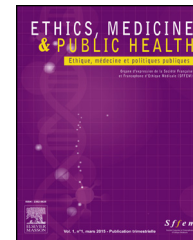




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DOSSIER "ETHICS, MEDICINE AND GENETICS"
Philosophical considerations

Forgiveness, tolerance, and genetic enhancement



Pardon, tolérance et amélioration génétique

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Summary Genetic enhancement that aims to remove human weaknesses would possibly ruin many things that have considerable moral value. Certain mental processes, such as (1) the process of forgiving and (2) the process of finding something tolerable consist partly of perceiving the other person as psychologically weak, and social institutions of forgiveness and tolerance are not only valuable as such, but also contribute to many valuable things. Therefore, it seems that weaknesses are not that bad. People should try to avoid weaknesses, as they contribute to morally problematic conduct but, on the other hand, the connection between weaknesses and wrongness means that forgiveness and tolerance are partly possible just because of weaknesses. The general social and cultural effects of forgiveness and tolerance, in turn, seem morally priceless. Weaknesses do not justify wrong actions, but they tend to explain why people act wrongly, and people are often forgiven or tolerated just because of their weakness. This is one reason why we should be very cautious with genetic enhancement. The aim of the paper is not to show that the gains promised by genetic enhancement would be outweighed by the costs of reducing the degrees of forgiveness and toleration in the human population. Rather, we simply try to indicate what are the possible moral dark sides of such enhancement.

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MOTS CLÉS

Pardon ;
 Valeur morale ;
 Amélioration
 génétique ;
 Tolérance ;
 Faiblesse

Résumé L'argument de cet article est que l'amélioration génétique, dont le but est d'éliminer les faiblesses humaines, pourrait en fait se faire au détriment d'autres qualités de haute valeur morale. Certains processus mentaux, comme (1) le pardon et (2) l'aptitude à tolérer une situation donnée, dépendent en partie de notre perception de la faiblesse psychologique de l'autre, et les institutions sociales relatives au pardon et à la tolérance sont non seulement précieuses en tant que telles, mais aussi de par leur contribution à d'autres valeurs. Il semblerait donc que nos faiblesses ne soient pas une si mauvaise chose. Les gens devraient essayer de combattre leurs faiblesses, car elles contribuent parfois à une conduite moralement répréhensible ; en revanche, la connexion qui existe entre faiblesse et faute implique que le pardon et la tolérance n'existent, dans une certaine mesure, qu'à cause de nos faiblesses. Les effets sociaux et culturels globaux du pardon et de la tolérance, pour leur part, nous semblent d'une valeur morale considérable. Les faiblesses ne justifient pas les mauvaises actions, mais elles peuvent expliquer la raison pour laquelle certaines personnes les commettent ; par ailleurs, les fautifs sont souvent pardonnés ou tolérés du fait même de leurs faiblesses. C'est une raison pour laquelle l'amélioration génétique devrait être abordée avec la plus grande prudence. L'objectif de cet article n'est pas de démontrer que les gains promis par l'amélioration génétique seraient moins importants que les coûts liés à la réduction de l'ampleur du pardon et de la tolérance dans la population humaine. Nous essayons plutôt simplement de signaler les côtés obscurs potentiels d'une telle amélioration.

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Introduction

The debate about the desirability and ethical acceptability of human enhancement has gathered a lot of attention among philosophers and bioethicists in recent years. Enhancement-based interventions, especially genetic enhancement, aim to improve humans beyond their normal, well-functioning, state. Enhancement is not merely a form of therapy, although these two may overlap. People may want to use medicines that are supposed to influence positively their normally functioning cognitive capacities such as memory, or to improve their physical abilities, although there may be nothing wrong with their present abilities [1,2].

Usually, the enhancement debate does not concern the question what should we do with weaknesses – understood as psychological attributes, processes or incidents that usually relate to action and reasoning and are generally considered somehow faulty. To some extent, weaknesses resemble diseases, and a person who opposes human enhancement need not oppose the idea that we should get rid of our characteristic weaknesses. However, the question whether weaknesses are altogether bad – morally or otherwise – is anything but clear [3]. There is much to say in defense of weakness, and this is what we aim to do here.

Obviously, almost all bad things have their positive sides. If your house burns down, then there is space to build a new house, and then others have a chance to help you. Bad things not only tend to have some good consequences, but also make many good things possible. But this does not mean that we should actively cause bad things and start to burn down people's houses. The same is true of weaknesses. To argue that, actually, weaknesses have their positive sides is not to argue that we should not try to avoid them, still less that we should try to increase them. However, it is important to see that, at least in some cases, a world without weaknesses

would not necessarily be a very pleasant place. To remove all or a considerable part of human weaknesses – were it possible – would gradually ruin many things that have considerable moral value. Possibly, those valuable things could be created by means other than by letting weaknesses do the job but, arguably, that would be rather difficult. Therefore, authors such as Barbro Fröding, John Harris and Julian Savulescu who all support radical enhancement programs should keep in mind that lifting humankind even to a level where weaknesses no longer exist would have serious moral costs, and that going still further is likely to have even more serious costs [4–6]. It is important to take into account the probable negative effects of (genetic) enhancement, in particular, the negative side effects, which would ensue, were such enhancement realized in society on the whole.

In what follows, we will defend the thesis that certain mental processes such as the (1) process of forgiving and the (2) process of finding something tolerable consist partly of perceiving the other person as weak, and that social institutions of forgiveness and tolerance are not only valuable as such, but also contribute to many valuable things. This gives us a reason to praise rather than blame many weaknesses. The aim of the paper is not to show that the gains promised by genetic enhancement would be outweighed by the costs of reducing the degrees of forgiveness and toleration in the human population. Rather, we simply try to indicate what are the possible moral dark sides of such enhancement.

Weaknesses

By weaknesses we refer to psychological attributes, processes, or incidents that often relate to action and reasoning and are commonly seen as defects. For instance, an average person who deceives herself suffers from a weakness. If a person's action is weak-willed, alternatively, then she is

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