

# **Bio-Conservatism, Partiality, and The Human Nature**

## **Objection to Enhancement**

*Abstract:* ‘Bioconservatives’ in the human enhancement debate endorse the conservative claim that we should reject the use of biotechnologies that enhance natural human capacities. However, they often ground their objections to enhancement with contestable claims about human nature that are also in tension with other common tenets of conservatism. We argue that bioconservatives could raise a more plausible objection to enhancement by invoking a strain of conservative thought developed by G.A. Cohen. Although Cohen’s conservatism is not sufficient to fully revive the bioconservative objection, we argue that it can be supplemented by an account of reasonable partiality for humanity in a way that provides further support to the bioconservative position in a manner congruous with broader conservatism. We propose that the idea of partiality to humanity can buttress the bioconservative objection into its strongest possible form. However, we conclude by arguing that, even in this form, the objection cannot do all the work that bioconservatives expect of it.

The prospect of emerging biotechnologies that would enable us to enhance and even radically transform our natural human capacities has generated significant ethical controversy. Such enhancements might include the use of technologies that would increase a given capacity within the limits of normal human variation; call this sort of enhancement, ‘normal-range’ enhancement. An example would be the use of existing pharmaceuticals such as Modafinil to enhance cognitive capacity. However, enhancements might also include the use of technologies that would increase a given capacity beyond normal species variation; call such enhancements ‘normality transcending’ enhancements. An example would be the use of radical life extension technologies. Some normality transcending enhancements might even serve to render future people ‘posthuman’ (Fukuyama 2002).

The disagreement about the use of these technologies has commonly been framed as a debate between so-called ‘bioliberals’ and ‘bioconservatives’, with the latter arguing that we must restrict, or even outright ban, the use of human enhancement technologies because they would undermine something intrinsically valuable about being human (Roache and Clarke 2009, 1–2). Bioconservatives raise a range of objections to enhancement, but their opposition centrally revolves around the idea that our given human nature possesses a great and distinctive value that would be violated by enhancement technologies, particularly normality transcending enhancements that would radically alter our natural capacities.<sup>1</sup> On this view, human nature should be cherished, preserved and ‘conserved’, and to try to supersede it is either inherently wrong, or likely to lead to bad consequences (Fukuyama 2002; Habermas 2003; Kass 2003; President’s Council on Bioethics 2003, 295). Call this ‘the Human Nature Objection’, or ‘the HNO’ for short.

Describing opposition to enhancement as ‘bioconservatism’ can be misleading because it can give the impression that resistance to enhancement is to be found primarily in the political right. It is a striking feature of the debate, however, that while social and religious conservatives do fiercely object to enhancement (Kass 2003; Fukuyama 2002), as one might expect, anxiety about enhancement is not restricted to such circles (Macklin 2006, 35–36) and, indeed, is shared by major figures of the political left (Habermas 2003; Cohen, 2011). Moreover, bioconservatives do not always endorse other claims that are commonly associated with conservatism. Indeed, the HNO is arguably in tension with the Hobbesian view of human nature commonly endorsed by political conservatives, according to which humans are irrevocably selfish and fallible (Kekes 1997, 368; Scruton 2010). Political

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<sup>1</sup> Though Kahane & Savulescu (2015) point out that, applied on a large-scale, even normal range enhancements could have radical effects.

conservatives who endorse this view are unlikely to object to the use of human enhancement technologies on the basis that human nature is intrinsically valuable. Rather, they are likely to oppose enhancement on the grounds that human attempts to impose control upon their flawed nature will inevitably backfire because they will be carried out by beings who are subject to the constraints of the very nature that they are trying to improve.

The HNO has been central to bioconservatism. But it has also received forceful and sustained criticism that, in our view, opponents of enhancement have so far failed to address (Buchanan 2009; Buchanan 2011, Chapter 4; Harris 2007, Chapter 3; Kahane & Savulescu, 2015). In brief, the main challenge facing advocates of the HNO is to explain why the relatively contingent and arbitrary features of human nature, selected as they were by blind evolutionary processes, bear intrinsic value. Indeed, as mentioned above, the pessimistic account of human nature defended by many traditional conservatives presents a further challenge to the idea that we have inherent reasons to preserve human nature, as Buchanan (2011) points out.

