

***Truly Human Enhancement:  
A Philosophical Defense of Limits***  
by Nicholas Agar

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Nicholas Agar's latest book—a follow-up to his previous book, *Humanity's End: Why We Should Reject Radical Enhancement* (MIT Press, 2010)—provides an argument for “moderate” forms of human enhancement through biological, technological, and social mechanisms. In so doing, he navigates toward a virtuous mean between the Scylla of “radical” enhancement, as promoted by transhumanists, and the Charybdis of total abnegation of any form of human enhancement, as argued for by various bio-conservatives and neo-naturalists.

Agar's basic claim is that “human enhancement is a good thing, but one that it's possible to have too much of” (1). His central argument for this claim is that forms of radical enhancement, aimed at improving “significant attributes and abilities to levels that *greatly exceed* what is currently possible for human beings” (2, original emphasis), would lead to the creation of “post-humans” who, while perhaps enjoying an objectively better mode of existence than unenhanced human beings, would differ from us to such an extent that we would not be able to evaluate their condition as an improvement on *our own* condition. In other words, radically enhanced post-humans would not be better versions of *us*, but potentially better beings of a categorically different order. Thus, we should not desire radical enhancement *for ourselves* insofar as the end-product would likely not be a being with whose interests and desires we could self-identify.

In criticizing various forms of radical enhancement, Agar argues both from a *moral* basis—with a focus on “significant, unjustified costs on others”—and from a foundation

of *prudential rationality* focused on our own self-interest in not undergoing the “transformative change” such enhancement would effect (3). Agar's concern is that the positive value of any such transformative change would be recognized only by the *transformed* individual, not the same individual prior to their transformation: that is, the unenhanced person would not value the benefits of the transformation as *their own* insofar as they are *human*. Prescinding from Agar's fictional examples of such transformative change—assimilation by cyborgs or alien body-snatching (5–14)—consider an individual suffering from Stockholm syndrome, who comes to view their captor's good as part of their own. When they are liberated and their captor is killed in the process, they are saddened by their captor's death, but only insofar as their values have been radically transformed as an effect of their imprisonment; in contrast, from the perspective of their pre-captured self, their liberation and the death of their captor is a positive outcome. In sum, Agar argues that the positive value of a transformative change ought to be recognized by an individual *prior to* their transformation, not only afterward.

After establishing this fundamental premise, Agar proceeds through the remainder of the book to show “that radical enhancement really does bring with it a new evaluative framework” with respect to our aesthetic and moral values, and “that radical enhancement is a negative transformative change” (15–16).

In chapter 2, Agar grounds his argument in an “anthropocentric ideal” of human enhancement, in which the positive value of whatever attributes are enhanced is recognized as

something good *for us* prior to the enhancement. This metric is opposed to an “objective ideal,” in which the positive value of any enhanced attribute is measured *as such* regardless of whether a human subject would view it positively prior to being enhanced. Consider, for example, a radical enhancement of our cognitive or emotive capacities. While one could easily argue for the objective value of a more expansive, creative, and faster cognitive capacity, or more stable and less exaggerated emotional tendencies, the question at hand is whether we would value such alterations of ourselves prior to actually being enhanced. In making his case for the anthropocentric ideal, Agar imports Alasdair MacIntyre’s concept of “internal goods” with respect to human nature and contends that prudentially valuable enhancements should promote such goods for us *qua* human beings (28–29). In importing MacIntyre’s concept, however, Agar is not presuming any *teleological* understanding of human nature that grounds the value of such internal goods; rather, the value of such goods is *subjectively* assessed, whether individually or collectively, by unenhanced humans to determine whether a particular enhancement of certain capacities would promote the attainment or increased experience of such goods.

