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Bad Arguments against Better Lives

The tone that I'm going to be adopting from the next chapter onwards will be one of friendly scepticism about biotechnology's role in the pursuit of the good life, laced with something more along the lines of traditional hostility to the idea that we have any obligation to develop or make use of it; but even a hostility to aspects of biotechnological evangelism comes a long way short of amounting to the idea that there is anything particularly wrong in principle with seeking to enhance or modify people. Yet there has been a number of arguments advanced that seek to defend precisely this position: that there *is* something morally problematic about many of the uses to which the biosciences might be put – particularly in respect of enhancement. The object of this chapter is to clear anti-enhancement arguments out of the way.

There is a number of forms that an anti-enhancement argument might take, but they do appear to fall into a more limited range of kinds. One of the simplest kinds of anti-enhancement argument rests on the idea that enhancement represents interference with nature, that we ought not to interfere with nature, and so ought to be at least cautious about enhancement. Nature, on this account, is granted a kind of integrity. This integrity is claimed to demand more than our respect, since respect is compatible with significant alteration; the Ashmolean museum in Oxford, for example, reopened in late 2009 after a period of substantial alteration that does not indicate any lack of respect for the integrity of the building. It is claimed to demand reverence as well.

Still: simply to point out that something is natural and therefore is somehow sacrosanct seems all-too-quickly to open the way to a hostility not only to enhancement (and remember that that hostility hasn't yet been justified), but to therapy as well. After all, vulnerability to measles, or a congenital heart problem, is perfectly natural; yet it would be odd to complain about reversing them. It would be similarly odd to complain about using spectacles to reverse age-related presbyopia, even though it is a perfectly natural process that doesn't even involve invasion by a hostile microorganism. (It's with this kind of argument that John Harris makes short work of the 'normal species functioning' account of the T/E distinction.¹) More absurdly still, it would seem to indicate a commitment to the wrongness of dentistry, the internet, and turning on the heating in winter. Since therapy is acceptable, though, we can't hold on to the claim that interference with nature *per se* is wrong. Appeals to

nature must, therefore, be much more subtle. As we'll see, though, this line won't get us far either – especially in relation to 'human nature', given the very plausible claim that, if there is such a thing as human nature, it's that we are an inescapably unnatural species.

Habermas' appeal to human nature is different in its emphasis – his concern is not that there is anything essential about humans as a species that merits reverence, but that we have an indirect reason not to interfere in our natures because of the ethically detrimental effects that such interference might have on our social interactions. In making this argument, he provides a kind of bridge between nature arguments and dignity arguments, which I shall also examine. Finally, I'll look at Sandel's objections to enhancement, which provide a good example of arguments that revolve around the kind of attitude to the world around us, ourselves, and our place in the world that it is desirable or virtuous to cultivate.

None of these arguments will, in the end, tell us wrong with enhancement in general and in principle. Though it would be foolhardy to say that this means that there's *no* in-principle argument against it, I'm happy enough to accept that there is at least no obvious reason to think enhancing wrong in itself.² Still: at least these arguments *are* recognizable as arguments. This is not the case for all objections; and I'll turn to a famous non-argument against enhancement now, if only to get it out of the way.

Repugnance as a moral tool

Bioscience, especially when it's applied to human lives, can have a tendency to attract suspicion. Terms like 'bioengineering', and the idea that we might interfere in the course of a person's development by altering them – sometimes at a cellular or genetic level – have the capacity to generate a fairly visceral reaction against them. Leon Kass is, famously, a proponent of the idea that there's a value in such reactions, and that they ought to be taken seriously in bioethical debate. He characterizes what he calls the 'wisdom of repugnance' as

the emotional expression of deep wisdom, beyond reason's power fully to articulate it. Can anyone really give an argument fully adequate to the horror which is father-daughter incest (even with consent), or having sex with animals, or mutilating a corpse, or eating human flesh, or even just (just!) raping or murdering another human being? Would anybody's failure to give full rational justification for his or her revulsion at these practices make that revulsion ethically suspect? Not at all. On the contrary, we are suspicious of those who think that they can rationalize away our horror, say, by trying to explain the enormity of incest with arguments only about the genetic risks of inbreeding.³

Though Kass is talking about human cloning in this particular case, appeals to the supposed 'wisdom of repugnance' could be made in any number of cases

(Aubrey de Grey has noted that it could be applied to research into extreme longevity⁴), or in respect of biotechnology in general. The nub of the appeal is that a gut feeling can tell us something of moral import in a manner that may not be easily articulable.

The final sentence of the quoted passage is particularly revealing, nodding as it does towards the fact that, if someone is repelled by some course of action, his reactions will not necessarily be allayed by pointing out either that the risk of harm is minimal, or even by pointing out possible benefits that may be conferred by it. Pointing out that contraception was used, and that in this instance both parties had a great time, isn't likely to undermine a viscerally hostile response to hearing about incest; and much the same applies, *mutatis mutandis*, when it comes to similar reactions against using the biosciences or their products. What counts is that the very idea of a certain activity or procedure is irreducibly contaminated; the question of acceptability is not an open one.

However, and as Kass himself admits in the paragraph from which the quotation above is taken, the big problem with this kind of appeal is that it is not an argument.⁵ Hence to try to present arguments against it in the manner that one would present counterarguments to concerns of the type we'll consider later in the chapter would be to mistake the essence of the rejection.