In this paper, we shall assume that the HNO in its familiar form fails. We shall propose, however, that an important strain of conservative thought can be used to develop a more plausible variant. We shall suggest that the NHO can be grounded in the sort of conservative mode of valuing that G.A. Cohen (2011) has defended, according to which we should have a ‘ . . . bias in favour of retaining what is of value, even in the face of replacing it by something of greater value’ (G. A. Cohen 2011, 203). However, we shall also claim that, in its bare form, Cohen’s conservatism is not sufficient to fully revive the HNO. We shall argue that bioconservatives would do

best here to draw on the idea of reasonable partiality,<sup>2</sup> and ground the NHO in an appeal to partiality to humanity,<sup>3</sup> Whilst we suggest that this strategy can buttress the bioconservative objection into its strongest possible form, we shall conclude that, even in this form, the objection cannot do all the work that bioconservatives expect it to do. We shall begin by outlining the argument against enhancement that can be based on Cohen's conservatism, and explain why it fails to fully revive the bioconservative objection.<sup>4</sup>

## 1. Conservative Valuing and Human Enhancement

According to the conservative bias that Cohen defends, the fact that a bearer of value *exists* can be understood to confer value to that entity in abstraction from the value that it otherwise bears. To illustrate this bias, Cohen asks us to imagine a college that was founded for the purpose of providing excellent undergraduate education, and which does not incorporate a doctoral programme. Suppose new professors claimed that the college should admit doctoral students, as this would enhance the undergraduate education, and thus allow the college to better realize its purpose. Cohen suggests that a long-standing professor might oppose the proposal as follows:

In addition to consideration of what good we might do . . . there is also the consideration of what we are, of our identity, and we may legitimately have regard to our desire to preserve that identity. I believe that it belongs to the identity of (the college) . . . that we are an institution that caters only to undergraduates

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<sup>2</sup> We first proposed this approach in Pugh, Kahane and Savulescu, forthcoming. The present paper attempts to flesh out the preliminary sketch put forward in that chapter into a stronger version of the NHO, and ties it to broader themes in conservative thought.

<sup>3</sup> In brief remarks that anticipate the view we develop here, Robert Adams suggested that we can legitimately prefer the continuation of humanity to its replacement by a more excellent species (Adams, 1979, 62).

<sup>4</sup> We have previously explored this objection in Pugh, Kahane, and Savulescu (2013)

The professor continues:

I believe that it is worth preserving . . . not only because it satisfies the legitimate desire of many of us, but also because (the college) is a valuable social creation . . . (Cohen 2011, 5).

These remarks incorporate two arguments that correspond to a distinction that Cohen draws between two different modes of conservative valuing, which he terms ‘particular valuing’ and ‘personal valuing’. The argument in the first quote suggests that members of the college value the college because they each have a special relationship to it. Cohen terms this mode of valuing ‘personal valuing’. The argument in the second quote is that the college bears a distinctive value that even non-members have reason to preserve, by virtue of its being a valuable social creation. Cohen refers to this mode of valuing as ‘particular valuing’.

In the case of particular valuing, as well as some object’s being intrinsically valuable, Cohen suggests that we can value the extant particular entity that bears the intrinsic value. For instance, we might value a beautiful building like St. Paul’s Cathedral in this way, such that we would have a reason to refrain from changing the building today in a way that goes beyond mere preservation, even if doing so would indubitably increase its intrinsic value. On Cohen’s view, the particular value of the extant original building might give us sufficient reason to refrain from changing it.

In particular valuing, the object under consideration is valuable in the first instance by virtue of the intrinsic value it bears. However, the object of personal value need not bear intrinsic value; rather the value of the object lies mainly in its special relation to the evaluator. For instance, suppose that a musician chose to preserve the old and damaged instrument that they learnt to play music on. Even though the musician could replace the instrument, and even if the instrument does not bear

intrinsic value, the musician might nonetheless choose to preserve the instrument because of its personal value *to her*.

Consider now how these conservative modes of valuing might be applied in the context of human enhancement. Cohen asks us to consider the following example:

What if a genetic manipulation could, for example, eliminate envy . . . I would not want to eliminate all of our bad features. I conjecture that that is partly because the negative traits are part of the package that makes human beings the particular valuable creatures that we personally cherish, and are therefore worth preserving as part of that package (G. A. Cohen 2011, 209).

He claims that this example suggests that we have two reasons to maintain human beings as they currently exist. The first reason is grounded by the particular value we place on human beings as creatures that “. . . exhibit a certain form of value” (G. A. Cohen 2011). What though, is the ‘certain form of value’ that human beings exhibit? One understanding that an advocate of the HNO might endorse is that human nature is intrinsically valuable. However, this interpretation still faces the challenge of explaining why the contingent features of human nature should be understood to bear intrinsic value. An alternative interpretation is that the intrinsic value of human beings is grounded in certain valuable features such as rationality and self-consciousness. Notice that this interpretation can allow the bioconservative to justify their view that we should preserve humanity as it currently exists. On this interpretation, human beings are intrinsically valuable by virtue of bearing certain intrinsically valuable features. However, we have reasons to refrain from using technologies to enhance these intrinsically valuable capacities because the conservative may also place particular value on humanity as it currently exists, in abstraction from the intrinsic value of the features they bear. We call this The Argument from Particular Value (Pugh, Kahane, and Savulescu 2013).

