

Would Aristotle Have Seen the Wrongness of Slavery If He Had Undergone a Course of Moral Enhancement?

NIGEL PLEASANTS

Abstract

I agree with those proponents of bio-medical moral enhancement who claim that we face large-scale global moral problems which are currently un-recognised or un-acted upon. But I argue that the proposed bio-medical means for tackling them is misconceived. I show that both bio-medical and “traditional” conceptions of moral enhancement share a misleading picture of the relation between the moral psychology of individuals and the socially structured moral problems with which they are faced. The argument unfolds in three stages. First I reflect on prominent historical cases of large-scale progressive moral change to assess the role of the agents’ moral psychology in bringing that about and sustaining it. Second, I identify some current cases of people recognising one or more of (what I call) the “new moral problems” that we face but not acting in accordance with that recognition. Third, I adumbrate an alternative stance to the idea of both traditional and bio-medical moral enhancement.

The sickness of a time is cured by an alteration in the mode of life of human beings, and it was possible for the sickness of philosophical problems to get cured only through a changed mode of thought and life, not a medicine invented by an individual. (Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics* [Oxford: Blackwell, 1978], II.§23)

1. The Idea and Aim of Moral Enhancement

The idea of moral enhancement is surely a good and important one. We all *ought* to be in favour of it. In his ‘A Lecture on Ethics’ Wittgenstein imagines someone observing him playing tennis and offering the judgement ‘you play pretty badly’.¹ Wittgenstein says it would be unexceptionable for him to reply ‘I know... but I don’t

¹ Ludwig Wittgenstein, ‘A Lecture on Ethics’, *Philosophical Review* 74:1 (1965), 3–12, 5.

Nigel Pleasants

want to play any better'. The observer would then have to concede 'Ah, then that's all right'. Contrast this with Wittgenstein telling someone 'a preposterous lie', the recipient telling him 'You're behaving like a beast', and Wittgenstein replying 'I know... but then I don't want to behave any better'. The recipient of the lie would not want to say 'Ah, then that's all right'; rather, she would object: 'Well, you ought to want to behave better'.

Wittgenstein is not advocating that people generally ought to want to make themselves morally better than they are – he is just noting that no-one should be content with being morally bad or behaving morally badly. Most people probably think that they already are morally (just about) good enough. And whilst we all admire people that are *exceptionally* morally good, there is no requirement to be *exceptionally* morally good oneself. This is why we have the concept *supererogation*. Thus it would seem that the only people that need moral enhancement are egregiously bad ones.

However, in making their call for moral enhancement, some of its more prominent proponents justify it by reference to large-scale global moral problems the responsibility for which implicates very large numbers of people, such as the effects of humanly-caused climate change² and world poverty.³ It is argued by radical critics such as Peter Singer⁴ and Thomas Pogge⁵ that virtually every citizen in modern society is responsible for the amelioration or eradication of the conditions that condemn a quarter of the world's population to life-debilitating and life-threatening poverty.⁶ Environmentalists

² Julian Savulescu and Ingmar Persson, 'Moral Enhancement, Freedom and the God Machine', *The Monist* 95:3 (2012), 399–421; Thomas Douglas, 'Moral Enhancement', *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 25:3 (2008), 228–45; David DeGrazia, 'Moral Improvement, Freedom, and What We (Should) Value in Moral Behaviour', *Journal of Medical Ethics* 40:6 (2014), 361–368.

³ Douglas, 'Moral Enhancement'; DeGrazia, 'Moral Improvement'.

⁴ 'Famine, Affluence and Morality', *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 1:3, (1972), 229–43.

⁵ 'Real World Justice', *The Journal of Ethics* 9:1/2 (2005), 29–53.

⁶ Pogge, in 'Real World Justice', argues that we are actively complicit in sustaining these conditions (we are, he says, 'participants in the largest, though not the gravest, crime against humanity ever committed') and that therefore we have a moral duty to stop causing the harm. Singer, in 'Famine, Affluence', famously argues that whether or not we are responsible for the conditions that make people suffer 'absolute poverty', we are responsible for trying to help as many as we can, up to the point at which to do more would entail sacrificing something of 'moral significance' to ourselves.

