

## Enhancing Me, Enhancing You: Academic Enhancement as a Moral Duty

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### Introduction

Enhancements come in many shapes and forms: physical enhancements, cognitive enhancements, emotional enhancements, and, there is even a new kid on the block, moral enhancements (see Persson and Savulescu 2008; Douglas 2008). It is, however, the issue of cognitive enhancement that really gets the debate going. The controversy created by the commentary “Professor’s Little Helper” in *Nature* at the end of last year is an illustration of this point. It is a piece that is ostensibly about the increasingly common “off-label and non-prescription” uses of drugs such as methylphenidate (Ritalin) and modafinil (Provigil) (Sahakian and Morein-Zamir 2007, 1157). Nonetheless, reading the ensuing news stories and online comments one could be forgiven for thinking that the article was solely about the use of cognitive-enhancing drugs by ailing university professors and students desperate to gain an academic edge.

While not yet a professor (I am instead a “lecturer”), and I hope not yet ailing, I was intrigued by the commentary and some of the ensuing responses to it. As pointed out by Bernard Prusak in his introduction to this controversy, the concerns arising often focus on issues of “safety..., fairness and justice..., coercive pressure..., whether the use of such drugs is in fact unprecedented..., and...whether pharmacological enhancements are different in a morally significant way from more mundane forms of life-enhancers.” All of these concerns are generally raised in an attempt to answer the question of whether or not a particular type of enhancement, or means of achieving that enhancement, is *morally permissible*. Here, however, I do not want to look at whether cognitive enhancement by chemical means is permissible or not. This has been dealt with at length elsewhere (see Harris 2007; Rose 2006; and Sandel 2007). For the purposes of this article, I am going to

start with the premise that a competent individual crosses no moral boundary when voluntarily choosing to take drugs such as Ritalin and Provigil purely for the purposes of augmenting cognitive abilities. From this premise that cognitive enhancement by chemical means is morally permissible, I am going to take the argument one step further and suggest that, for academics at least, there might even be a moral duty to do so. Although I am sure there will be many objections to this suggestion, I will start by addressing just one possible objection, and I will then move on to sketch out an argument in support of the contention that academics might be under an obligation to take steps to cognitively enhance themselves.

### **Academia, Sport, and the Ethics of Cheating**

The possible objection that I have in mind is that it is cheating to use cognitive enhancing drugs. This objection can be found implicitly in an article entitled “Brain Enhancement is Wrong, Right?” by Benedict Carey in the *New York Times*. In it, he says:

So far no one is demanding that asterisks be attached to Nobels, Pulitzers or Lasker awards. Government agents have not been raiding anthropology departments, riffling book bags, testing professors’ urine. And if there are illicit trainers on campuses, shady tutors with wraparound sunglasses and ties to basement labs in Italy, no one has exposed them. (Carey 2008)

The analogy here is, of course, with doping in sport. The implicit accusation is that academics who take drugs to enhance certain aspects of their cognitive function are cheating. Thomas Douglas points out “[e]nhancement in sport and enhancement outside of sport are often discussed in parallel” (Douglas 2007); but, if you will excuse the pun, these two playing fields are not the same. Academia and sport operate under different sets of rules and have different sets of expectations placed upon them.

In the context of sport, Bennett Foddy and Julian Savulescu point out that “doping is the most widespread method of cheating” (Foddy and Savulescu 2007). Cheating it most certainly is, but the reason that the taking of enhancement type drugs is cheating in this context is because of the rules of the game that athletes are playing. Whatever the particular sport that individual athletes take part in, they are engaging in that sport at a competitive level which has preset criteria for their participation. One of those criteria is that competitors do not take certain chemical substances. This is the deal that they must agree to. As a result, if individual athletes choose to take banned

substances, they are contravening both the rules and the ideals of fair play and sportsmanship (see further Douglas 2007). If, however, the rules changed and these banned substances were permitted, then taking these substances would no longer be cheating.

The equivalent situation in the academic context is, perhaps, that of students taking drugs in order to perform well on examinations. Yet even in this situation, the accusation of cheating can only be levelled in virtue of the rules of the game. If the rules are such that they prohibit the use of chemical enhancers, or at least certain classes of them, then it would be wrong to use them in that particular circumstance. We are, however, free to change the rules and permit the use of enhancers; if we were to do so, this use would no longer be cheating. This is true whether we are talking about education or sport.

