ANTIDEPRESSANTS, BIOENHANCEMENTS, AND THE ETHICS OF SELF-RESPECT

by

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ABSTRACT

Antidepressants and bioenhancement technologies raise special concerns – both for those who use them and those who don’t – about who we are and how we should treat ourselves. In this dissertation, I confront these concerns by asking and answering two ethical questions about different forms of self-treatment. These are: 1. Is antidepressant use morally problematic insofar as it is self-objectifying?, and 2. Is bioenhancement use morally problematic insofar as it undermines self-respect? (Note: by “morally problematic,” I mean “possessing a wrong-making feature,” not “always wrong, all things considered.”)

The first two chapters focus on the former question – the question of whether antidepressant use is morally problematic insofar as it is self-objectifying. In order to answer this, I first step back, in Chapter 1, and look at the phenomenon of self-objectification generally construed. I draw from Martha Nussbaum’s and Rae Langton’s work on objectification to formulate my own definition of “self-objectification.” I then argue that self-objectification is indeed possible, and that it assumes a number of interesting forms.

The second chapter turns to the specific bioethical question of whether antidepressant use is morally problematic insofar as it is self-objectifying. I argue that the answer is “yes.” Although I’m not the first to voice this particular objection to antidepressant use, I extend this previous scholarship in two principal ways. First, I draw from my definition and analysis of self-objectification in Chapter 1 to characterize exactly how antidepressant use is self-objectifying, and to pinpoint the accompanying specific moral offense. Second, I argue in detail against Neil Levy’s contention that some cases of self-objectification with antidepressants are completely permissible.

In my third and final chapter, I turn to the second question: whether bioenhancement use is morally problematic insofar as it undermines self-respect. I argue that it is, while also acknowledging that there are other senses in which it, simultaneously, can promote self-respect. I offer a few options for conceptualizing this tension, and maintain that the undermining of self-respect nevertheless constitutes one reason to worry about bioenhancement technologies.

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