Would Aristotle Have Seen the Wrongness of Slavery

argue that the citizens of modern western society are required to shrink the size of their “carbon footprint” by drastically reducing their consumption of energy-intensive goods in order to try to prevent the impending calamitous effects of climate change, which will be disproportionately suffered by poor people in the near- to medium-term future. In addition to these massive global moral problems, the same constituencies of moral agents are tasked with finding humane and just solutions to the crises presented by unprecedentedly large numbers of refugees, economic migrants, and other displaced persons desperately seeking sanctuary and a peaceable place to live. I also think, along with other “animal liberationists”,⁷ that we are morally required to cease the vast amount of killing and suffering that we impose on non-human animals through industrialised food production and scientific and medical experimentation. I call these states of affairs “new moral problems”. They are “new” because we have barely even begun to address them, and because they are not widely recognised *as* moral problems regarding which every citizen bears responsibility for trying to solve.⁸

If the radical critics are right about where responsibility for causing and resolving these new moral problems lies, then most people’s belief that they are a morally good enough person will look complacent and ill-founded, because nearly all of us are in fact behaving very badly. Such harsh judgement would no doubt be received with widespread incredulity. Hence the ostensible need for moral enhancement, of some kind. The kind proposed by recent proponents of “moral enhancement” is to enhance individuals’ moral psychology through bio-medical intervention. The aim is to stimulate, augment, or create ‘morally relevant traits’, capacities,⁹ and dispositions such as trust, co-operation, empathy, and altruism,

⁷ DeGrazia, in ‘Moral Improvement’, includes ‘other sentient beings’, as well as human beings, as deserving beneficiaries of human moral enhancement.

⁸ Cf. Judith Lichtenberg, ‘Negative Duties, Positive Duties, and the “New Harms”’, *Ethics* 120:3 (2010), 557–78. I realise that some, probably most, readers would not accept that these are all genuine moral problems. I accept that this is a matter of “reasonable disagreement”. But I do not think it plausible that someone might reasonably deny that any of the aforementioned is a genuine moral problem, still less that there *are* any moral problems of this scope, scale, and weight. Nevertheless, I do not here engage in first-order advocacy for any particular putative moral problem. My focus, rather, is on what it would take for these to be widely recognised *as* moral problems and for the recognisers to act in accordance with that recognition.

⁹ Savulescu and Persson, ‘Moral Enhancement’, 401.

Nigel Pleasants

‘morally better motives’,¹⁰ and to foster ‘*improved insight*: better understanding [...] of what is right’.¹¹

Proponents of bio-medical moral enhancement seem simply to assume that once in possession of morally relevant traits and cognitive awareness of the moral problems faced, agents would thereby be sufficiently motivated to do what is morally required. But this is a very big assumption, and it needs interrogation. What exactly has to occur for people to accept the moral demands emanating from the new moral problems to which I have adverted and to take appropriate action directed at solving or ameliorating them?

Recognising and accepting a moral problem, and taking appropriate action, involves both cognitive and emotive (motivational) dimensions. First of all, there needs to be an accurate perception of the group of existentially imperilled victims and an understanding of the nature of the harm that they suffer. Second, the harm that the victims suffer has to be seen as *morally unjust* harm, with the entailment that it is someone’s (some people’s) responsibility to cease causing the harm and/or to help the victims. Third, the responsible agents have to see and accept that it is *their* responsibility to take appropriate action. Fourth, they then have to devise what the appropriate action would be. Finally, they have to actually take the required action.¹²

In the cases of life-threatening poverty and the international refugee crises there is probably widespread perception and awareness in general terms of the suffering and loss of life, and this is probably quite widely seen to be *unjust* suffering. But evidently, few people see it as *their* responsibility to take the appropriate action and to devise and set about doing what is required. In the case of climate change there is probably little clear understanding and acknowledgement of the suffering that will be caused and at most a vague conception of the future victims that will come to bear it. It is surely quite clear what needs to be done (consume far less and change lifestyle) but still there is very little embracing of personal responsibility and effective action taken. In the case of animal exploitation, there is some perception of the suffering involved, but scant belief in it being *unjust* suffering and therefore little incidence of people

¹⁰ Douglas, ‘Moral Enhancement’, 229.

¹¹ DeGrazia, ‘Moral Improvement’, 363.

¹² The foregoing mirrors Latané and Darley’s five-stage model of the process of transition from bystander to helper in their classic situationist social psychology of ‘the bystander effect’, *The Unresponsive Bystander: Why Doesn’t He Help?* (New York: Appleton-Century Crofts, 1970).