The second reason is grounded by the personal value we place on human beings by virtue of the fact that “. . . they are *us*” (G. A. Cohen 2011, 209) . There are two ways in which to understand this argument from personal value. First, it seems plausible to claim that we each have a relationship to our own individual features that may ground our placing personal value on ourselves *individually*. Alternatively, one might make the broader claim that we each have a special relationship with humans as a species that can ground our placing personal value on ourselves *as a species*. Bioconservatives could use this second understanding to support the HNO. They might argue that seeking to enhance humanity would be to fail to recognise the personal value that we place on our shared human nature (Pugh, Kahane, and Savulescu 2013). Notice that this argument is perfectly compatible with the pessimistic view of human nature commonly espoused by political conservatives discussed above.

Although both modes of conservative valuing may be invoked in support of the HNO, we have previously argued that the reasons associated with personal valuing are generally stronger than those associated with particular valuing (Pugh, Kahane, and Savulescu 2013). We shall therefore focus on the way in which this mode of valuing can support the HNO. However, it seems that the conservative argument here needs further elaboration. For instance, one worry that might be raised against a bias in favour of humanity grounded in the claim that “they are us” is that it isn’t clear that there is a morally significant difference between this bias and discriminatory prejudices such as sexism and racism. Indeed, opponents of the conservative bias for humanity discussed above might claim that it’s a form of what Peter Singer pejoratively called ‘speciesism’ (Singer 2011, 50). To explain why having a bias in favour of humanity differs from morally problematic forms of

discrimination such as sexism and racism, we suggest that the bioconservative should appeal to considerations of reasonable partiality. To begin making this case, we shall start by outlining the nature of reasons of partiality, before going on to consider, in section 3, how to best understand partiality to humanity.

## **2. Reasons of Partiality**

Moral theories often implore us to adopt an impartial perspective in our moral deliberations, according to which all persons matter equally and should be treated accordingly. Nonetheless, this seemingly plausible claim is in tension with the common belief that we are often permitted to give priority to those to whom we stand in special relationships. To illustrate, whilst one may have no clear moral reason to save one stranger rather than another from a burning building, it seems that—*pace* Godwin (and perhaps Singer)—one would have a very strong moral reason to save one’s own mother, rather than one of the strangers. On some views, it might even be claimed that one would be morally required to save one’s own mother rather than two strangers.

The moral reason at work in this case is a reason of partiality. Keller suggests that the tension between widespread belief in reasons of partiality and the impartiality that is built into many moral theories gives rise to the “puzzle of partiality” (Keller 2013, 5): how can the fact that you share a special relationship with someone change the nature of your moral obligations to that person? Moreover, we might ask whether there are limits on the things to which such partiality can be justified. For instance, whilst it is plausible to claim that one may have a reason of partiality to give moral priority to one’s own mother, we might also wish to claim that we may permissibly

give priority to certain groups to which we belong, or to our own personal projects in our moral deliberations.

However, we surely cannot have reasons of partiality to give moral priority to individuals on the basis of their gender or race; Singer would also add species membership to this list.<sup>5</sup> This then raises the question of why certain relationships, projects and group memberships (which we shall henceforth refer to collectively as ‘attachments’) can plausibly generate reasons of partiality whilst others cannot. Call this the Discriminatory Partiality Challenge. It seems that if the bioconservative is to endorse Cohen’s claim that we may exhibit a bias towards human beings because ‘they are us’, they will also need to respond to the Discriminatory Partiality Challenge.

It is possible to develop value-based and non-value based accounts of reasons of partiality. Consider first a non-value-based account; on such a view, it can be permissible to be partial to one’s own group if one simply holds a preference for ‘one’s own’ to be favoured, or has the intuition that they should be favoured. On such views, these preferences or intuitions need not be grounded by any further claim about the value of the group itself, or one’s membership of it. Bernard Williams seems to endorse this sort of approach to partiality in his defence of what he calls the ‘human prejudice’. He writes:

A central idea involved in the supposed human prejudice is that there are certain respects in which creatures are treated in one way rather than another simply because they belong to a certain category, the human species . . . Told that there are human beings trapped in a burning building, on the strength of that fact alone we mobilize as many resources as we can to rescue them (Williams 2009, 142).

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<sup>5</sup> Singer himself of course also rejects (non-derivative) reasons of partiality. However, our defence of the claim that the conservative bias in favour of humanity needn’t amount to ‘speciesism’ is independent of Singer’s utilitarianism.

For Williams, the moral reason provided by fact that ‘x is a human being’ needn’t be supported by some further reasons; it is, we may say, a foundational moral reason. This, he suggests, also explains why the human prejudice is structurally different from other morally deplorable prejudices such as racism and sexism. Proponents of these prejudices either hold discriminatory attitudes at a pre-reflective level, or seek to explain why the claim that ‘x is white/male’ can operate as a moral reasons by appealing to further reasons (Williams 2009, 83–84).

