

Between mere opposition and dull allegiance

Enhancement in theological ethical perspective

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1. Christian longing for the enhancement of Life

„He will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away.’ (Rev 21,4)

Christianity has a lot to say about the “improvement” of life. Semantics of increase underlie the Christian expectation of salvation: Eternity is supposed to be better than the present existence – even if there is no definite answer yet of what this “better” will mean. The bible is full of images and stories which tell us about a life getting richer and fuller, about growth and completion, about the Christian longing for the better. From biblical visions like the one quoted of the book of Revelation some theologians go as far as to interpret biotechnological enhancement as a necessary human step in the history of salvation. According to the US-American professor for systematic theology, Ronald Cole-Turner, humans after the fall, suffering from shortcomings like anxiety, limited knowledge or fading youth, are supposed to regain their lost creational nature. Traits originally intended by God for humanity should even be exceeded compared to Adam and Eve.¹

One can object that this is misreading the biblical texts. Many of them, of course, primarily relate to spiritual well-being or they speak in metaphors of the eternal in contrast to earthly life. At the same time however, some of them clearly express their longing for a relief of sorrows and distress which is not supposed to be postponed until eternity. Their hopes for a life in beauty, joy and satisfaction are not contrasting earthly desires but rather draw on what humans wish for in this world and time. Their hopes do not only refer to an “unreal”, future life. In continuity to life here and now, these hopes are supposed to mean something to this life and to touch the whole existence, including body and soul.²

What this brief introduction shows: ethical arguing with biblical ideas remains difficult. Despite the possibility to explain the texts as drawing pictures of spiritual or future well-being one can hardly deny a specific Christian affinity to the “enhancement of life” completely. Some will still argue that the Christian ideas of enhancement are not fitting to “enhancement” as the term is used today. But: What is the term “enhancement” actually meant to describe?

2. Necessity of differentiations

The English term “enhancement” has powerfully entered the bioethical debates for several years now. In German speaking discussions and probably in those of other countries as well, the use of the English term conveys the impression that “enhancement” is a definite subject to deal with, like “organ transplant” or “abortion”. Translating the term “enhancement” as

“fostering”, “strengthening”, “enforcing”, etc. reminds us, however, of the broad range of possible actions which the term can include and which will be judged quite differently.

The scale can be set from so called “gene doping” (stimulating the body of sportsmen and women to produce e.g. more oxygen or more muscles) to make-up (enhancing one’s physical appearance), from pharmacological neuro-enhancement (increasing the intellectual or emotional sensitivity) to special diets (increasing the ability to concentrate or becoming less tired).

Different from the well known ethical discussions on conflicts at the beginning or at the end of life the question of enhancement draws its public power and its challenging nature from its generality. Not every one of us makes use of in vitro fertilisation. Not every one of us needs to decide about assisted suicide. But: Every one of us is obviously every now and then using enhancing means and methods. The will to “get better”, either in ones physical fitness, beauty or in ones mental power accompanies human life. Some kind of enhancement seems not worth mentioning: who would tell children that it is a problem if they learn how to use the computer much better and much earlier than other generations did? And who would forbid running teams to train in high altitude camps to improve their endurance? Yet, some other kind of enhancement appears highly challenging, especially when it comes to the use of pharmaceutical products or of other medical means.

Looking at the different categories of enhancement which Bettina Schöne-Seifert and Davinia Talbot identify as 1. physical enhancement (like doping in sports or aesthetic surgery), 2. neuro-enhancement, 3. enhancement at the beginning (via PID) and 4. enhancement at the end of life (enlarging the life span)³ one can discover: Within each of the categories, apparently, there is a smooth transition from *desired* forms of enhancement via *accepted* and only *tolerated* types to, finally, *disapproved* forms of enhancement. The ethical challenge lies in analyzing how these implicit distinctions are drawn and in developing criteria for a sound evaluation.

In the following, arguments from the angle of theological ethics will be explored. While considering both individual as well as social ethics, the latter, as to be demonstrated, seems to lead to more substantial arguments for the current discussions on enhancement.

3. Theological opposition: Fear for the human nature

Regardless of the above mentioned diversity of enhancing techniques one can often observe a rather general, undifferentiated opposition of theological ethics against it.