Agar supports his case for the anthropocentric ideal in chapter 3 by discussing “simulation theory,” through which we learn that one must be able to “veridically engage” with an observed performer in order to relate to their portrayed experience. It is difficult, for example, for a human observer to identify with the plight of a nonhuman animal without either identifying with certain aspects of the animal’s perspective—for example, its capacity to feel pleasure or pain—or fallaciously anthropomorphizing it. It is thus, for example, much easier to be concerned with the quality of life experienced by captive primates—our close evolutionary cousins—than with captured sea mammals until a documentary like *Blackfish* (2013) gets viewers to make the requisite subjective identification. Agar’s concern is that, just as we may objectively evaluate a nonhuman animal’s quality of life, but not subjectively share the same values, we may not be able to subjectively value an

enhanced post-human being’s quality of life as one’s own—even if the post-human being in question is *oneself* radically transformed.

Agar thus concludes in chapter 4 that, by virtue of adopting an “evaluative approach to identity” (57), radical enhancement “is likely to end the existence of its human subjects” (56). Consider the “shift in evaluative frameworks” (64) that accompanies radical cognitive *decline*, as in the case of Margo—a woman with Alzheimer’s disease who is undeniably happy—discussed by bioethicists such as Ronald Dworkin and Rebecca Dresser. Setting aside the question of strict numerical identity, it is evident that Margo, prior to the onset of dementia, would not appreciate the positive value of her daily existence once she suffers from severe dementia, regardless of how one may objectively assess her current experiences as positive: they are not positive *for her* as she is prior to her cognitive decline. Similarly, Agar contends that radical cognitive enhancement could lead to an individual—presume numerical sameness—having objectively positive experiences with which her pre-enhanced self cannot veridically engage and thereby not *own* as positive experiences *for herself*. In chapter 5, Agar applies his anthropocentric perspective to how radical cognitive enhancement may lead to a “revealed wisdom” about the universe, but one focused on the meaning of the place of enhanced individuals within it who discover such wisdom, as opposed to meaning for ourselves *qua* human beings (82–84).

In chapter 6, Agar raises his moral objection to radical enhancement—specifically aimed at *life extension*—based on concerns regarding the nature of the experiments necessary to achieve such extension and the likely exploitation of the poor (129–130). He argues that it will be difficult to secure volunteers for such research insofar as the psychological phenomenon of “loss aversion,” while motivating some to participate in experimental research in order to avoid loss of years composing a normal human life span, would work in the opposite direction when it comes to experimental research, with attendant risks, that seeks to extend the human life span (124–126). Thus, “volunteer risk pioneers”

are unlikely to sign up for life-extending experimentation (134–135) and, as a result, likely potential subjects would be culled from among the desperate. While a legitimate concern with respect to human subjects research in general, Agar's moral objection could be characterized as mere alarmist conjecture in this instance, since ethical safeguards could be put in place to protect vulnerable populations from potential exploitation. Furthermore, it is arguable that it would be unjust to exclude members of vulnerable populations from participating in potentially beneficial life-extending trials altogether, presuming that all the anticipated risks are fully explained and they provide voluntary consent.

Chapter 7 consists of Agar's positive argument in favor of moderate enhancement. In general, Agar foresees the possibility, already being realized in some cases, of objectively positive enhancement of internal goods that enhanced human beings could subjectively appreciate *qua* human beings. Agar sees his proposal for allowing moderate forms of enhancement to differ from the historical eugenics movement insofar as the latter "imposed a monolithic view about human flourishing," while Agar's postmodern proposal "would acknowledge a plurality of views about the good life" (142–144). I would counter, however, that an objective account of human flourishing, in an Aristotelian-Thomistic vein, could be a useful guide in drawing a distinction between permissible and impermissible moderate enhancements. Such an account would respect a certain degree of subjective diversity, and thereby avoid being "monolithic," but would nevertheless disallow certain forms or degrees of enhancement that would not be conducive toward our flourishing as living, sentient, social, and rational animals.