Would Aristotle Have Seen the Wrongness of Slavery

holding themselves personally responsible for opposing the institutionalised practices.

The foregoing is obviously a very rough sketch of the prevailing structure of attitudes towards the new moral problems that I have identified. In general terms, the obstacles to the communities of responsible moral agents taking effective action directed at addressing and resolving these moral problems are, variably: not seeing a group of victims as *bona fide* moral patients of the same moral status as themselves, and not seeing themselves as personally responsible for tackling and ending, or preventing, the suffering. It is surely highly likely that the major cause of these obstacles to moral action resides in the perceived self-interest of responsible moral agents.¹³ The personal costs of taking the action seemingly required to solve the new moral problems are perceived to be very large indeed, such that it would incur large and painful changes in lifestyle. In a word, the (perceived) sheer demandingness of the action needed to solve these problems is the principal cause of, or reason for, moral agents failing to see the situations and scenarios that I have called “new moral problems” as moral problems, or failing to take responsibility for tackling them. How, then, is bio-medical intervention envisioned to deliver the moral enhancement needed to transform un-seeing, passive, and unmotivated moral agents into seeing, active, motivated ones?

A couple of quite obvious concerns over the idea of bio-medically induced moral enhancement, were it to be possible, are that it would be either too dangerous if compulsory, or otiose if voluntary. However confident were the medical experts that an enhancement therapy was totally safe, the possibility of unanticipated disastrous side effects on some patients renders the idea of involuntary administration untenable (cf. the experience of Thalidomide, a supposedly straightforward medicine to relieve morning sickness in pregnancy). The obvious problem with voluntary consumption of an *ex hypothesi* effective enhancement therapy is the motivation to take it. If one has

¹³ On this see Michele Moody-Adams, ‘Culture, Responsibility, and Affected Ignorance’, *Ethics* 104:2 (1994), 291–309, who convincingly argues that self-interest in terms of material benefit and personal conservatism motivates people to remain ignorant of the wrongness of wrongful institutionalised practices in their society. She argues that this ignorance is culpable because it is *affected*, but I think the ignorance is largely caused by social and cultural influences and that therefore it is often genuine and for this reason excusable to a significant degree (see Nigel Pleasants, ‘Institutional Wrongdoing and Moral Perception’, *Journal of Social Philosophy* 39:1 [2008], 96–115).

sufficient motivation to undergo a therapy that would make one perform what one perceives to be highly costly (to oneself) moral actions, then one has sufficient motivation to perform the actions without therapeutic intervention, making the idea of voluntary enhancement otiose. I will expand on this point later.

The objections to bio-medical moral enhancement most prominent in the literature are that it is morally impermissible (because it would diminish the agent's freedom of action or freedom of will),¹⁴ or misconceived (because actions of this provenance would not count as moral actions).¹⁵ I do not regard these as strong objections. Even if it is the case that moral enhancement would diminish (some of) the responsible agents' freedom,¹⁶ I think the benefits for the currently suffering victims would justify this comparatively trivial loss to the agents. And if actions performed by morally enhanced agents should not count as moral action (because not motivated by their autonomous identification with appropriate reasons for their action), this really does not matter very much.¹⁷

My argument against the idea of bio-medical moral enhancement will be that both it and "traditional" conceptions of "moral enhancement" share a misleading picture of the relation between the moral psychology of individuals and the moral problems with which they are faced. I will develop the argument in three stages. First I reflect on prominent historical cases of large-scale progressive moral change to assess the role of the agents' moral psychology in bringing it about and sustaining it. Second, I identify some current cases of people recognising one or more of the new moral problems but not acting in accordance with that recognition. Third, I adumbrate an alternative stance to the idea of (traditional and bio-medical) moral enhancement.

¹⁴ John Harris, 'Moral Enhancement and Freedom', *Bioethics* 25:2 (2011), 102–111; Christoph Bublitz, 'Moral Enhancement and Mental Freedom', *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 33:1 (2016), 88–106.

¹⁵ Robert Sparrow 'Better Living Through Chemistry? A Reply to Savulescu and Persson on "Moral Enhancement"', *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 31:1 (2014), 23–32, 25; cf. Bublitz, 'Moral Enhancement', 103.