For a statement to be of *moral* interest, the speaker has to be able at the very least to be able to say that, and why, anyone who does not share his view is mistaken.⁶ Clearly, this is hard if that repugnance resists or does not require articulation to begin with. Repugnance gives the person who feels it a reason to avoid some thing or practice; but it is not in itself a *moral* reason: at most, it's the stuff from which we might try to craft a moral reason at a later point – and it doesn't give a reason to anyone else.

Hence a statement along the lines that 'This is repugnant' is of little more than anthropological interest to any listener: 'Oh. It doesn't seem so to me', he might reply, without being in the least bit moved to share that repugnance. Moreover, neither will a statement of that sort indicate any obligation for the listener to change his behaviour nor do anything to halt whatever the speaker finds repugnant unless he thinks that one ought always to avoid doing things that others find repugnant; but this is as much as to admit that repugnance is trumps, and there is no non-question-begging reason at all to accept that. (To take, for example, Kass' example of anthropophagy: it might be that eating human flesh is held repugnant by everyone; but in an emergency situation, if it makes the difference between death and survival, there is no particular vice in suspending one's sense of repugnance. And this serves to illustrate that, even if repugnance is morally important, it is much more likely to be one of a range of moral considerations than it is to be the only one.)

The speaker could, perhaps, attempt to show the listener why he should be repelled by whatever it is – except that this gives the game away, by moving

from a bare statement of repugnance to something more in line with an appeal to reason and/or reasons. The most the repelled person could hope for without giving the game away is to be able to persuade the listener that his own repugnance ought to count in this case. Maybe the listener could be persuaded of that, perhaps for the sake of social harmony. But that would be a decision concerning the virtues of social harmony, rather than the allegedly repugnant practice. The long and short of it is that appeals to repugnance provide a *ground* for certain kinds of subsequent argument; but they are not sustained by it, and the argument that is sustained concerns civility far more directly than it concerns the rights and wrongs of enhancement.

Overall, I don't think I need to spend any more time on appeals to repugnance. Trying to argue against them is a fool's errand, because they aren't arguments at the core; but – for precisely that reason – neither are they likely to persuade those who aren't inclined to be repelled.

Nature and human nature

A better way of establishing the wrongness of at least some uses of the biosciences is to construct an argument based on an appeal to nature. Ultimately, these arguments are not compelling, but they are at least arguments, following roughly the same structure: we ought not to interfere with nature (or human nature); this procedure *p* is such an interference; therefore we ought not to *p*. The minor premise, that *p* interferes with nature, is generally uncontroversial – indeed, proponents of bioscientific interventions of one sort or another frequently take it as a badge of honour that they are interfering with nature of one sort or another. Thus the focus of the debate must be on the major premise: that we ought not to interfere with nature. Bioconservatives will assent to this; others are less likely to.

The difficulty that is quickly encountered by bioconservatives is that rather quickly they end up insisting that many quite trivial things are morally problematic. I am awoken by a clock-radio, which relays voices almost instantly from locations all over the world, at exactly the same time each day; I turn on the light, and take a gulp of water from the glass by my bed. All these things could be construed as being possible only because of interference with nature – and I'm still under the quilt!

A slight variation on the same theme comes in the form of arguments along the lines that this or that is unnatural, and therefore wrong. But, as Mill pointed out, if 'nature' is understood as referring to 'the powers and properties of all things', it would be hard to imagine that anything could be unnatural:

But in this signification, there is no need of a recommendation to act according to nature, since it is what nobody can possibly help doing, and equally whether he acts well or ill.⁷

Meanwhile, if ‘nature’ is supposed to indicate ‘that which takes place without human intervention’,

it is evident at once that the maxim, taken in this sense, is not merely, as it is in the other sense, superfluous and unmeaning, but palpably absurd and self-contradictory. For while human action cannot help conforming to nature in the one meaning of the term, the very aim and object of action is to alter and improve Nature in the other.⁸

On one horn of the dilemma, we have to admit that *nothing* humans do is unnatural; on the other, we have to admit that the pursuit of that which nature doesn’t yield is the whole point of any action in the first place – and it’s not easy to see that there’s anything objectionable to the mere fact of having acted. Making a fire where there previously was none is, in a sense, an unnatural act; but since there is frequently nothing objectionable at all about making a fire, it cannot be morally problematic simply by virtue of its ‘unnaturalness’: we need something else to say apart from an appeal to nature.

So looking to nature in the broadest sense is not likely to furnish us with all that strong an argument against the permissibility of the use of the fruits of bioscience. But if nature *qua* nature won’t meet the demands of the argument, it’s still possible that appealing to the importance of *aspects* of nature will be a better bet. Since this book is concerned by the contribution that the biosciences might make to the good life for humans, it makes sense therefore to look to human nature for the basis of an argument – to wonder whether there’s anything about that that commands respect, and interference in which would be morally problematic. It might be, for example, that there is nothing particularly problematic about interfering with nature in the broadest terms – so the extinction of smallpox or a new treatment for diabetes would still be welcome – but that there is something essential about humanity would be held to be sacrosanct.

Ostensibly, the first problem with this kind of argument is establishing that there is such a thing as human nature, discrete from the rest of creation, to begin with. Arguably, if there is not, then we can protest all we like about its importance – it will not get us anywhere of any practical import. However, I said in Chapter 1 that I wasn’t too concerned that we should be able to give precise, locked-down meanings to words; it’s enough that we can recognize a human when we see one. It seems to me that any argument against the use of certain biotechnologies that relies on a particularly tight understanding of ‘human nature’ is likely to be weak, but unnecessarily so: there is no need to confine ourselves to any such understanding. (In the same sort of way, one doesn’t have to be able to give a precise definition of ‘sport’ to be able to say

confidently that one doesn't like it, or that it takes up too much of the TV schedules, or whatever.)