One of the main arguments, if not *the* main argument from which ethical implications are drawn is the following: Enhancement distorts human nature which is given or even intelligently designed by God. With slightly different emphasises this argument always starts off by taking a specific Christian “image of man” for granted which is characterised by a notion of naturalness. According to this perspective this human nature has to be preserved against an artificiality which is understood to threaten life. Over against God’s creational activity humans are supposed to accept their natural abilities and especially their limitations because they all are perceived as God’s gifts. Hence, enhancing techniques appear as the outcome of human hubris, as a shortcoming of fallen nature, as sin. The statement of the

Conference of European Churches (CEC) on enhancement⁴ basically follows this path as well. Acknowledging, yet, that the Christian belief is not always generally objecting to human activity the CEC statement questions where to draw the line between acceptable human activity and disapproved enhancement. It searches for the difference of nature and artificiality.

The authors claim, first, that enhancement techniques have nowadays entered a completely “new stage”: Whereas in former times humans only “changed the world around”⁵ but not themselves, they now, according to the statement, try to change the human being itself. On the one hand, whereas the differentiation between *external aids and internal changes* of the body corresponds to human intuition it quickly loses much of its validity: Technical devices like the nowadays extended “computer brains”, the methods of mobile communication etc. have certainly changed the human being itself. The idea that this type of enhancement can be put down again is a rather theoretical one, especially when taking into account the social pressure to use these technical devices. On the other hand one can question the assumption itself that humans have in former times not tried to change themselves. Some examples may underpin the dubiety: Chinese women used to bind their feet so that they stayed even too small to walk on; in the 1960s many young women followed beauty ideals of the slimming crazes and athletes tried to enforce their power already by certain diets already in the ancient world. Even the longing for suntanned skin or in former times for skin as pale as possible may demonstrate that the will to enhance and change the “natural” being is hardly new.

Secondly, many ethicists as well as the authors of the CEC-document base their discernment on a distinction of *enhancement and therapy*. Prominently presented by the US President’s Council on Bioethics in its statement “Beyond Therapy” this differentiation is plausible on a first level, defining both actions from a notion of “normality” – again closely connected to a supposedly given “human nature”. Medication and therapy restores normal functioning to sick people whereas enhancement drives healthy people “beyond this normality”. The strong critique of this argument can be heard from various sides, though. Already a quick look back at the development of medicine and therapy points to the contingency of the concepts of “disease” and “normality”. In one of the early articles on enhancement Eric T. Juengst states 1998: “It is not quite difficult to invent new sufferings in order to justify enhancement-interventions.”⁶ Beyond the irony: What is perceived as a “normal part of limited life” and what is described as a disease or a medical problem to be “fixed” can not only be attributed to “inventions” but even more to social, historical and cultural attributions. This insight points at more than just a “grey area” between the two supposedly clear cut opposites of therapy and enhancement. Without any doubts: of course, there *are* actual meanings of “sick” and “normal” or “better than well” today. However, it is necessary to highlight that one cannot deny the continuous changing of these concepts, even up to the perception of real physical or mental pain. Or put the other way round: One should be careful about declaring a present, largely predetermined understanding of “normality”, of “health” and “disease” as the standard for a human nature, as it were, to be preserved.

These few examples already show the difficulty to fundamentally draw on these dualistic differentiations in order to find powerful arguments against the use of the very general idea of “enhancement”. Much of what humans do or use today could have been called “enhancement” from an earlier point of view. Much of what is described as a medical problem that can be healed or prevented (like depressions or dementia) people some decades ago would have considered the normal course of life.

At the same time, having a closer look at the visions that are nourishing the theological fears of a threatened human nature, the enhancement-report of the German Institute for Technology Assessment calms down the debates. It convincingly demonstrates how little realistic the predicted horror scenarios of an alienated human nature are. Resulting from an analysis of several studies the report states: “Realistically, the prospects for an implementation of according visions, of utopias as well as dystopias, appear hardly promising. Scientifically based and plausible scenarios for a lasting, deliberate manipulation of ‘human nature’ by pharmacological substances without effects on the genetic, hereditary level do not exist.”⁷ According to this analysis there are with regard to genetic manipulation no realistic objectives, neither for physical performance nor for mental, cognitive or emotional abilities or performance because the genetic basis is largely unclear.

