

The Concept of “Autonomy” And Its Relationship with the Idea of Transhumanism

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Abstract

Medicine has a lot of principles that need to be complied with especially when it comes to saving the life of the individual and, at the same time, respecting his rights. Today there are increasingly more cases of malpraxis either because these principles are not fully complied with or out of negligence. We believe that one of the most important principles of medicine is autonomy, whereas it is essential for the individual to act in accordance with his principles and values or those of the society where he lives. In this paper I shall analyze the concept of autonomy and its relationship with transhumanism. I shall argue that within human enhancement - whether cognitive enhancement or human enhancement - the individual must be autonomous and must be able to decide regarding his maximum benefit. We believe that human bioenhancement is a project that – when put into practice - could have negative consequences, since moral enhancement is rather seen as a danger to the freedoms and autonomy of the individual.

Keywords: *Autonomy, transhumansim, medicine, human enhancement, cognitive enhancement*

1.Introduction

”Man, as the subject of knowledge, can transform almost anything into an object of the cognitive act: nature, his corporality, even the laws of his own thinking [...] but there always remains something that is less transparent to investigations” (Manea, T., 2003). Analyzed from different points of view within philosophy, man and his rights have been widely discussed; today we are again facing an attempt to define man, but from other perspectives: ethical, bioethical, medical, transhumanist, etc., but especially in terms of the relationships between the individual and the idea of good life, autonomy, freedom, right.

In antiquity, the concept of autonomy had political connotations. In medical practice, autonomy involves the patient’s free access to any information regarding his health; it is the realisation of the rational consciousness related to the individual freedom (Crăciun, P., Vicol, M.C., Turliuc, Ș.,

Astărăstoiaie, V., 2012, pp. 21-30). As we all know, science and technology have developed and so have the risks that the individual has to face when it comes to using them. It is not only about mass destruction weapons, but also about the life of the individual, especially when using the new technologies within medically assisted human reproduction. In Nick Bostrom's view, transhumanism is not a dogmatic philosophy, but rather a cultural movement that supports the transformation of the human condition for the purpose of its improvement and enhancement (Bostrom, N., Roache, R., 2008); the view on technology is, thus, interpreted in terms of the development of the new technologies that could help the individual overcome his biological limitations, thus enabling such a post-human reality (Bostrom, N., 2001). We believe that once the new technologies have emerged within the life of the individual, they have altered his existence (both in the private and the public sphere).

Nowadays, democratic promises are increasingly affecting us in the sense that each individual wants to have their freedom respected and to have the state interfere in his private sphere as little as possible, or to have the privilege of being able to decide regarding the person he wishes to vote for or whether he wants to have children or not, etc. We all agree that, if we could choose how our child will be like, we would decide to choose high intellectual and physical abilities, outstanding aesthetic qualities, or - at least during adolescence – obedience. These wishes – if we can call them that - are now unachievable since currently there are no technologies that could replace the aggression gene with a gene of obedience, nor can we make them more beautiful than nature can. In this context, we believe it is necessary to feature the autonomy of the individual, which is an aspect that, in our opinion, could be violated, especially when it comes to using the new technologies within medically assisted human reproduction. The philosopher who explicitly formulated the principle of autonomy was Immanuel Kant, who believed that free will is the supreme principle of morality (Massini Correias, C.I., pp. 487-504) and "the sole principle of all moral laws and of the duties corresponding to them [...]. The sole principle of morality consists in the independence from all matter of the law and in the determination of the freedom of choice as a simple legislative universal form" (Kant, I., 1972, pp. 121-122).

The principle of autonomy is considered to be:

- The basis of moral duty, which lies in the practical reason of the subject expressed by its own laws (Croitoru, R., 2006, p. 9)
- In order to become the basis of duty, practical reason must have universal value (Croitoru, R., 2006, p. 9)

For Beauchamps and Childress, the concept of autonomy means self-determination, which is achieved without the control and interference of other persons and is correlated with the exercise of choice, individuality and originality (Beauchamps, T., Childress, J.F., 1994): „some theories of autonomy feature the traits of the autonomous person, which include capacities of self governance,

such as understanding, reasoning, deliberating, and independent choosing [...] some writers argue that autonomy is a matter of having the capacity to reflectively control and identify with one's basic (first order) desires or preferences through higher level (second order) desires or preferences" (Beauchamps, T., Childress, J.F., 2001).