So we can afford to allow that there is such a thing as human nature, even if we can't quite pin down for the time being what it is. Where does this take us, though? Why should we think it sacrosanct? That is not obvious. More interestingly, it turns out that it is possible to construct a plausible account of human nature that is not only capable of accommodating interference, but which has it at its heart.

In *The Artificial Ape*, Timothy Taylor advances the hypothesis that humanity is, in some ways, a profoundly enhanced, augmented creature – naturally unnatural, as it were. The nub of his claim is that it is very hard to see how a species such as *H. sapiens* could have emerged and flourished had it not been for a number of technological innovations in our ancestor species. Merely being bipedal generates all manner of problems in respect of food, for one thing. The body shape required for bipedalism means that the abdominal cavity has to shrink; this means that there is less room for intestine, and that the process of digestion is therefore less efficient. It is much less easy for a biped to get the nutrition it needs from the same amount of food than a quadruped. The solution is cooking: cooking means that we can start breaking down food before it enters the body. Cooking implements are, in effect, an artificial second stomach that our ancestors learnt to build. It was by virtue of the use of this technology that a creature like a human, which otherwise would have struggled to obtain all the calories it required, could flourish – especially given the size of its power-hungry brain.

Our brains caused us other problems, too. Bipedality requires a pelvis of a certain shape, narrower than in quadrupeds. But this means a narrower birth canal. In animals with small brains, a narrowed birth canal would be bad enough; but humans have big brains, which have to be housed in a big head. So the question presents itself: how could a creature evolve that was both big-brained and bipedal? Wouldn't these characteristics be antagonistic? The answer is that humans are born, in effect, premature: we have a massively extended infancy in which we are fairly helpless – we can't do so much as support the weight of our own head when we're born, and can't even really stand up until well into the first year. But this simply raises another problem: wouldn't such a long period of utter helplessness count against the survival both of the infant and the adults burdened with the task of raising it? Again, this makes it hard to see how a species such as *H. sapiens* could have had much chance of survival, let alone flourished: compared to other members of the animal kingdom, juvenile humans are just broken monkeys.

The solution to this puzzle, Taylor hypothesizes, can be found in the invention of tools: slings and papooses in particular. In effect, Taylor argues, our prehuman ancestors turned themselves into marsupials. Infants could then be born 'premature' and helpless, and be allowed to develop their big, brain-

filled heads *ex vivo*: the way was cleared for us to become the species we became. There is little to no direct evidence of these tools, because they would have been made from resources ready-to-hand – leaves, branches, and so on – but they do offer a simple explanation of how we became what we are.

What's important for the argument here, though, is that we can tell a story about humans in which it is central to our nature that we are the product of interference with nature. In short, humans are a technologically-formed species: we could not exist were it not for the sake of this augmentation. Thus to appeal to something like human nature as a reason not to pursue further technological alteration may not be all that promising a strategy. Admittedly, there is arguably a difference between us making alterations to ourselves with particular intentions, and pre-humans blindly doing things that would *per accidens* allow for the evolution of humans. But that would still mean that we'd have to admit that interference with human nature is generally undesirable, even if it's not always blameable; and if we accept that human nature is the product of interference, we'd have to accept that it's undesirable that humans evolved in the first place. I do not consider such a position to require a great deal to be said about it – certainly not in a book that's considering the good life. Equally, we could, I suppose, say 'This far and no further': but such lines in the sand would appear to be arbitrarily drawn – and no one has ever had and difficulty crossing a line when it's only drawn in sand. What remains much more constant than any such line is the thought that the incorporation of technology into our lives and bodies has been a characteristic of humanity for as long as there has been even the possibility of humanity.

Habermas' future

A concern with human nature motivates Jürgen Habermas' excursion into bioethics in *The Future of Human Nature*. Though my project here is mainly concerned with things that we do to ourselves and Habermas' is mainly concerned with things that we might do others – embryos, primarily – it is worth some consideration, if only to clear the way of as many possible anti-enhancement arguments as possible. Habermas is worried about what the possibility of enhancement technologies might do to humanity's 'ethical self-understanding', and the potential that human relationships will be distorted by them. 'Bodies stuffed with prostheses to boost performance', he suggests,

or the intelligence of angels available on hard drives, are fantastic images. They dissolve boundaries and break connections that in our everyday actions have up to now seemed to be of an almost transcendental necessity. There is fusion of the organically grown with the technologically made, on the one hand, and separation of the productivity of the human mind from live subjectivity, on the other hand. Whether these speculations are manifestations of a feverish imagination or serious

predictions, an expression of displaced eschatological needs or a new variety of science-fiction science, I refer to them only as examples of an instrumentalisation of human nature initiating a change in the ethical self-understanding of the species – a self-understanding no longer consistent with the normative self-understanding of persons who live in the mode of self-determination and responsible action.⁹

I'll take the speculations of the first half of this paragraph as being wholly compatible with the use of the biosciences in an endeavour to maximize flourishing. What we know now about ourselves, and what we can do to ourselves individually and as a species, does disrupt intuitions that may have been passed down for centuries. A comfortable belief in human exceptionalism has been on the rack since Darwin and Mendel, disquieting as this may have been (Nietzsche's 'madman' scene in *The Gay Science*¹⁰ is an early articulation of the question about what we are and what we are to be in the absence of a clear, God-given framework). And knowing more about what we are has led to an awareness that what we are and what we must be are not the same. This is something that can be treated precisely as a means to increase our flourishing and the goodness of our lives, and as something thereby that we can happily embrace; and it is something also that (pace the concerns of Michael Sandel, which I address below) we can see as a liberation from the constraints of brute biology – Tuija Takala, for example, embraces the possibility of ectogenesis on the grounds that, with its development, all humans 'could finally be freed from the biologically determined roles that have for long dragged behind the social evolution'¹¹ – and so, on the grounds that a free life is better than an unfree one, a contribution to the good life by less direct means as well.