¹⁶ I return to this point in section 4 below.

¹⁷ It does matter to those that hold a virtue-ethical conception of the moral agent, which many participants in the enhancement debate do seem to hold. But I think that what matters morally has more to do with the beneficiaries of agents' action than the moral character of the agent themselves. The latter is primarily a good for the agent, and I find virtue-ethical fixation on the agent's character somewhat narcissistic. This issue is further explored in section 4 below.

2. Historical Reflections on Progressive Moral Change

Institutionalised slavery existed in all parts of the world for millennia. For most of its existence it was seen to be a natural, necessary, and inevitable status and practice in the societies that hosted it. It was not until quite late in the eighteenth century that substantial moral criticism of it began to emerge.¹⁸ By the end of the nineteenth century it had been abolished, that is, rendered ‘illegal throughout the Western Hemisphere’.¹⁹ The British abolition movement and the British parliament and government were at the vanguard of moral criticism and effective legislative action against it. Their endeavours were characterised by the nineteenth century historian William Lecky as ‘among the three or four perfectly virtuous acts recorded in the history of nations’.²⁰

It is generally believed that abolition was brought about by moral agents blessed with the acuteness of moral perception to see through conventional justifications and rationalisations of slavery, and the moral virtue to act against it. If this was so, then the moral psychology of these agents must have been significantly superior to that of all those preceding agents that either failed to see the wrongness of slavery or did not care enough to do anything about it. In a word, the moral psychology of the abolitionists would have been an *enhanced* version of what their predecessors – and many of their contemporaries – possessed. One could imagine a philosophical debate conducted by maverick radicals shortly before the advent of the abolition movement, wherein they might have pondered what it would take to get people to see the wrongness of, and to act against, slavery. They might well have concluded that nothing would change without an enhancement of those people’s moral psychology. They would have been wrong, though.

Leading historians of slavery and its abolition tell us that there is no reason to think that it was enhanced moral psychology that enabled the abolitionists to do what their predecessors had failed to do. The foremost historian of slavery, David Davis, conjectures that ‘men of

¹⁸ ‘Before the eighteenth century practically no one, no matter how compassionate or scrupulous, regarded slavery as an intolerable evil’, Thomas Haskell, ‘Convention and Hegemonic Interest in the Debate over Antislavery’, *The American Historical Review* 92:4 (1987), 829–78, 848.

¹⁹ David Brion Davis, ‘The Universal Attractions of Slavery’, *The New York Review of Books*, 17th December 2009.

²⁰ Quoted in David Brion Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1975), 453.

Nigel Pleasants

the mid-eighteenth century were no more virtuous than men of earlier times'.²¹ Thomas Haskell, arch-critic of Davis's theory of the causes and conditions of abolition, concurs with him: 'people who lived before the eighteenth century were about as insightful and capable of moral choice as people are today'.²² The idea that people prior to the advent of eighteenth century abolitionism were 'morally primitive' in their acceptance of slavery emanates from what Bernard Williams calls the myth of 'progressivism'.²³ I do not need to go into details here,²⁴ but Haskell, Davis, and Williams argue and cite evidence that the pivotal variable was significant changes in the socio-economic conditions in which the abolitionists were embedded that enabled them to recognise and acknowledge the wrongness of slavery and to take up arms against it, not newfound moral powers.

Over the course of the twentieth century there have been a range of other revolutionary moral changes to societal practice and social status, all of which, like the abolition of slavery, are about recognising and institutionalising the basic moral equality of all human beings. The most prominent changes are those that established women's suffrage and those that promote racial, gender, sex, and sexual orientation equality. These changes are grounded in the formal legal right to, and enforcement of, non-discrimination, and fair, equal, and inclusive treatment of all individuals regardless of gender, sex, sexuality, and racial categorisation.

But, as with the abolition of slavery, there are good reasons for thinking that these moral changes were not brought about, and are not sustained, by an enhanced moral psychology. If it *was* the case that such progressive change requires an enhanced moral psychology that brings autonomous moral insight and motivation to the majority of responsible moral agents, we would undoubtedly still be waiting for change. I aver that it is self-evident, via direct personal reflection, that we citizens who are now enculturated into a social life that upholds principles of gender, sex, sexuality, and racial equality do not denounce and eschew sexism, homophobia, and racism (to the

²¹ Davis, *The Problem of Slavery*, 41–42.