2. The concept of "autonomy" in postmodernism

The debates regarding autonomy in the postmodern period bring on different specifications of the concept of autonomy: on the one hand, respecting the privacy of others, protecting confidential information, obtaining informed consent, etc. Julian Săvulescu makes a clear distinction between the Kantian and Millian view of autonomy and believes that "the individual should be encouraged to make rational choices that would improve his authenticity and quality of life [...] and certain choices, no matter how destructive they might seem, are sometimes essential for the individual in the construction of his own life and well-being" (Sandu, A., 2012). Given that science and technology have developed extremely fast, the individual is morally obliged to use the new technologies in a rational manner, as they can seriously harm the mankind by reporting with educational experience (Esi, 2010, 41-50). It is not only about atomic or biological mass destruction weapons, but also about the application of the new technologies within medically assisted human reproduction.

As mentioned previously, in a not too distant future could science and technology could bring out the latest developments in the field of genetic engineering, and thus we shall be able to decide what kind of children to have: we believe that the great majority would like to have healthy, physically and morally improved children, with outstanding qualities. We have not yet asked ourselves how we shall relate to those children. Will they be treated in an instrumental manner or shall we treat them like our parents or grandparents treated their children? Obviously this question is difficult to answer because the differences between generations (not to say between centuries) regarding the way of thinking and the prejudices are obvious. Another issue that should be raised is related to the way the enhanced generation could treat their children. We obviously cannot know that; however, we can clearly assume that, from the moral perspective, the future generations will be morally improved since this is the only way that we can use the resources of the earth and the new technologies rationally.

Julian Savulescu believes that we need moral bioenhancement, and this can only be achieved through the interference of the new technologies, since "a project of understanding and changing the human behaviour is an urgent priority" (Persson, I., Săvulescu, J., 2014), and "if we had some extremely effective techniques of moral bioenhancement and increased the use of traditional moral education, we could determine the motivational states of people (if the doctrine of necessity rules the field of human behaviour). However, this would not mean that these people are not responsible: people can be responsible for the way they act and react in different situations, even if someone else has determined the way they will react in those situations" (Persson, I., Săvulescu, J., 2014).

However, we believe that human bioenhancement involves the modification and alteration of the individual and entails many risks: firstly, the autonomy of the individual: mental alteration means that he no longer has autonomy over his own person and his actions: he is programmed to carry out only moral actions. We have in this situation the idea of the “human values by reporting with stereotypes” (Esi, 2010, 140-146). But what if this situation were to turn, and we would use moral bioenhancement in order to overpower a certain segment of the population (soft slavery) (Terec-Vlad, L., Terec-Vlad, D., 2013) or, why not, in order to overpower a human race. Therefore, the transhumanist proposals regarding human enhancement and cognitive enhancement can be questioned given that the freedom and autonomy of the individual could be substituted.

Human bioenhancement could be a starting point, especially when talking about the tendency of the individual to destroy the planet, or to build biological and nuclear weapons; however, we cannot improve a race at cognitive level only out of the fear regarding the new scientific findings that could entail various consequences. However, Persson and Savulescu believe that “some children should be subject to moral bioenhancement just like they are now subject to traditional moral education” (Person, I., Savulescu, 2014).

Paraphrasing Vasile Astărăstoae, we believe that “the sleep of bioethics produces monsters”, given that any violation of the bioethical principles entails serious consequences. The paternalistic attitude of a parent wishing to have a morally enhanced child contradicts the principle of autonomy, because once the children are programmed to act in a certain way, their right to decide no longer exists.

3. Conclusions and suggestions

In this paper we have analyzed the concept of autonomy and we have discussed several issues related to the freedom of the individual, given the fact that the transhumanist proposals of moral bioenhancement are questioned because, in our opinion, they violate the fundamental freedoms of the individual on the one hand. We believe that, from the perspective of the democratic rights, we have the possibility to choose whether we do harm or good, but under no circumstances can we create human puppets with the help of the new technologies only in order to support a project that could subsequently be considered the beginning of soft slavery.

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