The sentiment of the second half of this quotation is an abiding theme of Habermas' book – the idea he develops is that a person who discovers herself to have been selected in some way may find it more difficult, if not impossible, to adopt the attitude to the world around her of a free being: the sense that she is a morally free being guided by norms and reasons may be eclipsed by the sense that she is made, rather than grown. For all humans must take an attitude to their own contingency, and all are in a sense constrained by their genome; but whereas this is not a threat to the freedom of the 'natural' human (Habermas takes seriously the idea that '[w]e experience our own freedom with reference to something which, by its very nature, is not at our disposal'¹², and that 'natural fate seems to be essential for our awareness of freedom'¹³), the same apparently cannot be said of the engineered human, who would be 'barred from developing, in the course of a reflectively appropriated and deliberately continued life history, an attitude toward her talents (and handicaps) which implies a revised self-understanding and allows for a *productive* response to the initial situation.'¹⁴ That is, while Hamlet admits that we may at least rough-hew the ends shaped for us by a divinity, Habermas worries that this would not be possible for the engineered human.

Why, though? Habermas' worry is that a child is excluded from the possibility of being an ethically equal player in the process of self-formation to the extent that she is designed. Whatever the contingencies of a natural life, each of us is equal inasmuch as that we are contingent in the same sort of way. When one person helps design another, though, this pattern is distorted:

Up to now, only persons born, not persons made, have participated in social interaction. In the biopolitical future prophesied by liberal eugenicists, this horizontal connection would be superseded by an intergenerational stream of action and communication cutting vertically across the deliberately modified genome of future generations.¹⁵

So while '[a]ll persons, including those born naturally, are in one way or another dependent on their genetic program'¹⁶,

[o]ur concern with programming here is not whether it will restrict another person's ethical freedom and capacity of being himself, but whether, and how, it might eventually preclude a symmetrical relationship between the programmer and the product thus "designed". Eugenic programming establishes a permanent dependence between persons who know that one of them is principally barred from changing *social* places with the other.¹⁷

For this reason, Habermas thinks that engineering ought to be reserved to certain therapeutic cases.

Habermas' worries, if well grounded, might well inform a quest for 'the good life', too: if a person is ethically restricted in this way, then they would presumably be likely to flourish less inasmuch as that humans are creatures with certain moral capacities. But the problem for Habermas is that it's not at all clear that we should take his worries about this as being worries about enhancement technologies; rather, they're probably best served as a warning about the ethics of childrearing in general, and the moral reasons we have not to impose expectations on our offspring. There is no *prima facie* reason to think that an enhanced child would have any more difficulty engaging with her origin than would any other child; she has a decent shot at having less difficulty on this front than would be faced by a naturally formed child with overbearing parents – and being naturally born wouldn't mitigate that overbearingness, any more than being engineered militates against good parenting. His worries, in fact, tend to assume a hyperbolic filial obsequiousness, as though the discovery that one was in any way modified prenatally would dispose one to treat oneself as less morally free, and less ethically equal to others. It's not at all clear why that should be – why a person can't respond to this aspect of their pre-biography as they would to the discovery that they were conceived for any other reason, or no reason at all. Being born with the slow-twitch responses of a middle-distance runner doesn't stop anyone becoming a baker instead, or even training for the sprint.

Even if – *arguendo* – Habermas is right on all this, it's odd that his concerns don't translate to therapeutic manipulation:

A preventively “healed” patient may later, as a person, assume a different attitude toward this type of prenatal intervention than someone who learns that his genetic makeup was programmed without his virtual consent, so to speak, according to the sole preferences of a third person. Only in the latter case does genetic intervention take on the form of an instrumentalization of human nature. In contrast to clinical intervention, the genetic material is, in this case, manipulated from the perspective of a person engaging in instrumental action in order to “collaboratively” induce, in the realm of objects, a state that is desirable according to her own goals. Genetic interventions involving the manipulation of traits constitute positive eugenics if they cross the line defined by the logic of healing, that is, the prevention of evils which one may assume to be subject to general consent.¹⁸

Quite how a pre-person can be treated as being able to give consent for one thing, and not for another, is never quite explained.

There is one area, to be fair, in which a Habermas-inspired suspicion of enhancement might have more power, and that is in relation to so-called ‘moral enhancement’. This is because, in that context, a person's moral attitude to himself and the world around him is precisely what is manipulated according to others' desires. I'll come back to this in Chapter 7.

The argument from dignity

One of the most common strategies deployed against the use of enhancement technologies involves the claim that they are corrosive to, or potentially corrosive to, human dignity. Article 1 of the European Union's Convention on Human Rights and Biomedicine urges that

Parties to this Convention shall protect the dignity and identity of all human beings and guarantee everyone, without discrimination, respect for their integrity and other rights and fundamental freedoms with regard to the application of biology and medicine.

This statement comes in the context of the Preamble's claim that the signatory States are

Convinced of the need to respect the human being both as an individual and as a member of the human species and recognising the importance of ensuring the dignity of the human being;

Conscious that the misuse of biology and medicine may lead to acts endangering human dignity

and that they resolve

to take such measures as are necessary to safeguard human dignity and the fundamental rights and freedoms of the individual with regard to the application of biology and medicine.

