

PANEL 4 ENHANCEMENT

COGNITIVE ENHANCEMENT

Just as some medications can enhance physical performance (e.g. of athletes), others allegedly enhance mental performance (e.g. wakefulness, attention, and clarity of thought), and reports from around the world suggest a rise in the use of drugs like Ritalin, modafinil, and donepezil for cognitive enhancement purposes, as well as unregulated devices that stimulate the brain through electrodes attached to the scalp using current drawn from 9 volt batteries.

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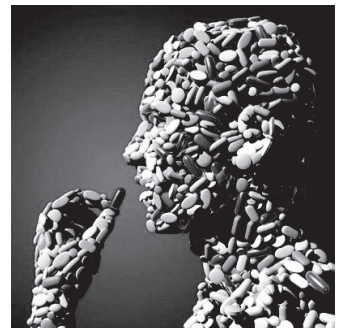
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Some can't wait for the nirvana of the cognitively enhanced future to arrive. An increasing number of studies cited in the media and in academic journals report that ordinary people like students, professionals, and video game players are increasingly using technology to boost their memory, wakefulness, attention, reflexes, and clarify of thought. Proponents of cognitive enhancement maintain that not only are there overwhelming and decisive reasons to embrace effective and side-effect-free cognitive enhancement technologies – only fools and neo-Luddites would bother resisting – but that those who oppose cognitive enhancement are ultimately concerned about something that, like death and taxes, is inevitable, and unlike death and taxes, does not even involve any morally significant sacrifices. Some also claim that the state should recognize and protect a right to mental self-determination, which should protect the choice of those who wish to enhance themselves against interference from government regulators and from others.

However, others rebuke the advocates, enthusiasts, and users of cognitive enhancement technologies as uninformed about the risks, and even as lacking moral rectitude. For instance, at Duke University students who use prescription medications like Ritalin and modafinil to enhance their academic performance now breach the university's policy on academic honesty. <http://studentaffairs.duke.edu/conduct/zpolicies/academic-dishonesty> Popping pills to get better grades is treated at Duke as an instance of cheating. Others also warn that unless we start thinking ahead real quick, once cognitive enhancement technologies become sufficiently effective and have sufficiently few adverse medical side effects, without adequate regulation people may eventually lose the freedom to choose whether to enhance themselves or not. The thought is that, without the right kind of

regulation, society will arrive at a “new normal”. This is a situation in which everyone has higher expectations of one another – expectations that originally increased due to the availability and use of cognitive enhancement technologies – and a concomitant duty to meet those elevated expectations which can only be met by using those technologies.

Do any of the above putative cognitive enhancement methods actually work? If so, precisely what kind and degree of effects do they have? How do they achieve those effects – i.e. through what mechanisms? What might be their short- and long-term (side) effects? Why do people turn to using cognitive enhancers? How should society regulate cognitive enhancers? Should they be banned? Or maybe promoted? Might we be negligent if we fail to use cognitive enhancers in some circumstances? Should cognitively enhanced people be held to a higher standard of care? Is it fair if some people enhance themselves while others do not (have access to enhancers)? Ought anyone be permitted to enhance themselves if this pressures others to do likewise? Are we less praiseworthy for accomplishments attained while cognitively enhanced? Does cognitive enhancement threaten authenticity or the self? And how do problems surrounding cognitive enhancement compare to problems of doping in sports?



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