



# INTERNATIONAL NEUROETHICS SOCIETY RACING FOR (NEURO)COGNITIVE ENHANCEMENT;

## WHEN THE HUMAN PERSON IS AT THE STARTING BLOCKS



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### ETYMOLOGY OF HUMAN PERSON or PERSONA

An **ambiguous word**: the **mask**, the “act to show before someone’s eyes”, as in Latin *persōnare*, from which *persona* (in Etruscan *Phersu*); or the “**face as openness to the world**” as in Greek *prōsōpon*.

### ONE OF THE MOST CONTROVERSIAL PHILOSOPHICAL CONCEPT

*Person* has to do with **personal identity**, what makes a person the one she is: but, is **personal identity** a property or a set of properties? Is it a necessity or a contingency?

*Person* is related to **personhood**: what is it to be a person? What is necessary, and what suffices, for something to count as a **person**, as opposed to a **nonperson**?

*Person* has also to do with **persistence**, which is the question of personal identity over time: what does it take for the **same person** to exist at different times? We can distinguish between **numerical and qualitative identity**: two beings are numerically identical if they are one and the same, even if physically distinct, while they are qualitatively identical if they are exactly the same. **Personal identity** is not always qualitatively the same: a **person** changes over time so that, for instance, an enhanced man is not necessarily a different **person**. What are the conditions for a **person** existing at one time to be identical to a **person** existing at another time?

### THE PERSISTENCE QUESTION ON THE PERSON

Almost all proposed answers to the *Persistence Question* fall into one of three categories:

- 1) the **Psychological Approach**: some psychological relation is necessary or sufficient (or both) for one to persist;
- 2) the **Somatic Approach**: personal identity through time is grounded on a physical identity (person A = person B if body A = body B);
- 3) the **Anticriterialism**: no sort of continuity, neither psychological nor physical, is necessary for personal persistence, but only the trivial statement that a **person** existing at one time is identical with a being existing at another if and only if they are identical.

### WHY ENHANCEMENT?

It is almost universally claimed that attempts to enhance certain human capabilities such as memory and alertness are age old; recently, drugs designed to treat memory impairment in patients with such deficits have allegedly been shown to improve attention, focus and memory, above the baseline, in normal individuals. However, data from the literature are controversial and side effects from their use, like toxicity, damage to the nervous system or addiction, especially in young individuals, whose brains are under development, are not known. At the same time, the ethical value of such studies is debatable since their performance would indicate a consent to the use of such drugs. However, USA physicians have already proposed some guidelines in the event of normal individuals asking for cognitive enhancers. Therefore, the enhancing debate cannot be assumed to be a “phantom debate”.



### ARE WE ALREADY USING SMART DRUGS and WHY?

A recent anonymous survey published on Nature has surprisingly shown that a non inconspicuous number of university professor and students, especially from highly rated and competitive Universities (mostly from English speaking countries) make use of cognitive enhancers (“smart drugs”). These drugs can be purchased on the internet, although they usually require a prescription. Interesting enough, one of the people of the Nature survey made the claim that the use of (neuro) enhancement is *almost mandatory for a professor when dealing with heavy schedules and frequent flights*.

### ETHICS OF ENHANCEMENT: A TWO-SIDED COIN

It is possible to distinguish between ethical issues emerging from the **management of enhancing drugs and ethical issues of principle**. Within the **ethical issue of management of enhancing drugs** lie the problem of **safety**, with a particular attention to possible side effects, **equality** of access in order to avoid potential social discrimination; finally, the question of **regulation and control** of production and commercialization. All the management questions concern the effectiveness of such drugs to enhance human mental capacity, which is not scientifically unproblematic.

The **ethical issue of principle** regarding enhancing drugs directly links with the notion of human identity. It is possible to assume **human identity as self-control or as self-expression**. In the first case, we are deprived of our real self if we are not able to control or direct our actions; in the second case, we are not really ourselves if our lives are not expressions of our real nature. Consequently in the first perspective (neuro) enhancement is only a new form of the old attitudes of human beings to build themselves, while in the second perspective (neuro) enhancement is a new threat to the real human nature.

### ENHANCEMENT and ANTHROPOLOGY

The concept of enhancement has certainly much to do with our vision of man and it is so deeply rooted in our perception of ourselves, as free individuals, that the debate has kept constantly articulated and controversial from the very beginning. There are strong advocates and

opponents of (neuro) enhancement; neither group seems to pay attention to the other’s opinions and justifications and any change of position is almost impossible!

### ENHANCEMENT and GOVERNANCE

Enhancement can be thought of as a process of technological innovation driven by a particular philosophical understanding of man and the world he lives in (or, also, as the product of an anthropological vision that implicitly or explicitly underlies neuroscientific theories). To protect the integral good of the human person such process must be certainly taken into account and a particular attention and reflection must be placed on the area of social life which is called upon to manage and direct this kind of innovation within the community, in order to transform it into an instrument of authentic human development. We are used to call this form of management, governance. The connection between governance and development is two-ways: on the one hand, the term development besides the term governance means to take the human person back to the core of social life, as an end; at the same time, by stressing that development requires governance we mean that the ethical dimension is not a juxtaposed element in the management of technological innovation and address thereof, but rather the recognition of a number of meaningful questions that lie at the heart of every authentic development. Therefore, introducing the governance of enhancement means, on the one hand, not to delegate the management of innovation to institutions and, on the other hand not to assume, at the level of individuals and institutions, a passive role on these issues. Thus understood, governance represents and means the care of both individuals and groups; in this way, the progress deriving from technological innovation can really contribute to creating an authentic human development, the one directed towards the search and protection of the common good.

### CONCLUSIVE REMARKS

We cannot answer the enhancement dilemma if we elude important questions regarding human identity and human *telos*.

From the concept of human person presented above, we ask ourselves: is a mediation between **human identity as self-control or as self-expression possible**? We believe that the human person, as a dynamic being, may in fact mediate between nature and nurture; she can potentially be the starting point for the definition of an ethical limit of the technical modification of man, who is naturally technical, that is in need of a balance between *physis* (nature) and *techné* (technology). At the same time, we also know that man’s nature can and should be taken into account in his actions: “Man can destroy the world. He can manipulate himself. He can, so to speak, make human beings and he can deny them their humanity. How do we recognize what is right? How can we discern between good and evil, between what is truly right and what may appear right?”

Man is not merely self-creating freedom. Man does not create himself. He is intellect and will, but he is also nature, and his will is rightly ordered if he respects his nature, listens to it and accepts himself for who he is, as one who did not create himself. In this way, and in no other, is true human freedom fulfilled” (Benedict XVI, Apostolic Journey To Germany, 22-25 September 2011, Visit to the Bundestag, Address of his Holiness Benedict XVI, Reichstag Building, Berlin Thursday, 22 September 2011).

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