It is of some note that the Convention talks both about the ‘dignity of human beings’, and ‘human dignity’. These would appear to be two different things.

The former indicates some characteristic capacity for which is found in all token members of the species, perhaps related to decorum, and the ability to behave in a manner befitting one’s place. The hero unjustly sent to the guillotine might be said to have kept his dignity to the last in this sense – and, in the process, demonstrated just what nobility of character it was that made him a hero in the first place. By contrast, the jilted lover who sells the details of an affair to the tabloids might be said to have behaved in an undignified manner – meaning that we expect something different. In the latter sense, ‘dignity’ indicates a quality of another kind (and, perhaps, a quality that makes individual dignity possible): something captured in the idea that, as Fukuyama puts it, ‘there is something unique about the human race that entitles every member of the species to a higher moral status than the rest of the world’¹⁹. Slavery could provide us with an example of the sort of thing that represents an assault on dignity in this sense, inasmuch as that it denies the presence of that characteristic in the slave, treating him instead as just another thing in the world. (On this basis, we might think that even a slave who is well treated in every empirical respect still has his dignity violated simply by virtue of being owned.)

Dignity in the first sense – the dignity of individuals – would not obviously be affected by bioscientifically-informed manipulations in any way; at the most, they’d just provide another way in which a person could behave in an undignified manner, and so would be qualitatively no different from the webcam, megaphone, or quill pen. Moreover, as Alasdair Cochrane points out, even if certain modes of behaviour are more dignified than others, that still won’t give us any clue about whether they’re mandatory.²⁰ If the biosciences really do make any difference to dignity, it must be in the latter sense. Nor is it hard to see how the worries might take root. If we’re in the business of altering what humans are, and human dignity is closely tied to what humans are, that dignity might seem vulnerable. The manufacture of Deltas in *Brave New World* could, on this basis, be presented as an (admittedly slightly lurid) example of how science might violate of their human dignity:

“Consider the horse.”

They considered it.

Mature at six; the elephant at ten. While at thirteen a man is not yet sexually mature; and is only fully grown at twenty. Hence, of course, that fruit of delayed development, the human intelligence.

“But in Epsilons,” said Mr Foster very justly, “we don’t need human intelligence.”²¹

Treatment like this invites the response that they *do* need human intelligence, because without it they would be less human – and to make a human less human would be to besmirch his status *as* human: to assault his dignity. Fukuyama articulates this worry as follows:

What is it that we want to protect from any future advances in biotechnology? The answer is, we want to protect the full range of our complex, evolved natures against attempts at self-modification. We do not want to disrupt either the unity or the continuity of human nature, and thereby the human rights that are based on it.²²

If we think that humanity has a particularly high moral status related to its dignity, then we might quite easily reach the conclusion that eroding that dignity is a serious wrong.

Yet the problems with this kind of claim are several. The most obvious one is that it seems to require that we have a clear idea of what, precisely, dignity is: it doesn't seem enough to say vaguely that it's simply whatever gives humans their special status; we would seem to need to know what we ought not to be eroding. Still, on the basis of the suggestion in the last chapter, I don't think that this concern needs to detain us all that much; the word 'dignity' does play a role in moral debate, and though its precise definition might be a matter of ongoing disagreement, this is not a warrant for making it an un-word quite yet. (Cochrane, incidentally, does suggest that there is nothing that the word brings to the table that we could not have otherwise, and so there would be at the very worst no loss, and probably some profit, associated with un-wording it.²³ This might be so, but it's a debate for another day.)

But there is a problem that's less easy to dismiss, which is that Fukuyama is articulating an undue pessimism about science and its products. For one thing, it is increasingly hard to sustain the idea that humans *are* radically different sorts of creatures from all the others, and the corresponding idea that humanity is unique and at one remove from the rest of creation. But, still, humans have an internal and intellectual richness that is – as far as we know – unparalleled, and so it's not completely impossible that we have a moral status that is unique; maybe human dignity can be linked to that kind of distinction. What's less clear is how that would be imperilled by the application of the biosciences. After all, the ability to manipulate ourselves even at a cellular level might very easily be thought to be coeval with whatever else makes us special; if the core of human dignity claims is that we are not just brute material, and more than the sum of the ambulant biochemistry that forms us, then it is not entirely clear why that dignity is imperilled by attempts to make ourselves even more than that.

The basic idea is that the acquisition of dignity might be the point at which a species passes through a kind of moral 'glass ceiling'; in manipulating ourselves and bodies in pursuit of the good life, it doesn't follow that we'd be stripping ourselves of any dignity, so much as outstripping ourselves.

One possible problem with this is that it might conceivably lead to a world in which a chasm opens between the biotechnological haves and have-nots; but this looks to be a problem about justice or solidarity, rather than about dignity *per se*. Sort out the justice problem, and the dignity problem will evaporate.

