The Social Paradigm

A social approach

Previous chapters have discussed two common paradigms within the human enhancement discourse, the biomedical and the transhumanist. This chapter introduces a third paradigm, one that has been motivated by the acknowledgement that any comprehensive debate on human enhancement should begin by recognising the rich and complex relations that shape who we are as well as the social factors that currently contribute to our understanding of what it means to be healthy, the goals of medicine and what it means to be human. This paradigm also recognises that the scope of human enhancement goes beyond the relationship of humans with medicine and its purposes, and beyond the relationship of humans with technology.

Something new on the horizon?

There are already different views of and approaches to human enhancement, thus it can be questioned whether or not there is anything original or novel about a social perspective on the subject. However, it is precisely this combination of a social perspective and enhancement that has not been fully explored or discussed. The different human enhancement approaches suggested so far have started from the premise of the individual as an abstract and isolated agent (the liberal view) without proper recognition of the real nature of individuals, namely that they are relational and dependent on others’ beings (the relational view). These human enhancement approaches have also been dominated by high-technological individualistic interventions focused on changing an individual’s bodily and mental features, and mostly focused on the interests, desires and values of a small group of privileged individuals (mostly Western white men with certain economic advantages).
Considering all this, the suggested third paradigm brings new aspects that have been undermined in other human enhancement paradigms. The approach suggested by this paradigm is new insofar as it offers a view on human enhancement in which the relationships shaping who we are as well as our individual lives are not only the starting point for reaching human enhancement, but determine the conditions needed to reach it. By highlighting a broader and different set of interests, desires and values, this paradigm might be doing some remedial work—adding those who have been left out of the enhancement discourse—but more importantly it urges us to rethink the assumptions upon which the current human enhancement discourse is based. Furthermore it urges us to consider the possibility that far from being a source of enhancement, the principles, values and criteria promoted by the biomedical and transhumanist paradigms of human enhancement actually reinforce patterns of domination and subordination that lessen human well-being. This paradigm offers us an opportunity to move forward and bring insight to the human enhancement debate, as it seeks to respond to the lack of attention regarding the relational nature of individuals under the current dominant human enhancement paradigms. A relational view of individuals could help us to balance individualistic preferences with social needs. Thus, social enhancement brings to the fore a more inclusive, equitable, sustainable way in which human enhancement can be understood and pursued.

Having a particular paradigm focused on the social is not without purpose. Paradigms can be understood as powerful tools that can change the way we understand the world and the problems we encounter in it, tools that structure and shape our actions (Clark, 1998; Kuhn, 2012; Wittgenstein, 1953). The result of living in a society in which enhancement is always associated with the posthuman as the result of radical technological interventions, with injustice, with individuals having super powers, compared to one where human enhancement promotes social transcendence rather than individualistic transcendence, and focuses more on our relatedness to others and the world rather than on us becoming more like machines, will be substantively distinctive. Different discourses can serve not only as an instrument for achieving different goals (such as social enhancement), but as Wittgenstein expressed it (1953), to have a framework to counterbalance those discourses that are already out there. Moreover, words have meaning because they create a ‘common vantage point from which we survey the world together’ (Taylor, 1985, p. 259). Thus social enhancement can be seen as a novel way in which to explore and reconceptualise