4. Criteria against simplifications

4.1 Individual ethical arguments

The attempt to fundamentally oppose “enhancement in general” by drawing supposedly clear distinctions on the one hand (external – internal / therapy – enhancement) is obviously not convincing. On the other hand, uncritically glorifying the assumed successes of enhancement methods appears equally inadequate. Instead of these two options the ethical discernment will benefit more from the so called middle axioms which present a viable alternative. Beauchamp and Childress have provided us with the four “principles of biomedical ethics”⁸: Beneficence and non-maleficence, autonomy and justice.

Especially the first two principles are to be understood from an individual ethical perspective. Their main question in short is: Is enhancement doing good or at least not doing harm to the individual? Whereas enhancement advocates like the English utilitarian philosopher Julian Savulescu intensely stress the general benefit of all kinds of enhancement techniques and take the negative effects as minor losses⁹, the objectors – hardly surprising – either see that even minor losses are not acceptable or they evaluate the harmful effects as to be much bigger.

A little more detailed: Risking the individual’s health seems to be the strongest argument against enhancement when it comes to the use of pharmaceutical products or – in the far future if at all – genetic manipulation. Obviously, harmful side-effects can up to now not be avoided which prevents many from making use of e.g. neuro-enhancement. A recent study among German students has shown that only very few of them are willing to take or have already taken stimulants intending to improve their mental abilities. Yet, 80% would be ready to take these drugs if they had no side-effects. The numbers of people risking their health by neuro-enhancement drugs increase distinctly as soon as one observes the attitude

in other countries (like the U.S.), the practise of working adults or especially of athletes in the area of highly competitive sports.¹⁰

At this stage, if side effects are unavoidable, theological ethics, and a Protestant one in particular, presses for transparency and clarification in order to empower people for their own decision-making. If vulnerable people like e.g. children are involved and possibly threatened there is a special need to intervene. But this remark leads to the principle of autonomy already which I am going to deal with later.

Now, imagining that at some point side-effects could have been abolished, health risks will not function as argument anymore. To evaluate “objectively” if a certain enhancement is doing good or harm will then be an even more difficult task. For as briefly outlined before: Allegedly objective concepts of “normality” as a benchmark do not work. If we ask people who use methods of enhancement they will certainly claim to suffer from some kind of physical or mental deficiency which they try to remedy: the professional musician will explain that he is afflicted with shaking hands during a concert, doctors complain about being tired during their job, women suffer from their wrinkles, men from their lacking strength etc. Who would dare to tell these people that their suffering actually does not exist? Especially a Protestant ethics is very careful about dictating what is to be felt as pain or suffering. It refrains from judging the individual for his or her feelings and perceptions. Yet, at a social ethical level, it can ask: Where do these feelings come from? Which social structures make people perceive themselves as deficient and foment the urge to enhance their body or brain?

4.2 Social ethical arguments

a) Within the principles of biomedical ethics, *autonomy* usually is dealt with in the perspective of individual ethics. In terms of individual ethics one can reason: The individual’s decision for personal enhancement can hardly be forbidden unless there are – as presented – side-effects which tend to be so harmful that people have to be saved from themselves by law.

Much more interesting, however, seems to be the social ethical discussion about what “autonomy” really means in societal structures where specific methods of enhancement are well-established. The possibility to reject these methods becomes dwindling small and, at the same time, the inhibition threshold to use them lowers; the pressure to use them increases. In consequence, theological social ethics can stimulate discussions on questions like: Is it desirable that a certain enhancement technique becomes the norm? (This is not only meant to be a rhetoric question. It might happen that we consider some kind of enhancement useful.) What does the individual, what does society gain, but before that: what might they *lose* if a certain technique becomes the norm? Since Christian theology rather favours the manifoldness and colourfulness of life, its ethics will for sure have a healthy scepticism at this point. Unless there are strong and striking reasons to reduce the number of choices by supporting a certain enhancement technique to become the social standard, Christian ethics will tend to strengthen the plurality of choices, of *real* choices which at the same time strengthens autonomy.

