Books Forum Introduction

Psychopharmacological enhancement discussed across disciplines

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Over the past several years, a heated debate about the psychopharmacological enhancement of cognitive performance and mood has been raging among bioethicists, in the media and elsewhere. This issue's Books Forum presents new angles on this discussion. A number of recent publications have begun to explore the historical genealogy of the current problem of enhancement and the public agitation it has generated. In his review of Andrea Tone's *The Age of Anxiety: A History of America's Turbulent Affair with Tranquilizers* and David Herzberg's *Happy Pills in America: From Miltown to Prozac*, sociologist Joseph Davis discusses two books that argue that the forgotten Miltown, not Prozac, was the decisive moment in the medicalization of problems of living. When trying to understand so-called cosmetic psychopharmacology today, these retrospective views might be more revealing than the utopian and dystopian science fiction scenarios powerfully informing the ongoing debate.

Pharmacopsychologist Boris Quednow looks at this discussion from an equally empirical, but neuroscientific, point of view. He takes the German volume *Neuro-Enhancement: Ethik vor neuen Herausforderungen*, edited by Bettina Schöne-Seifert and colleagues, as an occasion for vehemently contesting the pharmacological premises of the

enhancement debate as a whole. Quednow contends that the kind of substances presumed by many arguments presented in the book, drugs that make us significantly smarter without any serious adverse effects, do not exist, and will not exist in the foreseeable future.

As an emphatically interdisciplinary journal, *BioSocieties* assigned these book reviews across disciplines to create some of the rare opportunities for scholars and scientists from one discipline to respond to literature produced in neighboring fields. As reviews serve not only to present but also to evaluate publications, the chosen approach raises the question of how to assess books from different branches of knowledge. Davis praises the historical works he reviews as revealing blind spots of his own discipline, especially sociologists' failure to see that patients played an active role in the process of medicalization well before the 1980s. As a scientist, Quednow refrains from judging the philosophical quality of the bioethics volume we asked him to read. The reason for his refusal to engage with the ethical and political reflections on the 'social consequences' of neuroenhancement compiled by Schöne-Seifert *et al* is that he already conceives of their pharmacological presuppositions as unrealistic. This disputatious response might not be a book review in the strict sense. However, this issue's Books Forum is not only meant to inform readers about three exciting new publications, but it also provides a discursive space, in which the debate over cognitive and mood enhancement may open into a debate across the disciplines of sociology, history, ethics and psychopharmacology over a matter of shared, but also divergent, concerns.

In this spirit, we have invited the editors of *Neuro-Enhancement* to reply to Quednow's challenge in the next issue, and we would also appreciate hearing how our readers conceive of the claim that the fierce discussion about neuro-enhancement is merely a phantom debate. Please send your responses to reviews editor Nicolas Langlitz (langlitz@newschool.edu).

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