²² Haskell, 'Convention and Hegemonic Interest', 858.

²³ Bernard Williams, *Shame and Necessity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

²⁴ See Nigel Pleasants, 'Moral Argument is Not Enough: The Persistence of Slavery and the Emergence of Abolition', *Philosophical Topics* 38:1 (2010), 139–160.

Would Aristotle Have Seen the Wrongness of Slavery

extent that we do)²⁵ because we have an enhanced moral psychology. We can surely see that recognising the wrongness of, and complying with the legal prohibitions on, slavery, racism, sexism, and homophobia involves no specially enhanced or refined sense of trust, co-operation, empathy, altruism, or “morally better motives” on our part. Recognition and compliance is, rather, just palpably obvious and effortless. To put it bluntly, we have simply learned, through basic instruction in and experience of our society’s way of life, which kinds of attitude, belief, values, and behaviour are required and appropriate. Is there any reason to think that people today have more or greater powers of empathy, altruism, compassion, and critical moral insight than people (most of whom were blatantly sexist, homophobic, and racist) in the 1950s? In a word, No;²⁶ our appropriately non-sexist, non-homophobic, and non-racist attitudes, beliefs, values, and behaviour are grounded in our institutional, social, and cultural life, not an enhanced individual moral psychology.

It is noteworthy that those radical critics that agitate for recognition of and action on the new moral problems typically do not do so via sophisticated concepts and arguments, and presuppose only averagely motivated agents of merely ordinary moral decency. Singer’s famous argument for there being a moral duty to aid distant destitute peoples requires only that the agent acknowledge that they would unhesitatingly incur a minor cost or inconvenience in the course of

²⁵ This is an important qualification – I do not, implausibly, maintain that contemporary society is now (even largely) free of racism, sexism, and homophobia. There is still much to be done to achieve justice on these fronts. Arguably the main remaining recalcitrant barrier to justice is “implicit bias”. This phenomenon is claimed to be very widespread and its effect is most dramatically seen in those whose *explicit* beliefs, values, and attitudes are resolutely opposed to racism, sexism, and homophobia. Countless psychological studies have shown that many, perhaps most, individuals unknowingly harbour, and sometimes act upon, implicit (unconscious) biases that contradict and subvert their explicit (conscious) beliefs, values, and attitudes. There is a burgeoning philosophical literature on implicit bias – see, for a recent overview, Neil Levy, ‘Implicit Bias and Moral Responsibility: Probing the Data’, *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 93:3 (2017), 3–26. The phenomenon of implicit bias coheres very well with my claim that we modern citizens who denounce the evils of racism, sexism, and homophobia do not possess an enhanced moral psychology *vis-à-vis* our overtly racist, sexist, and homophobic predecessors.

²⁶ This judgement coheres with Haskell’s, Davis’, and Williams’ broader claim that the moral capacities of modern, early, and pre-modern peoples are about the same as ours.

Nigel Pleasants

rescuing a drowning child from a pond that they are passing. Singer is insistent that the duty to aid the destitute is no more supererogatory than this readily acknowledged duty. Likewise, moral arguments for vegetarianism and anti-vivisection require only that the agent extend their natural moral sympathies for pet-animals to food-animals and laboratory-animals. The only sacrifice that vegetarianism involves is said to be that of foregoing trivial gustatory pleasures and reconfiguration of dietary habits and routine.

Still, it might be objected that enhanced moral psychology was necessary for the radical critics, campaigners, and reformers that were instrumental in promoting and forging institutional change on gender, sex, sexuality, and racial equality (as opposed to the masses that simply acquiesced to the changes that reformers inspired). But as discussed above, there is strong reason and evidence for thinking that it was not a feature of the monumental achievement of the abolition movement, and this suggests that it was not a feature of the more mundane campaigns on gender, sex, sexuality, and racial equality either. The history of moral change around these morally arbitrary features of persons exhibits a protracted process of incremental, piecemeal, institutional, and legislative reforms, with each change creating a new context for reformers to respond to. There is also good reason to think that, as with the abolition of slavery, the requirements of a modern, increasingly sophisticated economic structure encouraged institutional and legislative reform. This is perhaps most easily and clearly seen in the case of labour supply and employment practice, where discrimination, disqualification, and restriction on the grounds of gender, sexuality, and race places irrational restrictions on the availability of talent and hinders the flexible working practices needed for a modern economy.