A further potential problem, articulated by Nicholas Agar, is that enhanced ‘post-persons’ may pose a threat to ‘mere persons’ not simply because members of the latter group would no longer be assuredly top of the moral tree, but because post persons may have a higher moral status, and so permissibly treat mere persons as a resource in the way that mere persons today treat sentient non-persons like cows or monkeys as a resource. We should not, Agar thinks, create post-persons, out of a concern for preserving our morally special status.²⁴ This worry I take to be overblown. Even if we think that post-persons would have a higher moral status than persons, and that higher moral status implies more entitlements, it doesn’t follow that post-persons are entitled to see mere persons as expendable (although they might); to have *some* extra entitlements doesn’t mean that there’s nothing to which a creature isn’t entitled. I could still be that, once a creature has passed what Alan Buchanan terms a threshold moral status, it has certain basic claims that are inviolable even by gods.²⁵ (Indeed, there’s no shortage of people who think that, even though we *do* use non-persons for food and research, we have no entitlement to do so; and this is compatible with thinking that the moral status of persons is higher.) This is a point to which Michael Hauskeller and David Wasserman both correctly nod.²⁶

All in all, I do not think that arguments from dignity carry all that much weight. Even if we think that humanity as a species has a status that is properly thought of in terms of dignity, the prospect of biomedical manipulation of ourselves and others is quite plausibly under threat only if we set about the task of creating Huxleyan Gammas, Deltas and Epsilons. Bioscientific intervention may provide us with new and creative ways to act in an undignified manner – but, as such, they are not qualitatively different from the technologies we already have, or consume on a night out. Even if some interventions might strike us as ill-advised, it doesn’t follow that they’re wrong. As Cochrane hints, it’s not obvious that appeals to dignity could *ever* do that.

A slight reprieve?

Having said all this, I think that there is a space for appeals to dignity, as long as they are handled with caution. Appeals to dignity are, as far as I can see, far more often than not unable to sustain a claim that a certain procedure is wrong. However, they might be able to take at least a little more weight if they are cast in terms of self-respect, and put to work on behalf of an appeal to some conception of the good life.

I hinted in the last chapter that a life of pure euphoria would not count as a good life. My claim was that a good life necessarily involves entertaining at least a little discomfort. A perpetual euphoric would have little reason to attend to even his basic bodily functions: he would neither be prompted to eat by a stab of hunger, nor repelled by his own filth, since he would be euphoric either way. Yet such a life would almost certainly be rejected by observers as being desirable; they might be able to accept that there is something attractive about being that happy, and never being made any less happy by anything, but it is possible to accept this idea without relinquishing the idea that, all the same, such a life would be undesirable. And the reason why it would be undesirable would seem to have to boil down to one of self-respect: whatever else I may be, I am too *good* to be unmoved by the thought of squalor. The genius who invented the euphoria pill may assure us that, if we take it, we will be unconcerned by the state of our lives. But while this is correct, a claim about the good life implies a claim about how we, as reasonable agents, would ideally want to live our lives – and this claim is irreducibly a claim about how we *at this moment* would ideally want to live our lives; being told that our concerns will vanish once we take the euphoria pill is therefore to miss the point that it is that euphoria pill that concerns us in the first place. We might well not regret it; but we wouldn't regret that same genius killing us, either, and that's doesn't mean that it's irrational for us to want not to be killed.

What is acceptable as a part of the good life is partly shaped by self-respect; and continued self-respect is also a constituent part of ongoing flourishing. And it makes sense to treat self-respect as being more or less synonymous with dignity. Dignity, that is, will inform what we accept as a good life – for example, we might reject certain things as being *infra dig*, or perhaps contrary to our *amour de soi* – and (*qua* a certain kind of fortitude) will also appear as a part of that good life.

In Chapters 6 and 7, I'll invoke something like a dignity argument to dampen some of the enthusiasm that we might have for certain kinds of cognitive or moral enhancement. In both cases, it is possible that these 'enhancements' could be used not so much to help agents realize their visions of the good life, as to corral them into lives of a certain sort. Many enhancements are held to be desirable because they enable a person to function better in the world as they find it and to be able to meet more effectively the demands that it makes. But this sort of claim tacitly assumes that, when there is a conflict between what the world demands of a person, and what she actually can do, it is the person that ought to change. Sometimes it might be; but it is not at all clear that this will always be the case. For it always to be people that change to meet the demands of, say, a given economic system is for them to be treated as functionaries of that system. This is not obviously compatible with their living a flourishing life; there is a meaningful sense in which this is because it is an undignified life – a life that self-respect resists. Though I shall be criticizing Michael Sandel later in

the chapter, this is an idea he captures well in *The Case against Perfection*: ‘It is tempting’, he writes, ‘to think that bioengineering our children and ourselves for success in a competitive society is an exercise if freedom.’

But changing our nature to fit the world, rather than the other way around, is actually the deepest form of disempowerment. It distracts us from reflecting critically on the world, and deadens the impulse to social and political improvement.²⁷

Of course, some might defend enhancement on the basis that there is little difference between improving the person and improving the world. But, while the two end up meshing better either way, and this is an improvement however you look at it, the defence still misfires. And this is simply because a life that is expected always to adapt to the world is one that is expected to run to stay still – an expectation that is exhausting enough in its own right, but more demanding yet when we remember that the person expected to change would have an investment in a particular kind of life that may have to be abandoned. Offering people the chance to enhance themselves as a means to catch up with the world around them is, when it comes to it, to offer them Hobson’s choice.

The mythologization of the given

Michael Sandel describes his programme in *The Case against Perfection* as ‘opposing genetic enhancement’²⁸. (Though he does primarily talk about *genetic* enhancement, the arguments translate to enhancement generally well enough for my purposes here.) The tenor of the essay indicates that this opposition is not dogmatic, so much as based on a claim that enhancement is incompatible with, and damaging to, something else that Sandel thinks important – something he calls an ‘ethic of giftedness’. His position appears to be that there are good things to be had from enhancement, but that they’re countered by the good that enhancement precludes.

