

Binocularity in Bioethics—and Beyond

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Abstract¹

Parens (2015) defends a habit of thinking he calls “binocularity,” which involves switching between analytical lenses (much as one must switch between seeing the duck vs. the rabbit in Wittgenstein’s famous example). Applying this habit of thought to a range of debates in contemporary bioethics, Parens urges us to acknowledge the ways in which our personal intuitions and biases shape our thinking about contentious moral issues. In this review of Parens’s latest book, we reflect on our own position as participants in the so-called “enhancement” debates, where a binocular approach could be especially useful. In particular, we consider the case of “love drugs,” a subject on which we have sometimes reached very different conclusions. We finish with an analogy to William James’s (1907) distinction between “tender-minded” rationalists and “tough-minded” empiricists, and draw some general lessons for improving academic discourse.

¹ Please note: this abstract will not appear in the final, published version. It is included here for reference only.

Introduction

Polarization in political discourse is arguably worse today than it has been at any point in the last two decades (Pew Research Center, 2014). The problem appears to be affecting science as well. As Thomas Ploug and Søren Holm argue, polarization in scientific communities can generate conflicts of interest for individual researchers: they can become more interested in scoring points for their “side” than in getting to the bottom of an empirical dispute (Ploug & Holm, 2015; see also Earp, 2015). This, in turn, could “threaten the objectivity of science, and [thereby] bias public debate and political decision-making” (Ploug & Holm, 2015, p. 356), bringing the problem of polarization fully around.

In his discriminating new book on the subject, Erik Parens, senior research scholar at the Hastings Center and fellow of the Center for Neuroscience and Society at the University of Pennsylvania, offers both a diagnosis and a partial solution to such poisonous polarization. Elegantly written, insightful, and uncharacteristically personal for Parens, *Shaping Our Selves: On Technology, Flourishing, and a Habit of Thinking* (Oxford University Press, 2015) is a discourse on ethics in the broadest sense. That is, it is a sustained reflection on what it is for creatures like us to live a life well, together.

This book should appeal to anyone who thinks seriously about such questions. And it should especially appeal to those who wish to engage in debates in this area—or in any area—in a way that is productive, rather than antagonistic. As Parens writes, “I would be elated if the habit of thinking [I describe in my book] would [prove] useful to all sorts of people engaged in all sorts of debates,” rather than in just the set of cases he describes (p. 10). Indeed, this habit, which Parens calls “binocularity,” should be useful well beyond his field of bioethics.

Bioethicists are not Ethical Wizards

Parens is actually uncomfortable with the label “bioethicist.” As he laments, bioethicists are often seen, and indeed frequently behave, as if they had all of the important answers: if you don’t know what’s right or wrong in a tricky moral situation, ask a bioethicist and she will tell you. But ethics, including bioethics, is not really about what is right or wrong, permissible or impermissible, what we are obligated to do and what we are obligated not to do. Instead, the questions that we ask when we engage in serious ethical reflection are much bigger and less simple (or simple-minded) than that. What the inquiry is really about is “the meaning of being human and about how we ought to live: questions about the nature of persons and what makes them truly flourish, about the nature of the various means we use to pursue our flourishing, about what if anything we owe our fellow citizens when we seek our flourishing, and so forth” (p. 3-4).

In other words, it’s complicated. There are no simple, straightforward answers that can lay claim to ultimate moral truth. Invariably, although it is easy to forget, there are other valid sides to every issue, other perspectives to be thoroughly considered. And it is only when we honestly engage with these other perspectives, Parens argues, that we can hope to achieve an adequate understanding of what is really at stake in our moral disagreements.

All too often, however, we fail to do this. Instead, we fall prey to what Parens calls the “first law of thinking dynamics” (p. 40): the Law of Conservation of Mental Energy (CME). According to CME, when we think about polarizing questions, and especially when our own views huddle toward one side or the other, “we tend to use as little mental energy as is compatible with continuing to fancy ourselves intellectually respectable” (p. 40). It is often easier, that is, to downplay or even ignore the most compelling arguments from the “other side,” than it is to acknowledge their strength or insightfulness and work on developing a more nuanced view.

It is an obvious point, yes. And one wishes that it didn’t need repeating. But given the

state of contemporary public discourse, Parens's analysis could not be more timely. As is increasingly becoming apparent, we exist now in a climate of knee-jerk (especially online) outrage in response to perceived transgressions (see, e.g., Dougherty, 2014); a climate where identity politics too often stand in for argument, and social signaling for dispassionate research (Niemietz, 2014; Lukianoff, 2014). In this climate, it is perhaps more important than ever to be wary of what Parens calls "intellectual laziness masquerading as moral courage" (p. 164).

Introducing Binocularity

As an antidote to this kind of laziness, Parens proposes a habit of thinking he calls "binocularity." This is "a habit of remembering that my insights are partial, both in the sense that they are always incomplete and in the sense that they reflect a stance toward the world that feels congenial to me" (p. 10). Building on a metaphor about depth perception first encountered in an essay by Jonathan Glover (2004), he writes that "this habit requires constantly remembering that, if we want deeper understanding—and ultimately better action—we need to aspire to think with at least two 'lenses' at once. Much as our brains achieve visual depth perception by integrating the slightly different information that our two eyes give us, we can achieve depth of understanding by integrating the greatly different insights that at least two conceptual lenses give us" (p. 33).

Parens draws on a range of cases to illustrate this habit. To take one example, he discusses the well-known debate within the field of disability studies that pits the "medical" model of disability against the "social" model. According to the social model, "impairment is a function of the social world in which the person ... lives," and therefore the appropriate response to disability is to change the relevant social conditions and attitudes, rather than the bodies of the people with purported disabilities (p. 135). According to the medical model, by contrast,

disability is “there to see, as clear as day, in the patient’s body.” The best way to help people with disabilities (according to this view) is “to change their bodies [with the help of medicine] to allow them to accommodate to the dominant way of doing things” (p. 136).

