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24.06J / STS.006J Bioethics
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Recitation 09: Enhancing, Treating, and Cheating

1. Administrivia

Paper #3 is due in class on **Ses L19** (This is next Thursday.)

Final paper is due in class on **Ses L26** (I strongly encourage you to meet with me to discuss your ideas beforehand.)

Lecture attendance is mandatory. Attendance and participation is part of your grade (15%).

2. Slippery-slope arguments: a review

[see separate handout]

3. Presentation: Guo-Liang Chew

4. Two kinds of questions

Distinguish:

- Classificatory questions (*e.g.*, what counts as enhancement?).
- Normative questions (*e.g.*, is enhancement permissible?).

5. Problems of classification

Is there a rigorous distinction between treatment and enhancement?

e.g., medicating: an old man with Alzheimer's disease; a forgetful old man; a forgetful middle-aged man; a forgetful young man; an otherwise normal young man.

e.g., surgery for: severe birth defects; moderate ones; minor ones; shape of nose, *etc.*

To what extent are our judgments sensitive to our socio-cultural-historical context?

e.g., reasonable treatments 100 years ago *vs.* today.

6. Ethical problems

What sorts of enhancements are permissible and in what contexts?

e.g., performance enhancing drugs in sports; performance enhancing drugs in academics.

Do we ever have an obligation to enhance ourselves?

e.g., do MIT students have an obligation to achieve academic excellence by any means?

When (if ever) do enhancements count as cheating?

e.g., study drugs before/during a test; test-prep courses; getting extra sleep.

On Slippery-Slope Arguments

A *slippery-slope argument* is an argument against a claim C —where C is usually a normative claim or a policy proposal. These arguments attempt to show that if we accept or adopt C , then, by some process (logical or causal), we will come to accept or adopt C' , where C' is horrible. On the basis of this, the argument concludes we ought not accept or adopt C .

Two kinds of slippery-slope arguments: about (i) beliefs, or (ii) policies.

Slippery-slope arguments take the following, general form:

P1. It will be horrible if we accept or adopt C_n .

P2. We should not accept or adopt a claim if doing so will lead to horrible consequences.

P3. For any i , if we accept C_i , then we will come to accept C_{i+1} .

C. We should not accept C_1

P3 does most of the work for slippery-slope arguments. There are two ways to justify it:

- logically: show how, at each step along the slope, we are rationally compelled to take the next step.
- causally: describe the mechanism that propels us along the slope. Here are a few candidates:
 - judgment retention
 - arbitrariness
 - status quo bias

There are a number of ways to respond to slippery-slope arguments:

1. Deny P3 (although watch out for having to either specify a threshold or describe why the causal mechanism fails).
2. Imprecise thresholds still offer thresholds.
3. Humans can recognize changes.
4. Humans can foresee consequences.
5. Large jumps make for implausible slippery-slope arguments.
6. Some slippery-slope arguments are just dogmatic defenses of the status quo; attack them as such.
7. Challenge P2, particularly when the argument involves beliefs: is the badness of consequences relevant to whether you should accept (or believe) C ?