

Review of:
Carl Elliott, *Better Than Well:
American Medicine Meets the American Dream* (New York:
Norton, 2003)

Carl Elliott's recent book *Better than Well: American Medicine Meets the American Dream* (2003) looks at enhancement technologies through the lens of identity in the contemporary American life. To mix the metaphor, Elliott uses enhancement technologies as a mirror in which we may catch glimpses of our anxious, protean selves. "The issues at stake in medical debates over enhancement technologies are important," he writes, "mainly because of what they can tell us about pathologies in the way we live. The uneasiness that many of us feel about enhancement technologies can tell us something important about selfhood, authenticity, and the good life."

Elliott does not advocate for or against enhancement technologies. Rather, he offers a cultural interpretation of their appeal and broadly assesses the moral benefits and costs of their use. In the tradition of David Reisman's *The Lonely Crowd* (1949), Phillip Rieff's *The Triumph of the Therapeutic* (1966), and Christopher Lasch's *The Culture of Narcissism* (1978), Elliott constructs an "ideal type" of personality to convey a central tendency in society and culture.

Elliott realizes that enhancement technologies (of which he covers a very wide range: accent reduction, transsexual surgery, cosmetic surgery, anti-depressants, anti-aging) are usually marketed and sold by taking advantage of

a person's perception that she is deficient in some way. This has led some observers to argue that the moral importance of enhancement technologies derives from "old fashioned American-style self-improvement". But Elliott argues that identity is a better framework than self-improvement for understanding the appeal of enhancement technologies. In his eyes, the significant question is not so much the social and cultural costs of the "quest to become BETTER, but whether there is any moral cost to becoming DIFFERENT. . . . Much because of our ambivalence is . . . about "what kinds of people we want to be . . . we have mixed feelings about the visions of the good life these technologies serve." (27)

Elliott's cultural interpretation draws on two master texts: Charles Taylor's *Sources of the Self* (1989) and Alexis de Tocqueville's, *Democracy in America* (1840/1945). From each text, Elliott takes an anchor for his argument. From de Tocqueville, Elliott borrows (as have countless commentators before him) the observation that Americans are chronically anxious about their status because they live in a fluid, competitive market society where identity is rarely fixed but rather confirmed by the social recognition of others. From Taylor, Elliott borrows the pervasive ideal of "authenticity", which has become a central element of modern identity. Authenticity is the ideal according to which each individual has a unique way of being human and each individual is obliged to live out that uniqueness.

Elliott finds authenticity a morally dangerous ideal, in which being in touch with your feelings has come to be an end in itself. Driven by the marketing engine of consumer culture, authenticity in many circles is

considered a higher form of life because "it is a life of fulfillment, a life in which you know who you are and live out your sense of your self." Elliott cites, Jan Morris' *Conundrum* a memoir about trans-sexual surgery, as an example of medical treatment motivated by the quest for identity, for the true self waiting to be expressed or found.

Elliott believes that Americans are drawn to enhancement technologies for highly problematic reasons. First, we are driven to alleviate the status anxiety created by marketplace competition and consumer culture. And second, we are addicted to an ideal of authenticity which leaves us with no moral horizons broader than individual self-fulfillment. Elliott's tone is much lighter, ironic, and humorous than critics like Phillip Rieff or Christopher Lasch. But the implication is clear: we cannot adequately assess enhancement technologies apart from understanding the cultural pathologies which partly give rise to them.

Better Than Well offers a shrewd, scientifically and philosophically sophisticated portrait of enhancement as a symptom of America's moral and spiritual inadequacy. I am sympathetic to Elliot's critique of enhancement in American culture. But Elliot misses key observations and nuances in his master texts (de Tocqueville and Taylor) and these weaken the force of his argument.

When de Tocqueville visited America in the 1830's, he was surprised by Americans' powerful commitment to religion--a commitment which shows no sign of abating in the 21st century. Elliott, on the other hand, follows the assumption of secularization built into almost all modernization theories--an assumption that contemporary

sociologists of religion now acknowledge is quite misleading. America's diverse religious communities are an important and relatively untapped resource for addressing the moral and spiritual problems posed by medical enhancement.

Among Jews, for example, the "Academic Coalition of Jewish Bioethicists" took up this issue in their 2004 annual conference (an edited collection is forthcoming). We need similar debates, perspectives and interdenominational dialogue from Christian, Islamic, Hindu and Buddhist theologians, preachers, and pastors. Each of these traditions contains frameworks of belief, hierarchies of value, and standards for living a good life, against which enhancement technologies can be evaluated.

If Elliott omits religion from de Toqueville's account of American culture, he also leaves out a crucial element in Taylor's ideal of authenticity. For Taylor, the moral value of authenticity does not lie in solipsistic efforts to live out the uniqueness of one's true self. In both *Sources of the Self* and *Ethics of Authenticity*, Taylor makes clear that authenticity worthy of the name contains external social and moral criteria, against which the authentic self wrestles. The resulting personal reappropriation contains external norms to which the authentic self holds herself accountable. Elliott, in other words, mistakes widespread, debased forms of authenticity in American culture, for the morally robust ideal. As a result, he paints too bleak a portrait of enhancement in American culture.

The appeal of enhancement technologies, as Elliott claims, does often reflect our anxieties, our obsession with presenting oneself in everyday life, and our concerns

about identity. But our culture has deep and diverse--if often conflicting--religious and resources to help formulate morally coherence stances toward enhancement. And it also contains a more robust ideal of authenticity, in which self-fulfillment culminates in self-transcendence. Of course, neither religion nor authenticity guarantees justified and reasonable policies, practices, or regulations. But each is a valuable moral resource overlooked or underestimated by Elliott.

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