In Defense of the ‘Human Prejudice’

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ABSTRACT

Those who favor genetic enhancement of human beings (‘trans-humanists’) tend to hold that there is nothing special about being human, if by ‘human’ people mean ‘being member of the species homo sapiens’. They reject the arguments of bio-conservatives as prejudicial toward the concept of humanity, and they argue that species-membership in general is morally irrelevant. In ‘The Human Prejudice’, Bernard Williams defends what he calls ‘humanism’ (and what others call ‘speciesism’) and argues that species-membership is a morally relevant fact about us. Williams’s argument has been criticized by many, and in this paper, the author, focuses on the most thorough attack by Julian Savulescu. They provide a diagnosis of why accounts such as his seem to be so misguided to trans-humanists (like Savulescu) and the author then defend Williams’s account. In short, the paper argues that there is nothing obviously wrong with being a speciesist.

Keywords: Bernard Williams, Bio-conservatism, Genetic Enhancement, Speciesism, Trans-Humanist

INTRODUCTION

Genetic modification and enhancement of human beings has recently become one of the central issues in biomedical ethics, since today technology could be used to change and to shape our biological characteristics, our cognitive and psychological capacities, and even our dispositions. The ethical implications of this technological leap are still far from being clear: should we embrace technology and make the best of its new promise, or should we (at the very least) pause and reflect on what this would entail for us as humans? On the meta-philosophical level, the central question in this debate is this: which conceptual framework are we to use when thinking about technology in the sphere of bioethics? Some influential analyses of technological issues in bioethics rely on the framework of ‘rights’ and ‘duties’, ‘benefits’ and ‘harms’, etc. and these hold that questions about permissibility of practices such as genetic enhancement or human cloning should ultimately be answered in these now familiar moral terms. Versions of this position have been defended by John Harris (2007), Allen Buchanan (2008) and Nicholas Agar (2004). On the other hand, there are conservative voices that urge us to use a wider conceptual framework in our ethical inquiry into technology’s impact on our lives. Michael Sandel (1998, 2005) has been insisting that modern liberalism is ill-equipped to do justice even to political issues, much less to genetic modification (2007). Similarly, Jürgen Habermas (2003) and Leon Kass (1972, 1998) have argued that we need to return back...
to the ethical question of what it means to be human and to look at issues in bioethics from this point of view. Thus, Kass (1972) famously claimed that ‘new biomedical technologies are challenging many of the formulations which have served since ancient times to define the specifically human’ (p. 18; emphasis added).

In particular, in today’s discussions of genetic modification of human beings the divide between the liberal and the conservative approaches to ethical questions in technology is both stark and clear. Those who favor genetic enhancement (‘trans-humanists’) tend to hold that there is nothing special about being human, if by ‘human’ we mean ‘being member of the species homo sapiens’. They reject the arguments of ‘bio-conservatives’ as prejudiced toward humanhood, and they argue that species-membership in general is morally irrelevant. In what follows, I focus on one prominent aspect of this discussion—the question whether species-membership is morally relevant to issues such as genetic modification of human beings. The most detailed and influential defense of the thesis that species-membership is morally relevant was developed by Bernard Williams (2006): in ‘The Human Prejudice’, he argues for a position that he calls ‘humanism’ (and that others call ‘speciesism’). Williams’s argument subsequently has been criticized by many, and I will look at the most thorough attack on it, one made by Julian Savulescu (2009). I will provide a diagnosis of why accounts such as Williams’s seem to be so misguided to trans-humanists and I will offer a defense of Williams’s humanism. In doing this, I aim to highlight the richness of the conceptual framework adopted by conservative arguments such as Williams’s. This, in turn, should allow us to understand better how to go about evaluating the ethics of today’s technological advances.

As a preliminary note, let me say that I will be using the terms ‘speciesism’ and ‘humanism’ to refer to the same position. The former is a term that has a negative connotation while the latter is rather positive, yet they denote the same theory or set of claims. I will use the term ‘speciesism’ when talking, for instance, about Peter Singer’s criticism of positions like Williams’s, since this is the way he refers to Williams’s view. On the other hand, when discussing Williams I will switch to ‘humanism’, again, because this is the way Williams refers to the position that he is defending.

SPECIESISM AND RACISM

Consider a common objection to speciesism, which is well-known from Peter Singer’s work. According to Singer (2009), speciesism is essentially akin to racism and sexism. In fact, when Singer launches this attack on positions such as Williams’s, he explicitly acknowledges that the term ‘speciesism’ is meant to flag this kinship. ‘I use the term “speciesism” deliberately’, he says ‘to make a parallel with other “isms” that we are familiar with, particularly racism and sexism’ and he cites ‘The Human Prejudice’ as an example of a speciesist point of view (p. 572). The aim of Singer’s ‘Speciesism and Moral Status’ is largely to undermine ‘speciesism’. In his comments on Williams, Singer says:

I do not see that the argument [in ‘The Human Prejudice’] is really different from a white racist saying, when it comes to a question about how one should treat people of different races, “Well, whose side are you on? We’re the ones doing the judging here, why don’t we simply prefer our kind because it is our kind?” (p. 572)

Thus, much like a racist who believes that membership in her race is morally significant and that it justifies treating members of other races as inferior, a speciesist takes membership in her species to be morally significant. Both are guilty of the same mistake in practical reasoning.

Singer’s earlier ‘All Animals Are Equal’ (1964) provides a better clue as to what he takes this mistake to consist in. ‘All Animals are Equal’ starts with a comment on what we can learn from the liberation movements that have ‘expanded our moral horizons’ (p. 1). He calls racist and sexist beliefs ‘latent prejudices’ which are, ultimately, ‘unjustifiable’. Once the prejudice is pointed out to us, we will make an ‘unaccustomed mental switch’ and, after ‘rethinking our most fundamental attitudes’, we will come to reject that prejudice in favor of
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