It is true of course that individual, and organised groups of, critics and campaigners played an important role in agitating for institutional and legislative reform. But their activities are ineffective on their own and only become effective when wedded to government-led, societal-wide imposed change to which the masses acquiesce. There are currently vociferous critics that campaign for recognition of, and action towards, the new moral problems to which I am advertising in this essay. But without the support of the government legislature, and a foothold in substantial public moral consensus, their claims are easily dismissed as the ravings of eccentric lunatics and dangerous fanatics (think of the popular image of the animal liberation movement, for example). The claims of earlier campaigners for racial, sexual, and gender justice were initially, and for a considerable time, similarly dismissed. Without the affordances of propitious

Would Aristotle Have Seen the Wrongness of Slavery

social and economic conditions their claims would have continued to be dismissed on these grounds by political and epistemic authorities and the wider public.

I concede that many people, both inside and outside of moral philosophy, believe that enhanced moral psychology was and is a necessary factor in revolutionary moral change of the kind discussed above. But there are good explanations for this propensity; one emanates from classical Marxism and the other from contemporary social psychology. Both of these explanations diagnose a commonplace, almost inveterate, tendency to mistake the effect for the cause and to be taken in by the “surface” appearance of things. One of the central propositions of Marx’s “historical materialism” is that “social being determines individual consciousness”, not the other way round, as inevitably seems to us to be the case. In social psychology, the ‘fundamental attributional error’ diagnoses a congenital tendency to attribute the principal causes of peoples’ behaviour to their character and psychology, when it is their social environment that plays the larger, and determining, causal role.²⁷

3. Contemporary Observations on Radical Moral Criticism

If my analysis of the conditions of already-achieved progressive moral change is along the right lines then an enhanced moral psychology of the individuals that enacted it was not a driving factor. And if the new moral problems that I have identified are of a broadly similar kind to these historical ones (abolishing slavery, establishing the equal value, rights, and treatment of people whatever their gender, sex, sexuality, and racial classification), then the latter provide strong inductive evidence for the enhancement of moral psychology not being needed to tackle the former. But I think there is also more direct suggestive evidence that enhanced moral psychology is neither necessary nor sufficient for tackling the contemporary new moral problems.

It is not hard to find examples of outspoken critics recognising a large-scale injustice and accepting responsibility for tackling it, yet failing to act accordingly. A neat demonstration of the phenomenon is revealed by G. A. Cohen’s irreverently probing question: “If

²⁷ See Gilbert Harman, ‘Moral Philosophy Meets Social Psychology: Virtue Ethics and the Fundamental Attribution Error’, *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 99 (1999), 315–31, and John Doris, *Lack of Character: Personality and Moral Behavior* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

Nigel Pleasants

you're an egalitarian, how come you're so rich?" which he addresses largely to fellow left-wing political philosophers, though the reader immediately recognises quite a large category of kindred candidates.²⁸ It is directed at anyone who enjoys much greater personal wealth than they would were their society to be organised according to a principle of distributive justice which they themselves profess sincerely to believe in. The conversational implicature of Cohen's question is: "Why don't you redirect to poor people, or to egalitarian causes, a substantial part of that portion of your wealth that exceeds what you yourself believe you would have in the just society that you say you fervently desire?" We have here, then, people with a vivid moral perception of the plight of the poor, a penetrating cognitive grasp of the injustice of that plight, recognition and acceptance of (socially shared) responsibility for ending that injustice, and even a realistic idea of what kind of remedial action is required (channelling their excess wealth to egalitarian causes). Only the actual action of setting about materially helping those whose suffering they recognise is missing from the rich egalitarian's response to the moral problem that they perceive.

