people's moral dignity for the sake of our – fallible – ideas about what it would be desirable for them to be like; and if we think that moral dignity is a component of the good life and the promotion of the good life interests us, there is obviously a tension here. Another is that even if certain characteristics are *ceteris paribus* reliably vicious, it is not a given that we would want to eliminate all vice from the world anyway: a uniformly virtuous world might be worse in important (though perhaps non-moral) respects than we would expect, or even find particularly desirable. And, finally, once again, we'd have departed from the idea of using the biosciences to improve the lives of the people on whom they're used, and turned to the idea of using them for the sake of improving the lives of others. This may or may not be acceptable – but it's something that requires justification of its own.

The provisional conclusion reached by the end of Chapter 7, then, was this: that of the ways that we might imagine that the biosciences and the applications that arise from them could improve flourishing and make lives better, a good number are not, after all, so straightforwardly desirable. Assuming that the people who would benefit from enhancement technologies already had lives that were at least minimally acceptably good, a good number of those technologies may do little to improve their lives further – or, at the very least, will do little that could not be matched by other, non-bioscientific means.

My overarching conclusion, then, runs along these lines: though it's true that the biosciences and the technologies they've facilitated have made our lives better than they might have been in some other world where those advances had not been made, it doesn't follow from that that bioscientific advance is a necessary part of the good life, or of making lives better. We ought not to shy away from their use; but neither is there any particular need to expend a huge amount of energy realizing bioscientific promises. And if this is right, then there doesn't seem to be much to underpin the idea that there's a duty to research more of them. The only rationale for further research would be therapeutic. Improving the therapeutic repertoire may be admirable: but it is not obligatory, though; and what obligations there are need not be met by means of bioscientific innovation.

I began this book with an epigram taken from Olaf Stapledon's *Last and First Men*, and though the book is cranky (and, frankly, quite boring), it's with another quotation – drawn from a couple of paragraphs before the first one – that I think I'll draw it to a close:

It was such a society, almost unthinkable to the First Men, that now set about remaking human nature. Unfortunately there were conflicting views about the goal.¹

It is not inconceivable that a philosopher may have helped these future humans decide on the goal to be pursued. But neither is it certain that they'd have agreed that there was any real need to alter or enhance humanity in any way at all.

Note

- 1 Stapledon, 2004, p. 186.