b) *The principle of justice* falls into line. Again, it will not be discussed with regard to individual claims but with respect to its social implications. According to the CEC document a major danger of enhancement in general is the increasing injustice between the haves and the have nots.¹¹ Up to a certain degree this is a very important and necessary warning. The fear is that biotechnological means will only be affordable for or accessible to a few. While this problem already concerns the close range of societies, especially ecumenical ethics will keep the global balance in mind: Will certain enhancement techniques widen the gap between the Northern and the Southern hemisphere? In view of sports some liberal philosophers avail themselves of the justice argument: According to them doping should generally be allowed because as long as it is forbidden, those athletes not using it are disadvantaged.¹² If liberal thinkers wanted to carry this idea to extremes they could even argue that the global gap widens the other way round in this case: Especially European athletes “suffer” from a strong doping control system compared to Africa or Asia... The CEC document, of course and rightly so, sends out the opposite message: It considers the possibility of injustice a strong argument *against* the deregulation of enhancement. If only a few benefit from enhanced abilities and they play it off against others, Christian ethics has to express its concern about justice; in particular about justice for those who are already disadvantaged in life. It is necessary to explicitly emphasize: Theological ethics has to stand up for the preferential option for the disadvantaged. However, the conclusions can be drawn differently. Given the fact that enhancement not only refers to a huge variety of means and methods but that each kind of enhancement can be used with different intentions, then, one can differentiate at least two different tasks which theological ethics can appropriate:

1. In case of enhancement techniques which (resulting from public and political discourse) the public considers desirable theology and churches have two options. They can either accept that it is not accessible to everybody (e.g. if the few use it for the benefit of the many) or theology and churches could support the disadvantaged to get access, too. Comparable initiatives can be found with respect to computers, education or medicine: their enhancing benefits were reserved for “the few” in earlier times but in the meantime it is a common conviction that these benefits should be generally available.

2. In case of enhancement techniques that are considered non desirable, theological ethics and churches should speak up. Especially if the specific enhancement technique is threatening the so called “have nots” and if it is widening the gap between the advantaged and the disadvantaged, then this serves as a strong argument against this kind of enhancement.

5. Between mere opposition and dull allegiance – some conclusive remarks

Pursuing these thoughts at the end it seems fair to say: One of the strongest deficits of the enhancement techniques seems to be that they reduce perspectives and solutions. They identify a certain problem and offer a certain solution. A contribution of theological ethics can be to question both problem and solution. A striking, of course, a little exaggerated

example: Some studies have shown that less handsome children are mistreated in kindergarten or in school compared to their handsome fellows. A simple enhancement solution could suggest making the less handsome more beautiful – implying that it is actually fair to discriminate the ugly. It does not take much to discover alternatives to the interpretation of the problem as well as of the solution. Theology and churches can challenge one-dimensional interpretations. Yet, this should not only lead to a criticism of the enhancement techniques themselves. One can rather question the social circumstances which often create a need for the different kinds of enhancement. Instead of mainly accusing pharmaceutical companies to offer neuro-enhancement, surgeons to offer facelifts or those who accept these offers to serve the wrong master, it seems worthwhile analysing how the social, professional, media systems foster these needs. Enhancement does no longer appear as a problem which others can be blamed for but much more as a phenomenon arising from the own systems. Assessing the question of enhancement from this perspective means to lay down the role of passive observers (or accusants) Instead it means to make use of the possibilities to take part in creating, shaping or sometimes changing the social systems and to get into dialogue with the public on questions like enhancement. Reminding again of the low probability that futuristic enhancement techniques will be realized there is a fair chance e.g. to promote alternative, social ways to enhance life. This kind of enhancement is not only more realistic but it is also easier – and up to now healthier – to bring about. Coming back to the more or less exaggerated examples one could argue: Instead of facial surgery for the less handsome kids raising the awareness of the teachers to stop this discrimination might be a more plausible solution. Instead of fighting neuro-enhanced top workers, discussions about a desirable company culture or political efforts to reduce the fight for jobs would enhance our working system. Most probably it would also enhance the economic output.

Theological concepts (like those presented by Ulla Schmidt and Janne Nikkinen in this volume) can enrich these public discussions about the “enhancement of life”. As stated at the beginning: Christianity has a lot to say about how life can be improved, about how life can be enhanced: it will certainly not simply parrot the societies’ ideas and plans but it might and should find points of contact. The following Christian beliefs only point out some among many links to the public sphere:

- The Christian ideas of power and weakness might invite to leave well-trodden paths of actual trends.
- Supporting the integration of *all* people (especially giving voice to those beyond standards), the Christian view will probably widen the understanding of *human achievements* that could also be worthwhile to aim for.
- And with regard to final aims of life Christian theology can help thinking about how earthly desires relate to eschatological hopes.