One could say that in virtue of their perception and cognitive grasp of the moral problem, rich egalitarians have an enhanced moral psychology compared to those that are not (economic) egalitarians at all. Rich egalitarians that are political philosophers do exhibit prodigious cognitive power in their ability to comprehend and formulate elaborate conceptual analysis of, and formal justifications for, the egalitarianism that they uphold (the moral desirability and justness of significantly diminished economic inequality). But this cognitive power is not correlated with any moral action that substantially accords with their espoused egalitarianism. This being so is what motivates Cohen's enquiry into the comportment of the rich egalitarian in the first place. So whilst one might concede that the rich egalitarian possesses enhanced perceptual and cognitive power *vis-à-vis* most of the rest of the (non-egalitarian) population, this does not amount to *moral* enhancement as such. Indeed, it can be called into question whether the rich egalitarian really does believe what they purport to believe. Cohen does not share my scepticism on this. He says his question 'does not ask how the people under inspection can credibly claim to *believe* in equality'; 'I *know* they believe in it', he proclaims.²⁹ I think I am following Wittgenstein in suggesting that, with some

²⁸ G. A. Cohen, *If You're an Egalitarian, How Come You're So Rich?* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000).

²⁹ Cohen, *If You're an Egalitarian*, 157.

Would Aristotle Have Seen the Wrongness of Slavery

beliefs at least, a person's mere avowal of the belief does not *ipso facto* make it a genuine belief, and it may be impugned by their sharply discordant (in)action. The crux of Wittgenstein's dismissal of Cartesian doubt is that one *cannot* – as Descartes purported to do – doubt that X simply by announcing the words 'I doubt that X'.³⁰ This holds for certain beliefs too, I think, namely, those such as the one in question that seems to commit the holder to some kind of accordant action.³¹

Consider another example of intellectual recognition of a moral problem in conjunction with an absence of ameliorative action that would accord with that recognition. In a recent interview John Searle says:

I think there is a very good case to be made for saying that if you grant the validity of universal human rights, then it looks like it would be some kind of special pleading if you said there's no such thing as universal animal rights. I think there are animal rights.

Even so, he 'confesses' that 'I try not to think about animal rights because I fear I'd have to become a vegetarian if I worked it out consistently'.³² The unmistakable implication is that for Searle, becoming a vegetarian would incur a higher cost in personal sacrifice than he is currently prepared to pay.

Searle is not particularly unusual on this. I have quite often encountered students, philosophers, and non-academics who admit that whilst they are intellectually persuaded by the moral arguments for vegetarianism, they have no intention of becoming vegetarian, or say they would like to but lack the resolve.³³

I hasten to record that my intention is not to criticise Searle (on the contrary, I admire his honesty and forthrightness), or rich egalitarians for that matter. Even the peerlessly virtuous Peter Singer is not immune to a glaring discrepancy (by his own lights) between

³⁰ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *On Certainty* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1979).

³¹ Cf. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1968): 'an "inner process" stands in need of outward criteria', §580.

³² Tim Crane, 'An Interview with John Searle' (2014): <http://www.crassh.cam.ac.uk/blog/post/an-interview-with-john-searle>.

³³ It is interesting that whilst there is something *prima facie* peculiar, or questionable, about the comportment of rich egalitarians, the very idea of a meat-eating vegetarian is patently preposterous. In the former case one may wonder how the egalitarian reconciles their (relative) wealth with their egalitarian belief; in the latter it hardly even makes sense for someone that eats meat, even just occasionally, to say that they are, or think of themselves as, a vegetarian (witness such expressions as "I am *nearly* vegetarian", or "I am vegetarian *most* of the time").

Nigel Pleasants

his moral belief and his action. Singer argues that the very least one should be doing to help the world's destitute people is to give aid up to the point at which to give more one would be sacrificing something of 'moral significance' to oneself.³⁴ Yet he himself apparently gives 'only' 20% of his income.³⁵ This is still evidently a much higher proportion than nearly everyone else, and one might think that to give more than 20% of one's income *would* be to sacrifice something of moral importance to oneself, but it is evident from what Singer says³⁶ that *he* does not think so.³⁷ I should add my own confession too: I think Singer's basic argument for our duty to help the world's destitute people is unanswerable. Yet I give only a tiny fraction of Singer's 20%, i.e., much less than 1%, an amount which I know falls out of sight of the line of 'moral importance'.

It might be thought that in the foregoing examples we have people that *would* act in accordance with their moral beliefs were it not that their moral will is too weak (they suffer from the classically recognised condition of *akrasia*). Then, if there were a bio-medical intervention capable of fortifying the moral will of these "weak-willed" people it would enable them to do what they ostensibly believe they should, but cannot currently bring themselves to, do. But I do not think that it is a weak moral will that prevents (most of) these actors from acting in accord with their avowed beliefs.