Williams’ endorsement of a non-value based account is in part attributable to his rejection of the view that humans have a definite value from an objective or ‘cosmic’ point of view—this is important, since that is exactly the kind of view that seems to undergird a great deal of bioconservative resistance to enhancement. However, Williams suggests that this lack of ‘cosmic’ value is of little significance because human beings still matter from the perspective of human beings. Accordingly, we might understand Cohen’s claim that we have a reason to favour human beings ‘because they are us’ to be echoing Williams here.

We shall consider the strength of Williams’ account in further detail below. However, we will first contrast this approach with a value-based approach to partiality. Williams’ use of the burning building case example shows only that we *do* care about human beings (or rather, as we shall argue, persons), not that our membership of this species is in any way valuable. In contrast, value-based accounts of partiality claim that reasonable partiality must be grounded by some sort of intrinsic value. On one value-based approach, our moral reasons to be partial towards our attachments are grounded by the intrinsic value of the relationships that we share with our attachments (Kolodny 2003; Scheffler 2010).<sup>6</sup> On this view, the moral

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<sup>6</sup> For an alternative value-based view, see Keller (2013).

reason that one has to save one's own mother rather than a stranger from a burning building is grounded by the fact that you share an intrinsically valuable relationship with her.

*Prima facie*, it seems that the value-based approach can respond to the problem of discriminatory partiality with relative ease, insofar as it seems clear that discriminatory partiality towards one's own race or gender is not based on an intrinsically valuable relationship (Miller 2005, 66). Moreover, it seems that this approach can offer a simple account of why we may be partial to individuals with whom we have forged close ties. However, this approach will not apply straightforwardly to Cohen's remarks in support of holding a bias in favour of humans because 'they are us'. The problem is that sharing biological make-up with another member of one's species does not seem to be sufficient grounds for an intrinsically valuable relationship. After all, we do not share close individual ties of the sort that we share with our loved ones with every member of our species.

In view of this, it might be illuminating to consider an analogous case: how theorists have defended the moral permissibility of being partial towards one's own co-nationals. As in the case of other members of our species, we clearly do not share close individual ties of the sort that we share with our friends and family with all of our co-nationals. How then can our relationship with our co-nationals be said to be intrinsically valuable, and to what extent is our relationship to other members of our species analogous to this case?

Thomas Hurka (1997) suggests that reasonable partiality to our attachments has a dual basis. The first is the extent to which the attachment produces or produced valuable goods. The second is the degree to which the people involved in the attachment have interacted and forged a shared history. The importance of each basis

is best illustrated by cases in which one is not fulfilled. First, we don't believe that we can be justifiably partial to those with whom we have forged a shared history that produced disvalue. To use Hurka's example, we do not believe that a former SS soldier may be justifiably partial to their former comrade, even though they have a shared history—since that history is evil. Conversely, Hurka points out that our reasons of partiality to a loved one are not wholly explicable by reference to the fact that they instantiate valuable qualities. For example, one would not have reason to be partial to a cloned replica of one's wife who exhibited the same valuable qualities as one's wife, but with whom one did not share a joint history.

As we mentioned above, we do not share close, shared histories with the majority of our co-nationals, even though we have a shared history in a more generic sense. However, it seems that the good that a nation produces over the course of its shared history is often considerable. As Hurka points out, co-nationals can derive substantial benefits from their involvement in political activity; they can, for instance, create a national health care system (Hurka 1997). In such cases, Hurka suggests that the goodness produced over the course of a shared history that does not involve close interaction may be sufficient to ground partiality towards members of that group. Notably though, the reasons of partiality generated here are weaker than the reasons generated by relationships that produce comparable goods, and in which there is also close interaction between members of the group.

### **3. Reasonable Partiality for Humanity**

Whilst we do not have the space here to address all of the ethical issues that the concept of partiality raises, the above overview provides us with a sufficient

background to consider the way in which it might be possible to develop an account of reasonable partiality for humanity.<sup>7</sup> To begin, we shall argue that Williams' non-value based account of the human prejudice is flawed. We shall then delineate a value-based account of partiality for humanity that could be used to buttress a bioconservative objection to human enhancement.

Recall that for Williams, the human prejudice differs from other morally problematic prejudices because it treats the claim that 'x is a human being' as a foundational moral reason. As one of us has argued elsewhere, this response to the Discriminatory Partiality Challenge is not convincing (Savulescu 2009).<sup>8</sup> The first problem to note is that racists and sexists could also believe that their prejudice is grounded on a foundational moral reason of the sort that Williams identifies. That proponents of such prejudices have historically appealed to further rationalizations is merely contingent.

