The Case for Perfection: Ethics in the Age of Human Enhancement

by Johann A. R. Roduit

Peter Lang, 2016, hardcover, $34
130 pages, bibliography and index, ISBN 978-3-631-67150-4

The debate over whether or to what extent we should pursue the enhancement of human capabilities has often been reduced to entrenched bio-conservative or bio-liberal positions calling for either a blanket prohibition of any enhancement beyond our species-typical capacities or the promotion of any enhancement a person may autonomously choose for themselves or their children. In line with thinkers like Erik Parens, who advocates for a binocular approach to evaluating enhancement proposals, and Nicholas Agar, who favors "truly human enhancement," Johann Roduit carves out a moderate position in favor of allowing specific, limited forms of enhancement.

To frame the parameters for differentiating between potentially beneficial and harmful enhancements, Roduit utilizes "a perfectionist approach of what it means to live a good human life" (47). *Prima facie*, this may sound like the author is advancing what constitutes bio-conservatives' worst fears of a eugenic mentality that seeks to create ever-more-perfect posthumans. On the contrary, Roduit shows how both enhancement's proponents and opponents presuppose some notion of human perfection (57–68). For bio-conservatives such as Michael Sandel and Leon Kass, human perfection consists of cultivating classical virtues in harmony with our given biological limits, which contribute to the exercise of our moral agency and attainment of happiness—understood eudaimonistically, not hedonistically. Although they claim to seek to improve the human condition, not promote perfectionism, bio-liberals nevertheless tacitly invoke a concept of human perfection in terms of maximizing the exercise of autonomy. Furthermore, it would be difficult for bio-liberals to adjudicate what counts as an improvement without implicitly assuming some superlative concept: one cannot assess whether something is better without an idea of what would be best (65). While enhancement enthusiasts often adopt a backward-looking view that seeks to improve on our former, given condition, Roduit favors adopting a forward-looking view that evaluates enhancement proposals in light of a certain ideal of what we ought to become (24). In short, he asks, "Towards what do we improve?" (77) This question is arguably valuable not only within the context of biomedical enhancement, but with respect to any mode of enhancing human capacities, including traditional tried-and-true methods of cultivating classical virtues or advancing one's spiritual development.

Roduit sees several advantages in adopting a perfectionist approach (51–52). For instance, it expands the concept of what it means to live a good human life beyond merely exercising one's autonomy; even strict autonomists admit that there are more or less rational—and some outright irrational—ways of acting autonomously. The concept of a good human life is, of course, quite vexed, which is one reason why a strictly autonomist bio-liberal may balk at placing any limits on enhancement so long as the chosen mechanism is safe and effective. Yet, Roduit counters, individuals tend not to make important life-changing decisions for themselves or especially for their children without being influenced by societal ideals that are often rooted in certain perfectionist assumptions. Instead of ignoring such assumptions and the ideals they inform, it is preferable to assess them critically while constructing a reasonable perfectionist framework. In short, if perfectionism is an undeniable lens through which to evaluate human biological and cultural evolution, should we not examine how we ought to focus this lens?

Roduit proposes using Martha Nussbaum's capabilities approach to develop a holistic view of human perfection (105–112). Nussbaum offers a broadly neo-Aristotelian foundation for defining what a good human life comprises, and Roduit believes her approach provides "an objective ideal, but not one that holds a fixed view of what a human being ought to be" (31). Of course, as James Keenan has noted, Christian perfectionism involves enhancing the spiritual dimension of the human person in addition to our physical, mental, and moral capabilities. This integral component of human well-being is not inimical to Roduit's project and could be proffered as a friendly amendment. Consequently, it would be worthwhile to adapt Nussbaum's neo-Aristotelian approach to a neo-Thomistic framework to conceptualize human perfection in all the dimensions of our being, thereby evaluating whether specific enhancements advance or detract from our flourishing, holistically understood.

Roduit may consider an appeal to Thomistic anthropology, in both its philosophical and theological dimensions, to be too parochial in light of his desire to avoid importing a fixed view of human nature, and he specifically critiques common anthropological arguments that identify a true self rather than create an ideal self (46–47). The Thomistic perspective, however, defines human nature in roughly the same broadly based terms as Nussbaum's Aristotelian approach. Briefly stated, human beings are defined as essentially living, sentient, social, and rational animals whose existence as such grounds our identity as persons—according to the classical Boethian definition of an individual substance of a rational nature—and who thereby enjoy a particular dignity because of our capacity to act in a rational, autonomous manner. While Aquinas's understanding of human nature informs his natural law ethic, the principles enshrined in his moral system are broadly stated and thus allow for a limited degree of social and even individual interpretation with respect to the specification and application of such principles to concrete situations—thus the need for the virtue of prudence. Hence, there is no one particular route by which any and all human beings seek to attain our ultimate end of flourishing as rational animals and enjoying loving union with our creator; yet this ultimate end imposes certain limits on what we could licitly pursue in any enhancement project, or whether enhancement in any form is a morally legitimate enterprise.

Roduit's brief but powerfully argued advocacy for the undeniable presence and utility of human perfection is a welcome contribution. Bio-conservatives like Kass warn that any pursuit of human perfection would realize the worst nightmares imagined by classical Greek tragedians (99). While the wisdom inherent in such stories ought to be always kept in mind, a story is just that, a story, and we need to carefully weigh whether scientific hubris will in fact bring about the terrible consequences forewarned. Once opened, Pandora's Box is exceedingly difficulty, if not impossible, to close; but how do we know now whether a particular enhancement proposal, or enhancement in general, constitutes one of the terrible contents of that box? Are we not all better off because Prometheus stole fire from the gods, even though he suffered greatly as a consequence? This volume is intended not to definitively resolve any Pandora's Box concerns but rather to kick-start an open conversation about what perfection means for us rational animals. Roduit has clearly made the case that such a conversation is both unavoidable and worth having, and he has also provided a useful framework that is grounded in a sound, if incomplete, anthropology of the human person.

Jason T. Eberl

Jason T. Eberl, PhD, is the Semler Endowed Chair for Medical Ethics in the College of Osteopathic Medicine and a professor of philosophy at Marian University in Indianapolis, Indiana.