Of course, it isn’t either/or ... and that is the whole lesson of Parens’s book in a nutshell. To make progress in these debates (as in so many others), he suggests, we need to avoid the temptation of allowing the hammer of our preferred conceptual framework to turn every answer into a nail. Instead, we need “at least two lenses.” In the disability case, “we need to consider how ‘socially’ constructing disabling traits differently—and how ‘medically’ constructing (and managing) those traits—can *both* help to promote the flourishing of people with disabilities” (p. 137, emphasis added).

Human Enhancement

And so it is with the debate on human “enhancement” (for overviews, see Earp, Sandberg, Kahane, & Savulescu, 2014; Hauskeller, 2013, 2014). As participants in this debate ourselves, we admit that we have often been tempted to take a clear stand either for or against enhancement—or for or against a particular kind of enhancement—even though we know very well that it is never so easy. Our position usually reflects some true insight, but so does the position of our opponents. It is important, therefore, to be aware of the lopsidedness of our own perspective, and of the fact that it is rooted (at least in part) in our own unique life experiences and individual character. We have no privileged access to the truth.

As a consequence of this fact, there is nearly always something important to be learned from listening to those we disagree with—really listening—and trying to understand what is right about their perspective. Sometimes, this habit of thinking reveals that our positions are not as divergent as we thought. We may find, for example, that we “share the same fundamental

moral ideal but see it from such different stances and through such different lenses” (p. 50) that our agreement on a deeper level is being overlooked.

Consider that those who are generally in favor of enhancement (the “enthusiasts”), and those who are more suspicious of it (the “critics”), actually share the same moral ideal of authenticity. They just interpret it in different ways. As Parens argues, the former are more inclined to see human nature as essentially transformative and progressive (thus adopting what we may call a “creativity stance”), whereas the latter are more inclined to emphasize the essential goodness of what we have and are already (thus adopting what we may call a “gratitude stance”). On this view, staying “true to ourselves” as authenticity demands can mean very different things depending upon one’s starting point. But neither interpretation is truer or more appropriate than the other. Both creativity and gratitude are valid perspectives; both have an important role to play in a life well-lived.

Love Drugs and Authenticity

Let us finish with a concrete example. In roughly the middle of *Shaping Our Selves*, Parens turns to the case of so-called “love drugs,” which might be used to enhance adult romantic partnerships (Savulescu & Sandberg, 2008; Earp, Sandberg, & Savulescu, 2012; Earp, Sandberg, Savulescu, & Anderson, 2013; Earp, Sandberg, & Savulescu, 2015; Earp, Wudarczyk, Foddy, & Savulescu, in press; Wudarczyk, Earp, Guastella, & Savulescu, 2013). As one could imagine, “critics” of enhancement find much to worry about in this scenario: as the President’s Council on Bioethics (2003) states, “[a] drug-induced ‘love’ is not just incomplete ... [it] is also unfounded, not based on anything—not even visible beauty—from which such emotions normally grow” (p. 253).

That is not a perspective with which we would necessarily disagree. But there is an

important distinction to be drawn, Parens argues, between a pill to *create* love (out of thin air, as it were), and one that would help *maintain* love between an established couple by subtly influencing their neurochemistry. For even so-called “enthusiasts” of enhancement, such as Julian Savulescu and Anders Sandberg (who are responsible for initiating ethical reflection on “love drugs” in the first place), agree that the former “is more likely to create inauthentic love, since the causal reasons for the love may lie in the drug ... rather than the particular person loved” (2008, p. 40). By contrast, a drug that worked by facilitating states of mind and behaviors that could *help* a couple connect authentically would be much less morally problematic (Earp et al., 2015).

So it isn’t as simple as being “for” love drugs or being “against” them (just as it isn’t as simple as being “for” or “against” the social constructionist vs. medical view of disability). Instead, a binocular perspective reveals that both critics of enhancement as well as enhancement enthusiasts share an underlying commitment to the promotion of human flourishing. If a drug only served to alienate someone from the “real” world, then, or if it conjured a mere illusion of love, then both sides would presumably reject it.

As Parens notes, “nobody’s for soma,” the drug of Aldous Huxley’s (1932) *Brave New World*. Similarly, although they may disagree on what its essential features are, or on how to identify it as opposed to alternatives, “nobody’s against true enhancement” either (p. 95). That is, nobody—not even the most strident critic of the enhancement project—is opposed on principle to the use of technology for the bona fide betterment of the human condition.

A Pragmatic Conclusion

Although he doesn’t mention it, Parens’s approach is reminiscent of William James’s 1907 account of the philosophical differences between rationalists and empiricists. As James saw

it, the difference was largely a matter of diverging temperaments: rationalists were “tender-minded” and empiricists “tough-minded.” What Parens suggests, in essence, is a pragmatist solution to the quarrel between tough-minded enhancement enthusiasts and tender-minded critics. The trick is to recognize the affinities and to search for common ground.

The truth is, we are all biased. Enhancement critics have been accused of suffering from a “status quo bias,” which may well be true, but enthusiasts suffer from their very own status quo bias: “they tend to be biased in favor of accepting more of the same, where ever-expanding technological intervention into our selves and the rest of the natural world is the status quo” (p. 90). Since complete objectivity is impossible, we should acknowledge our temperaments and biases, and strive to recognize that those held by others may yet yield valuable insights from which we could learn.

Biographies of Reviewers

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