Furthermore, it is possible to provide a plausible error theory that can explain why we have historically treated the claim 'x is a human being' as a foundational moral reason, in a way that we have not treated the sorts of claims underlying racism and sexism. As far as we are aware, the only beings who are able to understand the claim 'x is a human being' are *human beings*, the very beings to whom the claim gives priority. As such, we have not had cause to have to justify this bias to other beings. In contrast, in the case of racism and sexism, there are humans who can understand the claim 'the fact that x is white/male gives us a reason to give priority to x' and who lie outside of the set of beings to whom the claim gives priority.

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<sup>7</sup> For discussion of whether reasons of partiality are justified by further impartial considerations, see (Jackson 1991; Railton 1984; Williams 1981; Friedman 1991).

<sup>8</sup> See also Singer (2009, p. 572).

Accordingly, Williams does not succeed in explaining why the human prejudice is morally distinct from racism and sexism by appealing to this structural difference. Nonetheless, there is some intuitive appeal to his claim that, upon being told that there are human beings trapped in a burning building, one would be moved to go to great lengths to rescue them without further information. We believe that there is a plausible value-based explanation of this, but that such an explanation reveals that the case, at least as described by Williams, fails to demonstrate that we have reasons of partiality towards members of our *species*.

We suggest that our motivation to save the trapped beings in Williams' case is not best explained by the fact that they are members of our own species, but rather by the underlying assumption that the trapped beings are *persons*. By persons, we mean to refer to beings who instantiate particularly valuable capacities, such as autonomy, or self-consciousness over time (Singer 2011). To test the plausibility of this alternative explanation, consider the following permutation of the burning building case:

Told that there are *permanently unconscious* human beings trapped in a burning building, on the strength of that fact alone we mobilise as many resources as we can to rescue them (Savulescu 2009).

We suggest that this case is far less intuitively appealing. The difference between this case and Williams' case is that in the former, the human beings that are trapped are not persons, though they are living human beings. This permutation of the case suggests that what we primarily value about being human is not that we are members of a particular species; rather, we value being human because they tend to instantiate the valuable capacities that qualify them as persons.

The above reflections suggest that our moral reason in Williams' case is not a reason of partiality for humanity *per se*. In fact, it is not clear that it is best to construe

our moral reason here as a reason of partiality at all. Our reason to mobilize resources to save the (human) person trapped in the burning building is not grounded in the value of our membership of the group that contains all and only persons; rather, it is grounded by the value of the person herself. Yet, just as this value gives us reason to save a human person from a burning building, so too would it give us a moral reason to choose to save a non-human person rather than a permanently unconscious human, if there is time to save only one.

Nonetheless, it may yet be possible to develop a value-based account of partiality for humanity. Recall Hurka's two bases of national partiality. He claims that one basis of national partiality is the extent to which the interaction involved in the attachment produces valuable goods; the second is the degree to which the people involved in the attachment interacted and forged a shared history. Consider the second basis. Individual members of the human species have not interacted with all other members of the species; nonetheless, like co-nationals, it seems that it is possible to describe members of the human species as having some sort of a shared history. As a species, humans can be understood to have shared in a common cultural and biological history with (and *only* with) other members of their species in developing the valuable capabilities that qualify them as persons. What makes our shared history with other humans special is that, unlike other creatures with whom we share parts of our biological history (such as chimpanzees), or animals that have participated in our cultural history (such as domesticated animals), only other humans have shared in the part of our history over the course of which we have developed and exercised the very capacities that separate us from other animals.

For Hurka though, the first basis highlighted above does most of the work in justifying national partiality. To what extent can it be claimed that our relationship

with other members of the species produces goods in a manner that is comparable with the goods produced by co-nationality? It seems that a plausible case can be made in favour of this claim; humanity has produced many goods in its history, including, *inter alia*, science, arts, culture and of course welfare for many humans. Even if humanity has also been responsible for evil, we tend to believe that the goods it has produced outweigh the bad; the existence of humanity has been, many believe, all things considered a good thing.<sup>9</sup>

It might be argued that reasonable partiality for humanity can also be grounded by forward-looking prudential considerations. John Cottingham argues that morally justifiable partialities are those in which a plausible case can be made for claiming that the partiality in question must find a place in most plausible blueprints for human flourishing (Cottingham 1986, 370). Notably, in his discussion Cottingham identifies the potential for ‘planetism’, that is, partiality to creatures from one’s own planet (Cottingham 1986, 360). Whether or not such partiality could be justified on Cottingham’s account depends on the answer to the empirical question of whether such partiality is crucial for human *welfare*. Whilst he seems somewhat sceptical of this, he nonetheless writes:

[I]t is, I think, plausible to argue that human beings, or at least most of them, find it difficult to flourish unless they can integrate their lives into at least some network of partiality . . . that operates on a wider scale than self-directed partiality and philophilic partiality. . . (Cottingham 1986, 372).

