

Chapter 77

The Relevance of Value Theory for the Ethical Discussion of Human Enhancement

Tobias Hainz

Hannover Medical School, Germany

ABSTRACT

The aim of this chapter is to provide a practical introduction to the central issues of value theory in order to demonstrate their relevance for the ethical discussion of human enhancement technologies. Among the value-theoretical issues discussed are value lexicality, the monism-pluralism dichotomy, and incommensurability. A particular enhancement technology analyzed from a value-theoretical perspective is radical life extension, the direct and intentional extension of the maximum human life span. Several examples are given to show how value-theoretical concepts are implicitly reflected in arguments for and against human enhancement. At the end of the chapter, it should be clear that value theory can and should make stronger contributions to the ethical discussion of human enhancement and that, in this discussion, an increased awareness of value-theoretical issues is desirable.

INTRODUCTION

Value theory or, as it could also be called, axiology is a hybrid part of philosophy that has a considerable formal foundation but is also relevant for philosophy's practical subdisciplines, such as political philosophy, normative ethics, or, even more practical, applied ethics. The formal foundation of value theory becomes evident as soon as one recognizes the existence of issues like locating different values on a value scale, comparing different value scales to each other, and theoretically distinguishing between different kinds of value.

When dealing with the formal foundation of value theory, logical and semantical problems are much more in the foreground than the practical applicability of value theory. However, as soon as one takes the importance of these theoretical or formal issues for granted and focuses on the more material aspects of value theory, its relevance for practical philosophy cannot be ignored. Applied ethics in particular constantly deals with issues like autonomy, naturalness, freedom, or justice, all of which can be regarded as values. Value theory, therefore, is located between theoretical and practical philosophy inasmuch as it is theo-

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retically well-informed but cannot be separated from the practical areas of philosophy, such as applied ethics.

One particular topic in applied ethics is human enhancement, that is, the improvement of human capacities, broadly construed, through non-therapeutical interventions. The ethical discussion is very diverse but can be summarized as a discussion of the moral status of human enhancement: Is it ethically permissible or not? Are there any reasons why the application of enhancement technologies by free and rational people to themselves should be prohibited? Could parents even be morally obliged to use preimplantation genetic diagnosis or genetic engineering and, thereby, enhance their offspring? Arguments for and against human enhancement refer to autonomy, well-being, distributive justice, individual rights of future people, the naturalness of the human body, and further aspects that have to be taken into account. It should, therefore, be evident that value-theoretical issues are implicitly present in the ethical discussion of human enhancement. Yet, these issues are rarely made explicit, which is why an increased awareness of the interconnections between genuine value theory and the ethical discussion of human enhancement appears to be a *desideratum*.

This article attempts to point out at least some of these interconnections by introducing the most central issues within value theory and relating them to the ethical discussion of human enhancement in order to show *how* applied ethics can make use of value theory and *why* it should indeed favor a more explicit inclusion of value-theoretical considerations when analyzing a topic like human enhancement. Since a thorough discussion of the interconnections between value theory and the ethical discussion of human enhancement is beyond the scope of this article, it was inevitable to choose a particular value-theoretical issue as a prime example while mentioning other issues in a more superficial way. The example that will be discussed in detail will be the lexical ordering of values or, in short, value lexicality. Other

aspects of value theory and their relevance for the ethical discussion of human enhancement that will be discussed more superficially will be the dichotomy between value monism and value pluralism as well as incommensurability.

VALUE THEORY AND HUMAN ENHANCEMENT: AN OVERVIEW

Since this article will not deal with controversies within value theory but with its possible application to the ethical analysis of human enhancement, it seems advisable to provide a mostly general perspective on those value-theoretical issues that are of importance for the aim of this article without actually arguing for or against a specific position on a controversial issue. This background section will, therefore, neglect controversial debates within value theory that would deserve a separate analysis. Instead, it will provide a general overview of value theory in order to enhance the understanding of the relevant issues and their location within the value-theoretical landscape. This overview of central topics in value theory will necessarily be selective and non-exhaustive. Its purpose is to give the reader an impression of which issues value theory is concerned with and to introduce the topics that will later be revisited when the applicability of value theory to the ethical discussion of human enhancement will be demonstrated. Furthermore, a similar overview of human enhancement will be included in this section. The purpose of this overview will be to clarify how to conceive of human enhancement.

The first part of this section will feature an introduction to the most basic aspects of value theory that will later be connected to the ethical analysis of human enhancement. In the second part, value lexicality will be discussed in greater detail since it shall serve as the prime example of the practical relevance of value theory. The third and final part will feature a brief introduction to the concept of human enhancement.

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