Enhancement: Cognitive, Mood and Moral

The Center for the Study of Bioethics (Institute for Philosophy and Social Theory, University of Belgrade) and the Oxford Centre for Neuroethics (University of Oxford) are jointly organizing an international conference “Enhancement: Cognitive, Mood and Moral”. The conference will be aimed at exploring a variety of topics in the enhancement debate, with an added emphasis on moral enhancement. The event will take place at the Institute for Philosophy and Social Theory (Kraljice Natalije 45, Belgrade, Serbia) on 14-16 May 2013.

Conference Theme and Purpose

One of the most prominent themes in bioethics is human enhancement. Enhancement is uncontroversial in principle. There is nothing contentious in the aspiration to enhance someone’s cognitive abilities. The thesis about cognitive enhancement becomes controversial when it is assumed that means leading to it may be bio-medical and that it is morally justified to use them for non-medical purposes, i.e. with the aim to enhance normal functioning. Proponents of bio-medical enhancement, however, have also developed differing positions among themselves.

One of them deals with the issue of the relationship between cognitive and moral enhancement by bio-medical means. In recent years, this latter type of enhancement has assumed center-stage in the enhancement debate. Ingmar Persson and Julian Savulescu have argued that humanity is in need of an enhancement of its moral character by bio-medical means in order to lower the probability of self-annihilation or a milder form of what they call “ultimate harm”. They claim that cognitive enhancement has increased the probability of causing significant harm through the creation of ever more powerful technology. One of those who have disputed their position is John Harris, who believes that cognitive enhancement is largely sufficient for enhancing the morality of humans, while moral bio-enhancement might compromise their freedom.

It is primarily these issues that will be debated during the first day of the conference. The audience will have the opportunity to hear an elaboration of the first position by Julian Savulescu. John Harris will make the case for the second perspective. The debate will be joined by Peter Singer, Ingmar Persson, Nicholas Agar, Tom Douglas and others who have defended specific positions in the discussion on moral enhancement. The second day of the conference will be opened by a speech of Peter Singer, who will address the issue of the enhancement of human happiness. The panels during the second and third day will largely focus on various forms of enhancement and discuss their usefulness and moral justification.

Envisioned Conference Results

One envisioned result of the conference dialogue is a further development and clarification of various perspectives on enhancement, primarily on moral enhancement. It remains to be seen to
what extent this result will imply the discovery of new common ground among the proponents of various positions or develop their debate in the direction of a multiplication and deepening of existing differences. But no matter whether some of the differences among the positions will be relaxed or deepened, the enhancement debate itself will acquire additional content. In that sense, this debate will be enhanced itself. Furthermore, by exploring the idea of moral enhancement as a possible companion to other forms of enhancement, the conference will contribute to the search for a moral justification of human enhancement.

Another envisioned result of the conference will be the publication of the edited volume “Enhancing Enhancement”. In this volume the conference participants will have the opportunity to publish the papers they presented at the conference or other texts that foster the enhancement debate.

Conference Participants

The organizers of the conference are Vojin Rakić (Center for the Study of Bioethics, Institute for Philosophy and Social Theory, University of Belgrade), Julian Savulescu (Centre for Neuroethics, University of Oxford) and Petar Bojanić (Center for the Study of Bioethics, Institute for Philosophy and Social Theory, University of Belgrade). Participants will include prestigious scholars like Peter Singer (Princeton University), Tom Douglas (Oxford University), Katrien Devolder (Ghent University, Oxford University), Ingmar Persson (Goteborg University, Oxford University), Jovan Babić (University of Belgrade), Aleksandar Fatić (University of Belgrade), Aleksandar Dobrijević (University of Belgrade), Bennett Foddy (Oxford University), Nicholas Agar (Victoria University of Wellington), Elvio Baccarini (University of Rijeka), Snježana Prijić Samaržija (University of Rijeka), Amir Muzur (University of Rijeka), Iva Rinčić (University of Rijeka), Maartje Schermer (Erasmus University), Ayesha Ahmad (University College London), Sarah Chan (University of Manchester).