The idea that Cottingham appeals to here, that individual well-being of human beings is contingent upon their co-existence with others in a broader human community, has considerable philosophical pedigree. This idea is apparent in Aristotle’s politics (Aristotle 1997, 1253a29) and also in Hegel’s discussion of the concept of

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<sup>9</sup> Although we take this view to be plausible, it is not universally held. Schopenhauer famously lamented human existence as ‘some kind of mistake’ (Schopenhauer 1978, 37). More recently, David Benatar has argued that it would be better if we had never existed (Benatar 2006).

*Sittlichkeit*, the state which is achieved when the individual's subjective will synthesizes with the universal will (Hegel 2001, 182) . The idea may seem self-evident when we consider the individuals with whom we share close ties; my life would go worse and diminish in meaning if my family died. However, in accordance with the figures mentioned above, we want to propose the broader claim that the individual well-being of human beings may also be contingent upon the existence of other humans, even if the individual in question does not share a personal relationship with all other humans.

The basis of the prudential value of the existence of these other humans lies in the thought that the individual is sufficiently connected to these other humans that they are able to understand themselves as being part of a joint cultural enterprise, of promoting interests and projects that are contingent on the specific natural features and dispositions of human beings. Without our involvement in this enterprise, we suggest that the meaning of the individual's life would be diminished along with the individual's well-being; part of being human is being part of this enterprise, of this collective exchange of ideas and ideals. This idea is congruous with the 'Traditionalist' strain of conservative thought, defended by John Kekes, according to which conservatives ought to:

. . . maintain political arrangements that foster the participation of individuals in the various traditions that have historically endured in their society (because) . . . good lives depend on participation in a variety of traditions (Kekes 1997, 366).

A substantial proportion of what is valuable in our own lives is intersubjective, constructed by the contingent features and relations we have with other human beings that allow us to engage in these terrestrial traditions.

The above view of reasonable partiality has limited application, as it is grounded by forward-looking prudential consideration. As such, it's not clear that an individual has reasons to be partial to humanity if they do not expect to benefit from that partiality. However, as our discussion of Hurka's account suggests, reasonable partiality can also be grounded by backward-looking considerations; as such, the value for us of the existence of humans may generate reasons of partiality even in cases where this won't benefit us personally in the future.

It is important to be clear about the role that we understand these reasons of partiality to play in our moral deliberations. Consider another permutation of the burning building case. Suppose that you only have time to save either a human person or a non-human person (say a benevolent extra-terrestrial) from the burning building. In this case, it seems plausible to claim that one might permissibly choose to save the human person rather than the non-human person; on some views of partiality, it may even be obligatory.

One natural way of justifying the view that it's permissible to prioritize the human person here is that we have reasons for partiality to humanity that can play a role in our moral deliberations only if considerations of personhood cannot provide us with sufficient moral guidance. Considerations of personhood provide us with strong moral reasons that McMahan (2002, 218) claims “. . . derive from a consideration of the intrinsic properties of other beings who might be affected by our action”. In contrast, he notes that if considerations of partiality towards one's own species do pertain, they don't lower the baselines of respect for persons; as such, the most that they might justify is our doing 'marginally more' for members of our own species than non-members (McMahan 2002, 227). One may similarly hold that reasons of partiality towards humanity are weaker than the moral reasons that derive from a

consideration of the intrinsic properties of persons. However, when we are faced with a choice between saving a human person or a non-human person, these latter considerations cannot guide our decision-making about which person to save. In such circumstances, a reason of partiality for humanity may be invoked as a ‘tie-breaker’ to justify saving the human person.

Partiality to humanity can also take a stronger form. Suppose that we had to choose between saving humanity and saving an advanced alien civilisation that is objectively *more* valuable than humanity. One may plausibly hold that, because of our shared consciousness, history and relationships with other members of our species, we are nevertheless still permitted to save humanity. Just as an individual may sometimes permissibly prioritize her own family rather than maximize impartial value, we too can prioritize humanity in such cases, at least up to a point.<sup>10</sup>

#### **4. Partiality for Humanity and Bioconservatism**

To take stock, we began by outlining how Cohen’s conservatism can be used to object to enhancement, but pointed out that it fails to fully revive the bioconservative objection. We then suggested that it might be possible to capture the spirit of Cohen’s view in a more theoretically attractive manner by appealing to reasons of partiality, and have outlined an account of partiality for humanity. We shall now consider how this account might buttress the HNO objection, and evaluate the strength of this version of the objection

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<sup>10</sup> As the last two paragraphs should make it clear, we aren’t merely advocating ‘partiality for persons’ in making these claims.