The idea of the gift, giftedness, and the given is one that recurs many times throughout the essay. For Sandel,

[t]o acknowledge the giftedness of life is to recognize that our talents and powers are not wholly our own doing, nor even fully ours, despite the efforts we expend to develop and to exercise them. It is also to recognize that not everything in the world is open to any use that we may desire or devise. An appreciation of the giftedness of life constrains the Promethean project and conduces to a certain humility.²⁹

A little later, he claims that

eugenic parenting is objectionable because it expresses and entrenches a certain stance toward the world – a stance of mastery and dominion that fails to appreciate

the gifted character of human powers and achievements, and misses the part of freedom that consists in a persisting negotiation with the given.³⁰

There is a need for a certain amount of untangling here, since the sense of terms like ‘giftedness’, ‘gifted’ and ‘the given’ is not wholly clear. And the more one thinks about the terms, the more puzzling they become. On a superficial level, Sandel’s claim seems to be that there is a virtue in taking the world as one finds it, and accommodating oneself to it. That there is a *degree* of virtue in such an attitude is not wholly implausible – it might amount to the idea, for example, that it is wise to know what battles are worth fighting – and I’ve already conceded in the last chapter that there might be times when a person could justifiably be persuaded away from a particular vision of the good life. Yet taking the world as one finds it cannot be taken seriously as an attitude worth endorsing. Someone who refuses to use the telephone or the printed press, and explains this by saying that the virtue of taking the world as one finds it militates against communicating with anyone who is not in the same room, would be absurd. Neither does someone who refuses to take painkillers to fend off a migraine because he accepts the world as a given have virtue on his side. He would be a fool, and foolishness is a vice. As Kass notes:

The mere “giftedness” of things cannot tell us which gifts are to be accepted as is, which are to be improved through use or training, which are to be housebroken through self-command or medication, and which opposed like the plague.³¹

So the most that Sandel can mean is that there is something to be said for taking the world as one finds it *to some extent*. And this would be captured in the idea that there is something to be said for ‘negotiation’ with the given. Yet this is puzzling, too: ‘the given’ – presumably, what a phenomenologically-minded thinker would call ‘facticity’ – is a poor negotiating partner, because it won’t negotiate back. Sandel must, then, be speaking metaphorically, and talking again about a decision concerning the extent to which we are prepared to take the world as we find it.

Sandel’s attempt to fill the gaps appears to ride on an appeal to freedom; he does, as we have seen, talk about ‘the part of freedom that consists in a persisting negotiation with the given’. What, though, are we supposed to make of this? In what sense is freedom constituted by ‘a persisting negotiation with the given’? In normal language, my entering into a negotiation with you would only be required when our ambitions clash, and when we have to decide how much of those ambitions we are respectively going to have to relinquish. To this extent, negotiation is a matter of setting boundaries. Negotiation might mean my being prepared to relinquish some dimension of my freedom for the sake of preserving yours, and *vice versa*, when the two come into conflict. (e.g., negotiation might mean my having to relinquish some of my freedom to play loud music, and – less plausibly – you relinquishing some of your freedom

never to overhear it at all.) Yet while one must be free in order to be able to enter into a negotiation, quite how freedom *consists in* negotiation, remains a mystery – even if we think that it's possible to negotiate with the given. What kind of freedom is this?

(Since I've already made a reference to facticity, we might be tempted to draw a parallel with Heidegger's notion of freedom in the essay 'On the Essence of Truth' as 'letting beings be'³² – but Heidegger is even less clear than Sandel; and, anyway: being able to draw a parallel between two things isn't enough to clarify either.³³ Assessing the truth of either's claim is no small task.)

The appeal to freedom is unilluminating. Even if we think that freedom would be restricted in a world where biotechnological interventions such as enhancement were expected, this isn't what Sandel says. Is there any better way to unpack the 'ethic of giftedness' than by appealing to freedom?

There might be, but a better question concerns whether there is actually much need to – and there might very well not be. It is not completely *outré* to think that there is a virtue in finding satisfaction with the world as one finds it, even if this doesn't quite amount to Nietzschean *amor fati*. Although I suggested a little while ago that it can be pushed to absurd lengths, we call an ability to endure difficulty fortitude, and frequently treat that characteristic as admirable and worth cultivating; and, this being the case, the idea that there might be something admirable about being satisfied with what one has ought to follow as a matter of course. This is certainly the case in respect of those situations in which nothing can be done, since a refusal to accept certain aspects of the world can prevent us making the best of the life that we have (or could ever plausibly expect to have), and might even lead to making the worst of it. (To take an example to which I'll return in Chapter 4, it might be possible to spend so much time worrying about the badness of dying that it seeps into everything a person does. Trying to avoid death might turn out to be inimical to leading a good life if it means having something *ex hypothesi* undesirable constantly playing on the back of your mind. To the same extent, accepting mortality – within the bounds of reasonably prudent behaviour – may free a person to get on with the serious business of making the most of whatever time she has left.)

So we can accept that there's a wisdom, and a virtue, in knowing which battles aren't worth fighting. Still, it doesn't follow from that that there's anything suspicious about taking what means *are* available, or even extending the scope of available means, to make it otherwise. And it's not stretching the concept of freedom too far to suggest that taking those means is a liberating project. Yet this kind of liberation seems to be quite far removed from Sandel's idea of the freedom he thinks preserved in a 'negotiation with the given'. An 'ethic of giftedness', understood in this sense, does not need much in the way of unpacking: it just means that it is both wise and admirable to keep a sense of perspective about one's life and possibilities.