Taking seriously that, as Celia Deane Drummond puts it even with regard to the transhumanism-debate, “human beings are agents of their own destiny”¹³, means to step back a little from a “them-versus-us”-discussion but rather to understand oneself as a

member of the same social structures. Keeping open the choice of alternatives for life, widening the perspectives on life can be best reached by what the former head of the EKD-council, Wolfgang Huber, and the Bavarian Bishop Heinrich Bedford-Strohm call “public theology”¹⁴. Instead of a fundamental opposition against social or biotechnological trends it calls theology and churches to get involved politically and to exercise their public mandate. Public theology means addressing the public attention, fostering social dialogue and trying to reach decision-makers in the public sphere. And last but not least: the concept of public theology demands of theology and churches themselves to enter these public discussions with openness for other perspectives and without prejudices too general for an ethical issue which actually covers a wide range of measures. If churches and theology consider the conflicts of enhancement as attentively and carefully as described they will most probably not provide *the* ethical answer, but they are likely to enhance the debates on it.

¹ Cole-Turner R 2009: Human Enhancement and Christianity: A Case of Friendly Fire? Vortrag am Oxford Uehiro Centre for Practical Ethics (27.01.2009), URL: <http://www.podcastdirectory.com/podshows/10180-246> (06.09.2012).

² Cf. Schardien S 2012: Sehnsucht nach Mehr. Gentechnologisches Enhancement und theologische Eschatologie im Vergleich, in: Körner S / Schardien S 2012 (ed.): Höher, schneller weiter. Gentechnologisches Enhancement im Spitzensport, Paderborn, 305-325.

³ Schöne-Seiffert B / Talbot D 2009: Enhancement. Die ethische Debatte, Paderborn.

⁴ Conference of European Churches / Church & Society Commission 2010: Human enhancement – A Discussion Document, Geneva / Brussels / Strasbourg.

⁵ Ibid., 2.

⁶ Juengst ET: What Does Enhancement Mean?, German version in: Schöne-Seiffert B / Talbot D 2009: Enhancement. Die ethische Debatte, Paderborn, 25-45, here: 31.

⁷ Sauter A / Gerlinger K (Büro für Technikfolgenabschätzung beim Deutschen Bundestag) 2011: Pharmakologische Interventionen zur Leistungssteigerung als gesellschaftliche Herausforderung (Arbeitsbericht 143), Berlin, 195.

⁸ Beauchamp TL / Childress JF 2001: Principles of Biomedical Ethics, 5. Aufl., New York.

⁹ Savulescu J 2008: Interview with Julian Savulescu on „Designer Babies“ in the series „Bioethics Bites“ (29.09.2008), URL: <http://media.philosophy.ox.ac.uk/bioethicsbites/Savulescu.mp3> (06-09-2012)

¹⁰ Viciano A 2010: Da macht unser Gehirn nicht mit. Interview mit Klaus Lieb, Zeit-Online (10.03.2010), URL: <http://www.zeit.de/2010/11/M-Neuro-Enhancement> (06.09.2012).

¹¹ Conference of European Churches / Church & Society Commission 2010: Human enhancement – A Discussion Document, Geneva / Brussels / Strasbourg, 12.

¹² Vgl. Foddy B / Savulescu J 2007: Ethics of Performance Enhancement in Sport: Drugs and Gene Doping. German version in: Schöne-Seiffert B / Talbot D 2009: Enhancement. Die ethische Debatte, Paderborn, 93-113, here 111.

¹³ Deane-Drummond C 2011: Taking Leave of the Animal? The Theological and Ethical Implications of Transhuman Projects, in: Cole-Turner R 2011: Transhumanism and Transcendence. Christian Hope in an Age of Technological Enhancement, Georgetown, 115-130, here 126.

¹⁴ Vgl. e.g. Huber W 1973: Kirche und Öffentlichkeit, Stuttgart; Bedford-Strohm H 2008: Öffentliche Theologie in der Zivilgesellschaft, in: Gabriel I (ed.) 2008: Politik und Theologie in Europa. Perspektiven ökumenischer Sozialethik, Mainz, 340-366.