Grounding the HNO objection with an account of partiality to humanity has a number of advantages over appealing to Cohen's conservatism. By elucidating this argument in terms of partiality, we have shown that it is possible to defend the claim that we have a reason to preserve human features as they currently exist because we ourselves are human, in a way that does not collapse into a morally deplorable form of speciesism. Nor does it require explaining how the contingent and arbitrary features of the human species can generate such reasons. We can be justifiably partial to other members of our species only insofar as co-membership of the species can be described as a valuable relationship. Furthermore, reasons of partiality are a familiar element of morality, and do not commit us to the contentious claims about the nature of value that are central to Cohen's conservatism.

Basing a bioconservative objection to human enhancement on partiality to humanity resonates with other conservative approaches to various forms of partiality. For instance, David Miller has provided a conservative defence of partiality to one's co-nationals (Miller 1993),<sup>11</sup> whilst Carl Cohen's famous defence of speciesism can be understood to incorporate conservative themes (C. Cohen 1986). Of course, not all strains of conservatism give such weight to partiality; however, our account cannot be expected to be compatible with the diverse array of conservative views. That said, it might be objected that the kind of partiality that conservatives typically endorse is opposed to the cosmopolitan concern for humanity described above; for instance, the kinds of conservative partiality mentioned above often represent a justification for *not* taking the impartial perspective of caring about all of humanity.

However, in response to this worry, it's crucial to acknowledge that priority to humanity has so far rarely arisen as a practical issue, except in the case of animal

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<sup>11</sup> See Jones (1996) for a discussion of the conservative underpinnings of Miller's claim. See also MacIntyre (2002) for another conservative approach to partiality to one's co-nationals.

welfare. Indeed, conservatives have often held that we should give priority to humans over animals ((C. Cohen 1986). Conservative worries about enhancement, and their common appeal to human nature, strongly suggest that if confronted with cases where we need to choose between humans and non-human persons, conservatives would surely prioritise the former. Yet this form of partiality is compatible with still holding that we should give even greater priority to members of our own nation, or family, for example.

The account of reasonable partiality for humanity that we have sketched does depart from one significant trend in conservative thought. Standard bioconservative objections to enhancement very often rely on denying that enhancement could ever be a change for the better, or on the implausible claim that human nature is intrinsically valuable or superior to alternatives. In many cases, this can be understood to reflect a commitment to the claim that there is a metaphysical moral order to the universe, an order that enhancement would subvert—a claim that is central to some (but not all) strains of conservatism (Kekes 1997). We reject this view. On our account of partiality for humanity, we are understood to have reasons to preserve certain human features by virtue of the non-instrumental, but *extrinsic* value that these features bear.

One of the benefits of the approach that we have developed here is that the bioconservative might concede that making people live longer, be smarter, happier or more empathetic can, at least in some cases, be a genuine benefit; yet they may still maintain that we have reasons of partiality to refrain from making such beneficial changes.

For these reasons, we suggest that our account of partiality can buttress the bioconservative objection into its strongest possible form. However, we shall

conclude by arguing that, even in this form, the objection cannot do all the work that bioconservatives expect it to do..

The first problem is that reasons of partiality are weaker than the moral reasons generated by the value of personhood. This is problematic for a bioconservative objection to enhancement grounded in partiality for humanity, since reasons to carry out enhancements might appeal to the value of persons. To illustrate, current technology provides individuals with the means to bring about global destruction through bioterrorism. One of us has argued elsewhere that we thus have strong moral reasons grounded in the value of personhood to carry out widespread moral enhancement (Persson and Savulescu 2012). Such reasons are stronger than the reasons to refrain from enhancement that considerations of partiality might generate.

Bioconservatives might respond by arguing that reasons of partiality to humanity would rarely be weighed against reasons grounded by the value of personhood. In the case of enhancement, we are not considering whether we should prioritise one extant group's interests over another's; rather, we are considering what sort of beings we have a reason to *bring* into existence. Since a being cannot be harmed by not being brought into existence, what is at issue in the question of enhancement is not whether we can justify the imposition of harm on one group over another. As such, we can sidestep the question of whether reasons of partiality to humanity are of sufficient strength to justify prioritizing the interests of humans over non-human animals. Even if such matters are best settled by appealing to the moral reasons grounded by the value of personhood, reasons of partiality may well be sufficiently strong to ground claims about what sorts of beings we should bring into existence. In particular, they can give us reason to refuse to radically transform our

human nature, or to replace humans with superior ‘post-humans’, *even* if the resulting change would be seen as a clear benefit from an impartial perspective.

This seems right. However, a second limitation of a bioconservative appeal to partiality to humanity is that it cannot provide us with a moral reason to refrain from carrying out enhancements that aim to *preserve* our current features, or the intrinsically valuable relational goods instantiated in a common ‘human project’. For example, life-extension technologies seem compatible with giving priority to the human; ageing brings about the loss of many capacities that we value and which allow us to engage in characteristically human activities. Similarly, moral enhancement might allow us to enhance human cooperation in a way that allows the species to pursue its joint traditions and projects more fruitfully. Life-extension and moral enhancement technologies thus seem to preserve much of what we value in being human rather than replace it with something else. It should therefore be *supported* by the bioconservative who appeals to partiality to humanity.

