A review of Allen Buchanan’s *Beyond Humanity*

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*Beyond Humanity? The ethics of biomedical enhancement*  
A. Buchanan, 2011  
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Allen Buchanan is an accomplished political philosopher and the lead author, with Dan W. Brock, Norman Daniels, and Daniel Wikler, of *From Chance to Choice* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2000), which, to date, remains the single most important and comprehensive investigation of the ethical issues raised by the use of genetic technologies to select or modify our children. The publication of his book, *Beyond humanity?*, on the topic of human enhancement more generally, is therefore to be welcomed by all those interested in what has become one of the most vigorous debates in applied ethics. The book is rich in ideas, philosophical informed, and clearly argued; it is undoubtedly destined to become an essential point of reference in future debates about the use of technology to improve human capacities.

The book sets out to answer the question ‘is it ethically permissible for a reasonably liberal and democratic society to embark on the enhancement enterprise?’ (p.16, italics in original). According to Buchanan,

> A society embarks on the enhancement enterprise if, through its regular political processes, it (1) allows considerable freedom to individuals and organisations to develop and choose to use enhancement technologies, including biomedical enhancement technologies, and also (2) devotes significant public resources (a) to research that can be expected to result in enhancement technologies, (b) to creating a vigorous and informed public debate about the benefits and risks of such technologies, and (c) to developing effective and morally sensitive policies and institutions for coping with the challenges of enhancement (p.16).

Buchanan believes that this is the appropriate question to ask on two grounds.

First, Buchanan thinks it is a mistake to understand the enhancement debate in terms of being ‘pro’ or ‘anti’ enhancement because he denies that any of the leading figures in this debate may justly be characterised as ‘pro-enhancement’ (p.13). This suggestion will surprise those who are familiar with the work of Julian Savulescu, who writes articles such as “New breeds of humans: the moral obligation to enhance” (*Reproductive Biomedicine Online* 10 (Supp.1): 36-39, 2005), John Harris, author of *Enhancing Evolution: The Ethical Case for Making Better People* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007), or Nick Bostrom, who once penned a chapter entitled “Why I Want to be a Posthuman When I Grow Up” (In: Bert Gordijn and Ruth Chadwick (eds), *Medical Enhancement and Posthumanity* [Springer, 2008], pp.107-137). However, Buchanan’s point is that none of these authors support enhancement without reservation. The ‘enhancement enterprise’ allows that we might reject or regulate some particular enhancements. Thus, rather than being ‘pro-enhancement’, Buchanan holds that we need merely be ‘anti anti-enhancement’ (p.14) in order to embrace the enhancement enterprise. He therefore directs his criticism towards ‘those who appear to reject enhancement as such, rather than merely rejecting some enhancements in some circumstances, when undertaken for certain reasons or as the expression of certain values’ (p.2, italics in original). I imagine readers may disagree as to the extent to which this is an accurate characterisation of the position of Kass, Sandel, and Habermas, who are the primary targets of his critique.

Second, his argument is framed by a profound pessimism about the ability of philosophical debate to shape social outcomes and about governments’ capacity to regulate technology. Thus, he insists:
The question of whether a society like ours may or should (provisionally) pursue the enhancement enterprise is the right question to ask, given that we will have enhancements no matter what any ethicist says and regardless of what political decisions are taken on enhancement (p.20).

Buchanan’s case against the anti-enhancement position in Beyond Humanity? is aided by a certain flexibility about what, precisely, counts as “enhancement”. At various points, Buchanan construes enhancement so widely as to include ‘numercy, literacy, and computers’ (p.26), ‘agriculture’, and ‘science’. Elsewhere, however, the technologies under discussion are more outré, and include (p.56): ‘enhancement of existing capacities for impulse control, sympathy, altruism, or moral imagination, through pharmaceutical or genetic interventions’; ‘the development of the ability to extract nutrients from items that humans have never consumed before’; and, ‘enhancements to help us adapt physiologically to climate change’. Indeed, it is hard not to worry that there is a form of philosophical “bait-and-switch” going on here – “You want agriculture and literacy? Then you had better get ready to eat grass!”. Of course, this intuition presumes that it is plausible to make a relevant distinction between these familiar technologies and the more racy enhancements that quickly move to the foreground when advocates of the enhancement project want to represent it as something more dramatic than the right to read books or to breed better turnips. Buchanan argues powerfully that critics of enhancement have, thus far, failed to do so.

I have taken the time to set out how Buchanan refigures the enhancement debate because I suspect that, ultimately, how readers will respond to Buchanan’s arguments will depend upon whether they see the intellectual landscape as Buchanan does. Yet the philosophical meat of his discussion is found elsewhere in the book, which is filled with more arguments than I have space to discuss here. Highlights include: a sophisticated exploration of the implication of an evolutionary perspective for debates about enhancement; an extended argument that we would do better to abandon concerns about human nature in favour of independent normative grounds for evaluating the consequences of enhancement; and a discussion of the possibility that enhancement will lead to the development of “post-humans” who may possess (or claim) superior moral status to unenhanced human beings. Particularly welcome is a treatment of conservatism and enhancement: Buchanan argues that conservatives should actually be in favour of enhancement because the radical alteration of human nature would allow us to remove the limits on human social reform currently due to our various weaknesses and character defects. In the final chapter, Buchanan addresses the questions of institutional design he thinks are necessary to ensure that biomedical enhancements are not available solely to the wealthy. He advocates the creation of a ‘Global Institute for Justice in Innovation’ (p. 255), with the power to authorise compulsory licensing of biomedical enhancements to entities within member nations, in order to create competitive markets that would encourage the diffusion of these technologies.

In the course of these discussions, Buchanan acknowledges various ethical concerns about enhancement but none that, he believes, would justify giving up on the “enhancement enterprise”. Given the heavily qualified nature of this project and Buchanan’s conviction that — because (he holds) prohibition of enhancements is effectively impossible — the only alternative to the enhancement enterprise is the unregulated uptake of enhancements through the ‘backdoor’ (p.60), this conclusion is arguably over-determined. Moreover, Buchanan’s pessimism about the efficacy of philosophical argument in generating good public policy suggests a partial defence of the ‘grand sounding… catchphrases and slogans’ (p.3) of the authors he criticises. We may be more likely to achieve the ‘effective and morally sensitive policies and institutions for coping with the challenges of enhancement’, which Buchanan believes are necessary, if at least some of those concerned about these challenges continue to argue against “enhancement” rather than join wholeheartedly in the “enhancement enterprise”. Despite the powerful response to recent critics of enhancement set out in Beyond Humanity, then, there is cause to hope that the “enhancement debate” will continue.

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