

Service and Status Competition May Help Explain Perceived Ethical Acceptability

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The arguably dominant view on the ethics of cognitive enhancement (CE) is that it is primarily beholden to the principle of autonomy (e.g. Harris 2007; Agar 2005), sometimes supplemented with justice-related considerations (Buchanan 2011). The hard external constraints on enhancement – whether ‘sanctity’, or avoiding to ‘play God’, and being open to ‘givenness’ – seem to have more or less faded from view, both in the academic communities as well as among the public (Ranisch and Ehni 2020).

Against this backdrop, the results found by Dinh et al. are all the more surprising. They tested for ethical acceptability while varying contextual factors such as use by peers, endorsement by authority figures, and the presence of competition. All these contextual factors undermine the exercise of autonomy, at least in the sense that the enhancee could not claim with full justification that their choices are entirely “their own”. Also the importance of the enhancee’s social role (student/athlete vs. employee) seems to be at odds with the principle of autonomy, where all that matters is the nature of personal choices. Yet, oddly, only the presence of a competitive environment negatively impacts ethical acceptability.

These empirical results can be relatively straightforwardly explained if one assigns central ethical significance to the principle of service rather than to that of autonomy. The core insight underlying the principle of service, at least in this context, is that the good obtained from enhancement is never a purely “personal good” (cf. Buchanan 2011), but rather impacts the lives of others. In ethically evaluating the ensemble of impacts, distributive justice is less important than the degree of “service” (i.e. benefit to the community) obtained by an individual act of CE.

A theoretical case for the principle of service is laid out in Desmond (forthcoming), but can be briefly summarized here. Social status is one of the most powerful motivators in human psychology (Anderson, Hildreth, and Howland 2015), and our concern with it reflects the very real impact status can have on life histories, including health and morality rate (Marmot 2005). Now, status is not just a personal good but a positional good, and humans have evolved to be nervous about others achieving status, since with status comes power and the ability to impose one’s desires on the collective. Most animal status hierarchies are largely based on dominance; however, what is unique to humans is how status is also freely given to highly competent individuals who render some service to the community. Some evolutionary anthropologists describe “service-for-prestige” norms observable across a wide range of societies (Price and Van Vugt 2014). In this way, one could say that human status hierarchies have evolved to be oriented, as much as possible, towards service.

Enhancements, as means to increase capacities, insert themselves right at the heart of these status dynamics. They can be used for service, but they can also be used for purposes of dominance. This is *a fortiori* true of cognitive enhancements, since these increase the capacities most crucial for status. Given the central role that status plays in our psychology, it could be

expected that the ethical approval of enhancement would depend strongly on whether the act of enhancement is perceived to obey service-for-prestige norms or not.

The empirical findings of Dinh et al. relating to the importance of contextual factors can be interpreted through the lens of the principle of service.

Social role. Service does not seem to be of core importance to the activity of sports (at least compared with medical or legal professions), and in professional sports, athletic success entails large rewards both financially and in terms of status. Enhancement of the individual is not likely to benefit the community. By contrast, if CE allows an employee to do a job better, the benefits will also clearly extend to the client or institution, at least in the short-term. Thus it can be expected that CE among athletes, compared to CE among employees, would be more likely to be viewed as promoting a perverse competition (i.e., one that leaves everyone worse off) and as flouting service-for-prestige norms.

The authors also note that use of CE by students is more likely to meet moral disapproval. This likely reflects the fact that education is often viewed by both students and their parents as a way to increase one's status later in life, for instance by landing a prestigious job (see e.g. Segrin et al. 2013). However, education is notoriously ambiguous given that the dissemination of information and understanding is also an important common good. For instance, the student trying to excel in medical school in order to help discover the proverbial cure for cancer is likely to face a different moral judgment than one single-mindedly trying to advance personal wealth. If a future survey, building on Dinh et al.'s work, were to take the *ultimate intended purpose* of student CE-use into account, the prediction here is that the ethical approval of student CE-use would depend significantly on this ultimate intended purpose.

Competition. Dinh et al. rightly note the importance of (perceived) zero-sum competitions, and the main addition of this commentary would be to draw attention to a specific type of zero-sum competition: status competition, whether this involves competition for scarce positions of leadership and power (in corporations, politics), or for positions where one has the ability to do types of intrinsically satisfying and highly financially rewarded work (e.g., medicine, law, engineering). Moreover, and this is where the commentary may possibly diverge from the Dinh et al.: some status competitions are perverse, leaving everyone anxious and self-centered, but others can be markedly more healthy, leaving the community better off.

Authority and Peers. When an enhancement has been endorsed by a figure of authority or is used by the majority, it is often perceived as the norm. Enhancement then ceases to be perceived as a tool for self-advancement, and moreover, it becomes not unreasonable to assume that the enhancement has been made the norm because it allows a better service to be offered. This latter assumption is of course sometimes unjustified, but it reflects how humans have evolved unconscious biases towards imitating the majority or towards imitating high-status individuals, precisely because this is, often, a good learning strategy (Henrich and Boyd 1998). The examples of the use of enhancement by surgeons and pilots fit this picture: if the regulating body mandates the consumption of Adderall, it is not unreasonable to assume that this was mandated to help the surgeon save a life or help a pilot to safely bring passengers to their destination. Thus, upon reflection, the factors of peer-influence and influence by authority figures thus seem to be very similar: they serve to establish the use of enhancements as the norm.

This analysis generates the following hypothesis: if an authority figure were perceived to mandate enhancement for his/her own gain, then likely the use of enhancements would *not* be seen as ethically acceptable. In other words, it is likely that the participants in the study of

Dinh et al. implicitly read “authority figure” as a “*trusted* authority figure”. Once the majority or the authority figure is no longer trusted, then enhancement by peers or authority figures would likely no longer mitigate ethical disapproval of CE.

Conclusion.

In closing, I would like to suggest what the policy implications would be of following the principle of service. The variation in moral intuitions need not strengthen a libertarian stance – a take-home the authors hint at in their remark “it may make sense for people in any given setting to define the conditions of CE use on their own”. Instead, insofar our moral intuitions follow service-for-prestige norms, some social regulation of behavior would be appropriate. This would not (or even: should not) take the form of legislative regulation: when service is legislated or enforced it can too easily become servitude. Moral education, a softer form of regulation where values are communicated but with significant respect for individual freedom, seems more appropriate. Such a moral education would sketch how enhancements affect some of our deep-seated status-related fears, how they can thus affect the lives of many people around the enhance, and how it is important that enhancement is undertaken for right, service-oriented reasons.

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