

# Prototypes or Pragmatics? The Open Question of Public Attitudes Toward Enhancement

Roland Nadler, University of British Columbia

Peter B. Reiner, University of British Columbia

Banja (2011) nimbly analyzes how a particular strain of conceptual myopia corrodes the rigor of “moral conservative” arguments in bioethics, particularly on the topic of human enhancement. We find his prototypist angle meritorious, but demur on a key conclusion: that virtue essentialism’s “prospects for remaining popular, especially among non-bioethicists and the electorate, are exceedingly good.” Our primary concern is that this prediction, despite enjoying a priori appeal, lacks empirical support. Gathering data on ordinary citizens’ moral intuitions about enhancement not only will prove worthwhile for its predictive value, but also will lend a helpful measure of nuance to debates on an important normative question: how public opinion should factor into policy decisions on biopolitical issues.

We heartily agree with the central philosophical thrust of the article, as the picture of category-mediated reasoning emerging from prototype theory poses a vexing and potentially insurmountable challenge to arguments from naturalness, dignity, giftedness, et cetera, all aimed at establishing prohibitions on the use of cognition-enhancing pharmaceuticals. Moreover, we do not dispute the premises that Banja recruits in support of his forecast regarding the popularity of such arguments. He elaborates that to *the folk*, virtue essentialist arguments, being “dogmatic, certain, and absolute,” sound “just the way moral argument is supposed to sound.” One could suggest that preliminary support for Banja’s thesis can be found in examples such the comment thread on the CBS News website in reaction to its *60 Minutes* segment on the illicit use of prescription stimulant medications by university students (CBS News 2010). Even a cursory review of the comments reveals explosions of moral outrage.

However, there is a danger in relying too heavily on public comments such as those just cited, for they draw not on public opinion writ large but rather on the sentiments of a particular public—those sufficiently motivated by the television program to vent their frustration. What is not known is whether the general public shares those sentiments (Nadler and Reiner 2010). It may in fact be the case that the anxieties of the general public over cognitive enhancement rest for the most part not on *philosophical* op-

position but on *pragmatic* concerns.<sup>1</sup> Preliminary data from our own investigations into public attitudes toward cognitive enhancement suggest that the prevalence of virtue-essentialist sentiments amongst *the folk* may prove illusory (Nadler and Reiner, unpublished observations), and that the intended force of the rhetorical flourishes employed by their proponents may be lost on denizens of the real world: When we queried members of the general public as to how compelling they found a variety of objections to cognitive enhancement, arguments from distributive justice and safety enjoyed a noticeable edge over the worry that “the success that people achieve after taking cognitive enhancers might not be genuine.”

To preempt one potential misinterpretation, we do not infer from our preliminary data that *the folk* engage in rational, Bayesian-style belief updating when considering the enhancement debate. Indeed, a great deal of research undertaken in political psychology has established that people generally do not act like perfect Bayesians when presented with new factual information about a political issue—indeed, far from it (Jacks and Cameron 2003; Bullock 2009; Prasad et al. 2009). Our claim is simply that the *desiderata* among which a given layperson’s (less than perfectly) rational faculties will navigate when reasoning about this particular issue are comprised more of comparatively concrete interests—safety, accessibility, fairness—and less of the grand metaphysical–religious precepts that Kass and his ilk would have us enshrine.

These arguments, and the data that drive them, have important implications for thinking about more than just the impact of virtue-essentialist rhetoric upon the enhancement debate. Discerning whether people, by and large, tend to approach this issue as cool-headed technocrats or principle-driven moralists will prove crucial in resolving an important public policy question: How should the regulatory and legislative bodies of a democratic society respond to the populace’s expressions of unease about emerging biotechnologies? It seems to us that if *the folk* hold with Kass and colleagues, the prospects for enhancement technology will be dimmer than would be the case if pragmatism prevails. The

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Address correspondence to Peter B. Reiner, National Core for Neuroethics, University of British Columbia, Vancouver, BC V6T 2B5, Canada. E-mail: peter.reiner@ubc.ca

1. We entertain no illusions to the effect that these sources of unease form a neat dichotomy; surely people’s reasoning will fall along a spectrum between these poles.

reason relates to the nature of each type of objection: Practical concerns about cognitive enhancements can always be mollified by improving the implementation of the technology, whereas to the in-principle opponent, no enhancement will ever be sufficiently safe, effective, or inexpensive. To whatever extent a democratic government should not railroad policy over the entrenched moral opposition of its *demos* (though we take very seriously the limited extent of that principle lest it facilitate the suppression of, e.g., crucial but widely unpopular civil rights), widespread resistance to enhancement on philosophical grounds would spell trouble for proponents of cognitive enhancement in a way that widespread pragmatic unease would not.

Even if one holds that flat-footed neo-Luddism makes for a less defensible objection to pharmacological enhancement than apprehensions about, e.g., adverse side effects, the latter are undeniably easier to address than the former is to dislodge; virtue essentialism probably is cognitively “sticky” (to the unknown extent that it is held at all), despite being an untenable wreck under the microscope of reasoned analysis. Perhaps, in the ideal world of decisive philosophical argumentation, the fact of its stickiness should not matter, considering the strong theoretical case against its underpinnings advanced by Banja and others (e.g., Bostrom 2005; Macklin 2006)—but in the all-too-real world of messy political entanglements, it *does* make a powerful difference. We would be well served, then, to know which of these positions will come to enjoy the favor of the plebs. As commentators on biopolitics have ably demonstrated (Haidt and Graham 2007; Hughes 2009), attempting to simply deduce the answer to such a question from existing, traditional partisan political stances will not work. Our approach must be empirical. ■

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# Enhancement: A Pragmatic View

Timothy Dolan, Catholic University of Korea

Little can be disputed regarding the potency of sentiment identified by Banja (2011) as “virtue essentialism” as one point of departure for ideological conservative opposition to enhancement technologies, but it can be elaborated upon a bit and other arguments can be applied.

First, one should include Francis Fukuyama (2002), who saw genetic engineering as altering human nature itself and thus to be approached as more threat than promise, as an influential moral conservative.

Another fairly important dimension is the literary and cinemagraphic referents that subtly shape public percep-

tions and can be compellingly invoked in public debate. Lasswell ([1947] 1999) famously observed that politics is the manipulation of symbols. Language itself is symbolic, and literary referents in general and cinemagraphic referents in particular hold potent influence in popular debate. The broader science fiction genre (the only moral literature left) and its cautionary tales ranging from the classics of Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (2007 reprint), H. G. Wells’ *Island of Dr. Moreau* ([1896] 2008), and Huxley’s *Brave New World* (1998 reprint), to the more contemporary cinemagraphic treatments of *Bladerunner*, and *Gattaca*, consistently point toward

Address correspondence to Timothy Dolan, The Catholic University of Korea, Public Administration, 43-1 Yeogok 2-dong, Wonmi Gu, Bucheon, 420-743 Korea. E-mail: timothydolanenterprises@gmail.com