One could attempt to counter this surprising conclusion as follows. As we explained above, reasonable partiality for humanity is grounded by the value of the human species’ shared biological and cultural history. As such, it might be claimed that even if the aforementioned technologies preserve certain valuable capabilities, partiality for humanity may speak against such enhancements. It will do so if these enhancements preserve these capabilities in a way that is discontinuous with the shared biological and cultural history of the species, or if they rupture the relational connection to other humans that helps to give meaning to our lives.

Yet, it’s not clear that this argument succeeds. First, as we discussed above, reasons of partiality for humanity are generally weaker than the moral reasons generated by the value of personhood. Insofar as these technologies safeguard the

valuable capacities that demarcate personhood, the partiality-based reason not to use these technologies may again be overridden. Second, the reply assumes that the technologies under consideration would rupture the continuity of the species' shared biological and cultural history or the relational connection to other humans that gives meaning to our lives. However, it's not clear why this would be the case. Consider life-extension technologies; the human life-span has dramatically increased over the past century, and is likely to continue to do so. If these innovations have not ruptured the continuity of the species' shared biological and cultural history or our relational connections to others, bioconservatives who would press the objection from partiality would need to provide a plausible account of why life extension technologies would do so.

This point speaks to a general concern about the scope of the objection from partiality. If the objection is to succeed against a particular enhancement, it must show that the enhancement in question would rupture the continuity of the species' shared biological and cultural history, or our relational connections to others. However, it isn't clear how we should determine whether an enhancement technology would have this effect, especially in view of the fact that humans have changed themselves throughout history in ways that we do not believe to be morally problematic.

At this point, the distinction between normal-range enhancements and normality-transcending enhancements becomes critical. It seems less likely that normal-range enhancements would rupture the shared history that can be understood to undergird reasonable partiality to humanity. Such enhancements would only serve to improve individual within the limits of normal species variation. In contrast, it seems that normality-transcending enhancements that precipitate immediate changes that radically alter the form or function of an entity might more plausibly be

understood as rupturing this shared history. As such, reasons of partiality for humanity may only raise doubts about normality-transcending enhancements, insofar as they can be understood as radically altering the features that are central to our sense of sharing in a common biological and cultural history with other members of our species. For instance, reasons of partiality for humanity might provide us with reasons to refrain from ensuring that all new-born children are female, contra the argument developed by (Sparrow 2010). Reasons of partiality can certainly ground an objection to radical forms of enhancement that would render the subjects ‘post-humans’.

However, even radical changes can be compatible with safeguarding a shared history that undergirds reasonable partiality if they are part of a gradual evolution. By way of analogy, consider psychological accounts of personal identity. Roughly, according to such accounts,  $X$  at  $t_1$  is the same person as  $Z$  at  $t_3$  if and only if  $X$  is uniquely psychologically continuous with  $Z$ , where psychological continuity consists in overlapping chains of strong psychological connectedness, grounded by diachronic psychological connections such as memories, beliefs and desires (Parfit, 1984, pp. 205–207). Crucially, on such a view,  $X$  at  $t_1$  could be the same person as  $Z$  at  $t_3$ , even if there is no *direct* psychological connection between  $X$  and  $Z$ . All that an identity relation requires on this account is that there is psychological *continuity* between  $X$  and  $Z$ ; as such, if  $X$  is (uniquely) directly connected to  $Y$  at  $t_2$ , and  $Y$  is (uniquely) directly connected to  $Z$  at  $t_3$ , then  $X$  and  $Z$  are the same person.

Similarly, even if enhancement technologies resulted in wholesale changes to human nature, this needn’t rupture the features of humanity that undergird reasonable partiality. These enhancements might bring about such changes in a gradual manner that preserves a sufficient degree of continuity across different stages of the species’ development. Understood this way, reasons of partiality to humanity don’t necessarily

support conserving humanity exactly as it is; rather they allow us to resist acute, radical transformations.

## 5. Conclusion

Fittingly, this final observation echoes the ‘pessimistic’ political conservative view that gradual changes are better than revolutions. We began this paper by highlighting the fact that previous bioconservative objections to enhancements have been widely criticized because of ungrounded claims about the nebulous concept of human nature. We have shown that the bioconservative can mount a theoretically stronger version of the HNO objection by appealing to reasons of partiality for humanity. On this version, human nature is not to be preserved because it is intrinsically valuable, but rather because it’s *our* nature. We have argued that a version of the HNO that draws on reasons of partiality to humanity is theoretically stronger than previous version of the HNO, and more congruous with the conservative tradition with which proponents of the HNO are so often identified. Nonetheless, even this version, which we take to be the strongest form of the HNO, still fails to provide grounds for rejecting all forms of human enhancement.

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