Agar's final substantive chapters (8 and 9) confront the argument put forth by Allen Buchanan that even radical forms of enhancement would not produce a race of "post-persons" whose *moral status* would be categorically different from our own, such that it would be morally incumbent on unenhanced persons to yield the satisfaction of their own interests to those of "especially morally

needy" post-persons (181). Agar concludes that "loss in relative moral status" will expose "mere persons" to "significant harm," and thus creating beings with enhanced moral status is unjustified (183–184). Consider how we, as persons, currently utilize non-human animals, not classified as persons, in potentially life-saving medical research, let alone more ethically dubious forms of treatment. A parallel situation could result in which post-persons, while recognizing that unenhanced persons have a certain degree of moral status, could nevertheless be justifiably sacrificed on the altar of "supreme opportunities" to benefit those endowed with higher moral status (184–189). Agar contends that, while we "mere persons" would have no justifiable reason to complain about the choices post-persons might make against our interests, we can rightfully complain now about the choice to create, or risk creating, morally enhanced post-persons in the first place (191–192).

Agar disagrees with Buchanan's contention that personhood is a "threshold concept" such that it would be a category mistake to believe we could create a race of "post-persons" who enjoy a higher moral status than we do (160). Buchanan and Agar both presume a Kantian definition of personhood in which the inherent moral status of persons is premised on one's "capacity for practical rationality" (159). While Buchanan holds that the presence of such a capacity marks one as a person—regardless of how well one reasons practically—Agar contends that cognitive or emotive improvements of a sufficiently great magnitude could yield an increase in moral status (162–163). He then considers various attempts to provide a foundation for a higher moral status than that enjoyed by "mere persons."

Jeff McMahan, for instance, proposes that increased *freedom of will* may ground a higher moral status for post-persons (169–171). This proposal is interesting when viewed both from Buchanan's Kantian perspective on personhood and from Thomas Aquinas's. For Aquinas considers the capacity for determining one's own actions to mark the difference between persons and

non-persons, with the former possessing an inherent “dignity” (*Summa theologiae* I.29.1 and I.29.3 ad 2). Aquinas further allows for *degrees* of dignity among different genera of persons, reasoning that angels, who exist as pure intellects, possess free will “in a higher degree of perfection” than human beings do and thus “the angels’ dignity surpasses” our own (*ST*I.59.3). Nevertheless, Aquinas does not claim that angels’ greater dignity entails that their interests trump those of human persons the way Agar fears the interests of enhanced post-persons may override those of unenhanced human persons.

It is arguable that the dignity of various types of persons may come in degrees, and yet personhood remain a threshold concept, such that the basic natural interests—for life, freedom from pain, respect for individual autonomy, and such—of even the lowliest persons ought not to be violated, even for the sake of promoting such interests for more dignified persons. Agar raises several excellent reasons why we should avoid radical enhancement while promoting more

moderate forms of human enhancement. Although I do not share Agar’s concern that radically enhanced post-persons could rightfully claim moral demands at the expense of the basic natural interests of unenhanced persons, the danger that the radically enhanced may not *acknowledge* the equivalent natural rights of the unenhanced has already been well-established by historical analogues in which certain groups of persons considered themselves to be more highly evolved, and thereby more rightfully entitled, than other groups of persons. While a great deal of work lies ahead to define what would specifically count as “truly human” enhancement, Agar has powerfully argued for this as the proper conceptual metric in morally evaluating any enhancement endeavor.

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***Manual of Catholic Medical Ethics:  
Responsible Healthcare from a Catholic Perspective***

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translated by M. Regina van den Berg  
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In recent years, Catholic bioethicists have published works in English that are more or less comprehensive and faithful to the magisterial teachings of the Church, among the most prominent of which are Nicanor Austriaco’s *Bioethics and Beatitude* (Catholic University Press, 2011), Anthony Fisher’s *Catholic Bioethics for a New Millennium* (Cambridge University Press, 2012), and Elio Sgreccia’s *Personalist Bioethics: Foundations and Applications* (The National Catholic Bioethics Center, 2012, a translation of the

latest edition of his Italian work). Alongside these important volumes we find the *Manual of Catholic Medical Ethics*, which took form under the leadership of Willem Cardinal Eijk, Archbishop of Utrecht, the Netherlands. With sections written by various experts, Eijk’s significant tome draws on a wide variety of sources, including Sgreccia and Ashley and O’Rourke’s *Healthcare Ethics: A Theological Analysis* (Georgetown University Press, 1997), often providing argumentation in light of two documents from the Congregation