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Article abstract

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Flesh, Foil, and Authenticity: Reflections on Johann AR Roduit's "Flesh and Foil"

RESPONSE TO — CREATIVE WORK / RÉPONSE À — TRAVAIL CRÉATIF

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Résumé

Le poème de Johann AR Roduit, « Flesh and Foil », soulève un certain nombre d'enjeux concernant l'amélioration humaine, notamment la nécessité de fonder ce processus d'amélioration sur des principes. La notion d'authenticité et l'éthique de la vertu peuvent satisfaire le besoin de *guidance* exprimé par ce poème.

Mots clés

amélioration humaine, amélioration biomédicale, authenticité, éthique de la vertu, eudémonisme

Summary

Johann AR Roduit's poem, "Flesh and Foil," raises a number of issues regarding enhancement, especially the need for principles to guide the process of human enhancement. The guidance that the poem seeks can be found in a combination of virtue ethics and authenticity.

Keywords

human enhancement, biomedical enhancement, authenticity, virtue ethics, eudaimonia

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Aucun déclaré

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None declared

Much of the literature on enhancement concerns what sorts of biomedical enhancements, if any, should be legally permitted. Johann AR Roduit's poem, "[Flesh and Foil](#)," is certainly relevant for that discussion, though I think that it even more directly raises the issue of what should guide individuals pursuing their own enhancement [1]. The emphasis on foil and metallic scales focuses the poem primarily on biomedical enhancement, especially enhancements that gradually turn one into a cyborg, as foil replaces flesh. The issues raised, however, extend well beyond biomedical enhancement, and that is part of the power and philosophical interest of "Flesh and Foil". We enhance ourselves through education, physical training, improving our diets and even through moral reflection and discussion. Biomedical enhancement is simply an extreme version of enhancement. All enhancements raise the issue of what should guide us. We need to consider carefully, for example, what talents are worth developing in light of the time and resources committed. The athletically talented person who spends every hour and every penny single-mindedly enhancing gymnastic performance, for example, may find at some point that he or she has lost sight of what is genuinely valuable in life and has become alienated from him or herself. Such a person might well lament, "Scales fell on my eyes; I lost sight of the stars." Nor is enhancing all of our talents indiscriminately an answer. Such a pursuit can produce a fragmented self, and this is another way in which one can become alienated from oneself and lose a sense of direction.

"Flesh and Foil" raises at least three philosophical issues regarding enhancement. The first issue surfaces in the third stanza in which the person who engages in continual enhancement risks becoming a ship of Theseus in which the crucial parts have all been replicated or replaced thereby raising the question of whether the enhanced person is really the same person who began the

process. This is one way that enhancement might be thought to threaten identity, but I do not think we need to worry. Even if it becomes possible to replace human body parts one-by-one, it is not a threat to personal identity because personal identity does not reside in physical attributes. After all, many of the cells in the human body are replaced several times during a lifetime without creating an identity problem. Zeus remains Zeus even when he assumes the body of a swan for his nefarious plans regarding Leda [2].

It is more plausible to suppose that personal identity resides in some sort of psychological continuity, but it is difficult to see what it could mean to replace individual psychological traits with equivalent though artificial traits analogous to replacing the planks of Theseus's ship. Moreover, enhancement concerns improving one's self and therefore requires that one's individual self retain its identity. After all, I seek to enhance myself in order to become a better person, not to annihilate myself and become a different person.

The second philosophical issue arises in the fourth and fifth stanzas. The fourth stanza about losing sight of the stars indicates that there is a loss of direction and self-directed motivation, which presumably is why the ship of Theseus that the person has become drifts nowhere, forever. The person who sets out on a voyage of continual enhancement needs fixed values to guide the journey. But where are these values to be found? I believe that the most important question the person embarked on a project of continual enhancement can ask is what a flourishing life for that person would consist in.

Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* provides a partial answer, though I do not claim it is the only possible answer. From an Aristotelian standpoint, enhancement should be used to increase human flourishing spelled out in terms of a life of rational activity in accordance with the virtues [3]. This certainly gives us some guidance by limiting the pursuit of enhancement to a vision of human flourishing and thereby providing a partial context for enhancement. There is nonetheless room to get lost. I want to know what it would be for me to flourish as an individual person and not merely as a generic human being. Going somewhat beyond Aristotle's own view, Julia Annas notes that the virtues necessary for flourishing or *eudaimonia* are compatible with significantly different ways of living [4], and Martha Nussbaum notes how virtues can be applied differently by various cultures without leading to moral relativism [5]. Priests, warriors, scholars, and athletes all need virtues such as courage and temperance, but those virtues play out differently for the scholar and the warrior. The virtues provide direction, according to Annas, by enabling one to live a unified life in which one's sources of energy cooperate [3, p. 117].

I would argue in addition that adopting the virtues by a particular person to achieve a unified life requires authenticity. To enhance oneself without getting lost requires that we keep in mind not only the human virtues that constrain justifiable enhancement, but also that we have an idea of the who we are at the outset and what sort of life we are most suited for as an individual. We need a sense of our talents, opportunities, and character. This tells us what aspects of ourselves are to be enhanced. To become a better self requires that we have an initial sense of the self we already are. The trick is not to change what we are but to become better at what we are provided that we are improving within the context of developing virtues and the constraints of morality. So the emphasis on authenticity does not mean that the person who assesses his or her character as vicious or immoral should use enhancement to become even more vicious. Authenticity both provides guidance and motivation so that a person's continual enhancement does not result in "drifting nowhere without end."

A long-term vision of what we want to become can also be helpful, but it is not enough. What matters is whether the vision that is adopted is a good fit with one's combination of character, talents and values as well as whether pursuing the vision enhances one's virtues. Adopting a long term-vision that is arbitrary or imposed on one by others threatens to blind one to what is most valuable in one's own life – to blind one to the stars. In fact, one might be able to proceed without a long-term vision if one's

use of enhancements progresses step by step and is based on one's character and what one authentically values. In fact, proceeding a step at a time without having a clear vision of the final outcome can be valuable because it allows flexibility to take account of changes brought by earlier enhancements. In the end, the guiding star is not something distant and outside of ourselves. It is a wise assessment of who we authentically are within the context of the virtues necessary for flourishing.

It might be objected that this rules out any sort of enhancement that could produce posthumans. I am not sure just when humans become posthumans for purposes of enhancement. What is crucial from an Aristotelian point of view is whether the virtues are still relevant to the sorts of creatures we become. Virtues such as courage and temperance are not relevant for creatures who have enhanced themselves and their environment to the point at which they have nothing to fear and no need to constrain their desires. "Flesh and Foil" makes a good case that such beings would be truly in danger of "drifting nowhere forever."

There is also a third issue raised by "Flesh and Foil" that is worth thinking about. At least for me, the fourth stanza also carries a worrisome connotation. Stars offer not only navigational guidance but fill us with awe and wonder at the power and vastness of the universe. Kant nicely gets at this toward the end of the *Critique of Practical Reason* when he writes that the two things that fill his mind with admiration and awe are the starry heavens above and the moral universe within [6]. As we progressively gain the power to control something it tends to lose the power to awe us, since our control reduces the mystery of what is mastered to a mere object for engineering. There is danger then that techniques of biomedical enhancement will reduce the feeling of mystery and awe in the development of one's self as a unique and wonderful being. This is not sufficient reason to avoid enhancement, but it is reason to proceed with caution and respect for one's self.

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