Of course, if we were to allow the use of these enhancers—for the sake of argument, let's say modafinil—it might well be the case that students would either choose not to use them or find that they could not afford them.<sup>1</sup> Such inequality is not, however, an argument in itself for proving that the use of modafinil by students should not be permitted. After all, there are other enhancement type technologies out there that students choose not to use or cannot afford: for example, availing of a private tutor. If enhancements are ever to be deemed morally problematic, then the problem will be not the enhancements themselves, but the context in which they are used.

Despite the obvious similarities between cheating in an examination-type situation and cheating in sport, no such equivalence exists for those of us who work as academics. There might be a resemblance in so far as there is definitely an element of competition in academia, but this is where the comparison must end. While I was quite tickled by Carey's notion of university campuses being raided to test professors for illicit substances, the level playing field is not the paradigm upon which academia is built. Far from it, academia in fact encourages the participants in the academic game to excel, push the bounds of knowledge, and stand out from their fellows. And we reward those who do so with promotion, large research grants, and prizes such as "Nobels, Pulitzers or Laskers" (Carey 2008). So perhaps the enhancement of cognitive abilities is not inimical to the role of an academic, but actually a requirement of it.

### **Academics: A Duty to Enhance?**

If academics are to act as role models for the next generation, then they may in fact have a moral obligation to take cognitive enhancers. The intellectual and moral shape of the nation in which they teach is arguably in their hands as educators. This brings with it a not insubstantial responsibility to fulfil

their role and discharge any corresponding duties. While it has been noted in studies that enhancement drugs are of benefit to “military commanders and air-traffic controllers,” Nick Bostrom claims in a letter published in *Nature* on “Professor’s little helper” that

[o]ther jobs are just as important and intellectually taxing—including the jobs of many scientists and academics. Anything that can help our brains deal better with the complex challenges of the twenty-first century is to be not only welcomed but actively sought. (Bostrom 2008)

To amplify this point, it is clear that there is an expectation upon the researchers and lecturers in our academic institutions not only to be competent in their roles, but to excel in them. It is not acceptable for them to sit comfortably on their laurels, happy with the knowledge and skills they have attained thus far in life. As part of their jobs, they are supposed to be constantly in pursuit of new knowledge or ways to push the bounds in their chosen fields. They currently do so through the development and expansion of their knowledge and skills base, including those needed for teaching, researching, publishing, presenting, obtaining and managing research grants, and public engagement activities. In this way they are continually improving and expanding both their cognitive and other abilities. These more traditional means of cognitive enhancement are undoubtedly helped chemically through imbibing unhealthy amounts of caffeine. The constant improvement and augmentation of their abilities helps them to be intellectually sharper, perform better at tasks, and produce higher level research.

The point that I am making is that it is not simply considered to be a matter of personal preference whether or not academics take the necessary steps to fulfil and excel in their roles; it is seen, by both the institutions that employ them and society at large, as an obligation that is part and parcel of the job. In this respect, cognitive enhancement in academia may be considered a duty. It is one that is generated by virtue of the role that academics have taken on. It is an obligation generated by the special relationship that they have both directly to their students in their role as educators and more generally to society in their role as researchers. It is an obligation to produce the best possible kind of research and deliver the best possible teaching.

If we are content that our cognitive development as academics through skills development, training, and the attainment of knowledge is a duty by virtue of the role we have taken on, then, when other methods become available that can also enhance our cognitive abilities, the employment of these might also be part of that duty (given, of course, that the chemical compound

is safe). I acknowledge that there will be those who may disagree with my characterization of both the responsibilities incumbent upon individual academics and the strength of the duties generated by these responsibilities, but that is going to have to be a debate for another occasion.

## A Final Word

I have argued that the use of enhancement-type drugs in the academic setting is not comparable to their use in sport. The professional academic plays by a different set of rules, and the improvement of our cognitive abilities is something that is not simply desirable, but is in fact expected as part of our roles. Academics are undeniably engaged in the business of cognitive enhancement. It could even be argued that the business of cognitive enhancement is the *raison d'être* of our academic institutions and those who work in them. Accordingly, it may well be the case that we have a duty to enhance our cognitive abilities in any way possible, including by chemical means.

Having argued for a moral obligation that might fall upon academics to enhance themselves, I hasten to note that, while researching for and writing this paper, I did not neglect my own duty in this respect. I consumed not one but several cups of that most enhancing of beverages: coffee. It does occur to me, however, that with modafinil I might have produced a markedly better piece of work. At the very least, I might have produced it faster and actually met the deadline for the paper.

## Note

1. This is unlikely to be the case, however, for modafinil. The price listed in the British National Formulary, which has details of all medicines prescribed in the UK, is £55.80 for 30 tablet, or £1.86 per tablet—less expensive than my daily latte.

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