Importantly, though, what it does *not* amount to is a dogma of giftedness – one can accept the world as a given without having to accept its immutability; it makes sense to imagine someone conducting a kind of audit of the world and his life, and saying to himself, ‘Well, this is how things are; what now?’ There is no reason to think that there is an *a priori* upper limit to the amount of modification and enhancement that one may undergo; it means at most that there is something rather foolish about pursuing them without much in the way of thought and consideration. This is a rather trivial statement, though; and it is almost completely non-directive.

It is also not at all clear why an attitude of mastery and domination over the world is all that problematic. It’s possible that what Sandel has in mind here is an echo of Heideggerian worries about ‘enframing’ the world and humanity – see, for example, his essay ‘The Question Concerning Technology’³⁴ – but Heidegger’s position requires a great deal of preliminary work that Sandel does not appeal to countenance, and is, in any case, not obviously correct and not obviously a moral claim anyway.³⁵ If we do want to moralize an *attitude* of domination, we have to be able to say either that (a) the thing the domination of which is being willed is thereby wronged or (b) that there is a danger that a domineering attitude in this case, though not inappropriate, will lead to our taking a similar attitude in another case where it *would* be inappropriate: this is, in effect, a slippery slope argument.

There is no reason to believe that ‘nature’ or the given is wronged by our attempts to fit it to our wills – or how it even could be; so all that remains is the slippery slope argument. Yet slippery slope arguments are notoriously slippery in their own right, and Govert den Hartogh has provided an ample demonstration of why this is so.³⁶ Their power relies in no small part on the supposition that, in allowing the move from permissible action *A* to permissible action *B*, we will have made it less easy to hold back from impermissible action *N* – which means, in effect, that we will forget how to make moral judgements. Since there is no reason to suppose that we will lose any such power, the gradient and the slipperiness of the slope remain unclear.

The ‘ethic of giftedness’ is, in the end, a very puzzling thing; it almost certainly won’t tell us that we ought to eschew enhancement for ourselves or others. Stephen Wilkinson suggests a response that is pithy and directed. Taking aim at the idea that it’s wrong for parents to try to select characteristics in their future children because those children are and should be treated as a gift, he points out that

I might receive a hideous gift, or one with exceedingly high running costs. It seems certain that there will be *some* cases where it is permissible to not to react with feelings of gratitude. Hence the child-gift analogy fails to support the claim that parents are required to feel appreciative of their children no matter what they are like.³⁷

The point translates easily enough. Being gifted is one thing: being required to put up with that gift is quite another. Indeed, while we might have qualms about appropriating a gift for a purpose different from that of the donor out of a sense of deference for her feelings, we don't even have to worry about this when the 'donor' is blind, dumb, indifferent nature.

Is enhancement permissible?

As I admitted at the start of the chapter, it's impossible to say that there could not in principle be an argument showing that enhancement is impermissible simply on the basis that one has rebutted or rejected a number of extant arguments. However, I'm equally happy to insist that, while absence of evidence is not evidence of absence, the onus is on the opponent of enhancement to show that there is something inescapably objectionable about the whole enterprise; *sans* such a demonstration, it is perfectly legitimate to work on the assumption that there is no such argument. And on that basis, I shall now leave bioconservative arguments for enhancement's impermissibility to one side, and turn my attention to its antithesis: the idea that enhancement is obligatory. As we'll see, it doesn't fare much better.

Notes

- 1 Harris, 2007, *passim*.
- 2 Appeals to dignity will get a look in during Chapter 7, but the context will be different, and even there, I don't pretend that they'll apply to *all* enhancement.
- 3 Kass, 1997, p. 687.
- 4 see de Grey 2004 and 2005, *passim*.
- 5 Kass, 1997, p. 687.
- 6 For more on this theme, see Brassington, 2013, *passim*.
- 7 Mill, 1874, p. 15.
- 8 Ibid., p. 19.
- 9 Habermas, 2008, p. 42.
- 10 Nietzsche, 1974, § 125.
- 11 Takala, 2009, p. 194.
- 12 Habermas, 2008, p. 58.
- 13 Ibid., p. 60; slightly modified.
- 14 Ibid., p. 62.
- 15 Ibid., p. 65; cf. p. 42.
- 16 Ibid., p. 64.
- 17 Ibid., p. 65.
- 18 Ibid., p. 52.

- 19 Fukuyama, 2002, p. 160.
- 20 Cochrane, 2010, p. 235.
- 21 Huxley, 1977, p. 30.
- 22 Fukuyama, 2002, p. 172.
- 23 Cochrane, 2010, p. 241.
- 24 Agar, 2013, *passim*.
- 25 Buchanan, 2009, p. 367.
- 26 Hauskeller, 2013, p. 76; Wasserman, 2013, p. 79.
- 27 Sandel, 2007, p. 97.
- 28 Ibid., p. 101.
- 29 Ibid., p. 27.
- 30 Ibid., p. 83.
- 31 Kass, 2003, p. 19.
- 32 repr. in Heidegger, 1999.
- 33 Thiele (1994, p. 284), for example, tries to elaborate Heidegger's point by describing freedom as allowing humans 'to glance beyond . . . being and its mastery in thought, word, or deed'; but why this counts as *freedom* is no more clear.
- 34 repr. in Ibid.
- 35 See Brassington, 2007, *passim*, for more on the ethical aspects of Heidegger and technology as 'enframing'; see also Hodge, 1995, *passim*'
- 36 den Hartogh, 2001, pp. 283–4.
- 37 Wilkinson, 2010, p. 40, slightly modified.