

Jan-Christoph Heilinger: Anthropologie und Ethik des Enhancements

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With his work on ‘Anthropologie und Ethik des Enhancements’ (‘Anthropology and Ethics of Enhancement’), the German author Jan-Christoph Heilinger made another contribution to the book series ‘Humanprojekt’, which is published in cooperation with the *Berlin-Brandenburgische Akademie der Wissenschaften* by the renowned Berlin publishing house De Gruyter. The scientific research projects in the 1980s in the area of gene therapy, gave rise to a debate on the ethical assessment of a genetic ‘enhancement’ or improvement of human qualities. The attentive reader will already find a number of remarks about a possible enhancement of individual persons in Rawls’ *Theory of Justice*, in the context of a discussion on compensatory justice to redress unfair outcomes of the ‘natural lottery’. What is the appropriate normative point of view to assess such non-therapeutic, hopefully beneficial interventions into the human genome? Is it sufficient to apply the established principles of medical ethics or does the range of such an endeavour demand a much broader philosophical analysis?

It is Jan-Christoph Heilinger’s concern to demonstrate that an adequate examination of this field of research also requires the consideration of central topics of philosophical anthropology. This is particularly evident in the case of philosophers who propagate ‘transhumanism’, i.e. the overcoming of the *conditio humana* by biotechnical means. However, the reference to anthropology makes the present work a very ambitious endeavour, due to the continual scientific critique of the content and methodology of philosophical anthropology. Fortunately, the author has an impressive knowledge at his disposal of both the historical development and the current discussion on philosophical anthropology.

The book consists of four parts, whereby part I deals with the anthropological relevance of human enhancement, part II analyses and discusses different approaches to defining enhancement, part III gives an overview and critique of selected voices in the ethical debate, while part IV develops the book’s core philosophical argument (‘Anthropologie und anthropomome Ethik’, ‘Anthropology and Anthroponomous Ethics’). The organised and

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well-structured composition of the work makes it easy for the reader to follow Heilinger's line of argumentation.

The author characterises his research as an interdisciplinary study between applied ethics, philosophical anthropology, normative ethics and meta-ethics (p. 16). The anthropological question 'What is man?' is conceived as an ethical and hermeneutic question. Heilinger does not deny the importance of new insights of the natural sciences into the human body and mind, but he is critical of a mere external or objective definition of man. Philosophical anthropology, as the systematic reflection by human beings *on* human beings, uses scientific concepts and terms for the description and interpretation of man's specific qualities. Following a formulation of the German philosopher Volker Gerhardt, anthropology is, according to Heilinger, then the "conceptual self-interpretation of man" (p. 46). Due to such a hermeneutic methodological conception, communication and public discussion have a central relevance in later parts of Heilinger's work.

In part II, Heilinger deals with the task of finding an appropriate definition of enhancement. He starts from the assumption that the notion of enhancement is unfortunately associated with a number of different prejudices, and wants to avoid a conceptual bias due to the unexamined definition of enhancement practices. In particular, he has the impression that the use of concepts like 'health' or 'nature' in the definition of enhancement could bias the further normative discussion. The decision to define enhancement practices as interventions 'beyond therapy' or 'beyond the natural' would then already anticipate a part of the ethical discussion. When, for example, therapeutic interventions are normally seen as useful and necessary interventions, the notion of enhancement could then automatically get the connotation of being superfluous and dubious. Therefore, the author favours a definition which he calls a 'dynamic minimal definition of enhancement': "Enhancement is an intentional intervention, which aims on specific changes in the – materially organised and mentally represented – human correlation of functions, which is evaluated positively by the subject" (translation CL) (p. 92). However, from my point of view, it is questionable whether the chosen definition is not too open and does not need a better specification by referring to one of the mentioned concepts (the majority of authors seems to prefer distinguishing enhancement from therapy, for obvious reasons).

In part III, Jan-Christoph Heilinger analyses three different approaches in the ethical discussion of enhancement: firstly, the writings of the so-called transhumanist authors, secondly, the well-known report of the U.S. President's Council on Bioethics, and thirdly a recent study which uses the established principles of medical ethics for an evaluation of brain interventions (p. 145 ff.) Particularly the conclusions from the analysis of the transhumanist arguments in para. (9.3) are brilliantly written and contain a number of central reservations towards the transhumanist 'movement'. Maybe it would have been useful to make some remarks on the notion of 'bioconservatism' (which has been introduced by transhumanist authors to designate critics of enhancement). Given that most of today's medical ethics and law as well as the international conventions and documents in the field acknowledge the importance of the integrity of the human body and psyche, probably most of these positions should then be termed as 'bioconservative'.

In part IV, the author describes four 'significant components' of the notion of man as an outline for his anthropological approach. The four components are the human existence as living organism, embodiment and consciousness, the human need for orientation which is satisfied by cultural and religious concepts and ideas, and the capability for self-determination. The author, however, does not aspire to represent a closed and completed concept of man; his approach rather serves as a reasonable starting point for philosophical

and public deliberation. The weakness in the argumentation is found not so much in the description of the four components as such, but rather in the following discussion in which the author interprets self-determination as the *decisive* component for the ethical evaluation of enhancement practices. The reader would also be interested in the consequences of the remaining 'significant components' for the assessment of human enhancement (which is partially dealt with in the exemplary discussion of some applications of enhancement technologies in chapter 19). Additionally, the focus on self-determination points to a scenario where a person wants to enhance herself, while the other scenario, the one where a person wants to enhance another human being (which at the moment does not have the capability of self-determination), fades into the background. However, the idea of publicity and public deliberation (pp. 209 ff., pp. 252 ff.) is an important addendum to Heilinger's approach and can compensate eventual conceptual problems.

The present book is obviously an important work which, in a persuasive way, connects the enhancement debate with philosophical anthropology. Similarly, it is a good point of reference for the development and modernisation of anthropological methods and procedures. One can hope that the inspiring analysis which was started here will lead to a more extensive debate on the field of anthropology and enhancement.