Cohen seems to diagnose *akrasia* in those rich egalitarians that acknowledge a troubling discrepancy between their belief and their action (though his chief interest is in rich egalitarians that think there is no discrepancy, and that therefore they do not need the "*akrasia*" excuse). This is in line with standard definitions of *akrasia*, according to which the akratic agent is one that both 'believes that he ought (all things considered) to do X' and 'does not intend to do X'.³⁸ By this definition, rich egalitarians that acknowledge a discrepancy between their belief and their action are indeed akratic.

³⁴ 'Famine, Affluence and Morality', 234.

³⁵ Howard Darmstadter, 'Peter Singer Says You Are a Bad Person', *Philosophy Now* 89 (2012): https://philosophynow.org/issues/89/Peter_Singer_Says_You_Are_a_Bad_Person.

³⁶ 'Famine, Affluence and Morality', 241.

³⁷ Cohen admits to fitting the description 'rich egalitarian' himself: 'I am, like most professors, much richer than the average person in my society', and he confesses to giving to egalitarian causes 'only a fraction of the money that I earn (by which I don't mean that I give away something like, for example, three quarters of it; I mean a different, more fractional, sort of fraction)', *If You're an Egalitarian*, 150.

³⁸ Cohen, *If You're an Egalitarian*, 155.

Would Aristotle Have Seen the Wrongness of Slavery

However, it seems to me that someone who believes that they are morally required to do X but have no intention of doing or trying to do X does not thereby have a weak *will* in relation to X. I would say that they have a weak will only if they *want* to do X but fail to. If there is no kind of attempt to exercise the will against the resistant object (the doing of X), this is not a *weak* attempt at willing but no willing at all.

Thus to put it bluntly, the rich egalitarian, the meat eater that intellectually accepts a moral argument for vegetarianism, the typical believer in environmentalist arguments, and those like myself who accept that there is a duty to do what one reasonably can to help the world's destitute and those in need of refuge, really do not *want* to do what they purportedly believe they should do.³⁹ They do not want to because they believe that doing so would be extremely demanding and costly to themselves, to an extent that would sharply diminish their quality of life. If demandingness and costliness is the principal reason for the inaction of those that recognise the new moral problems yet fail to act amelioratively towards them, it is likely also to be a determining factor in the perception and judgement of those (the large majority of the population) that do not even recognise them as genuine moral problems.

Another principal reason for non-recognition of the putative new moral problems to which I advert is the normative force that emanates from the routineness and non-controversialism of believing and acting in line with the large majority of people, especially when this majority includes those of impeccable epistemic authority and moral standing, and most of one's family, friends and acquaintances. Consider the following illustration of this phenomenon, which features morally risky behaviour that occurs chronically in every modern society, the putative wrongness of which is, *ex hypothesi*, recognised by *virtually no-one*. The behaviour in question is car-driving.⁴⁰ We all know that the consequences of driving a car, when it goes wrong, can be devastating to human life and limb. The frequency with which it goes wrong is dramatically framed by Douglass Husak: 'more Americans were killed in car accidents in the month of September 2001 than died in the terrorist attacks of

³⁹ I do not deny that there may be a rare few that fail to act only on account of a weak will.

⁴⁰ The purpose of this example is not to argue that car-driving is, in itself, morally wrong. I am interested here only in the fact that hardly anyone has even *considered* whether it might be, despite, as I will show, there being strong *prima facie* reasons at least to pose that question.

Nigel Pleasants

September 11. Motor vehicle crashes are the leading cause of death for persons of *every* age from 4 through 33 years old'.⁴¹

Husak contends that driving a car is wrong (because it risks causing death or serious injury to other people) when done under two conditions conjointly. These are, when the vehicle is a SUV or truck that is constructed in such a way that it causes much greater damage to other types of car upon impact than it suffers from them (due to its disproportionate weight and strength), and when the purpose of driving it is what Husak categorises as 'frivolous'. Driving under these conditions is to engage in activities that are not necessary, and which risk killing and injuring other people (often those that have not consented to be party to the activity, and in the case of children, those that lack the capacity to consent). There are reasons for thinking that by his own lights Husak is too lenient in only designating as wrongful driving that occurs under both conditions conjointly rather than under each of them. And one might also note that even when driving is done for non-frivolous purposes it might still be morally questionable – the claim of putative "economic necessity" is often rejected as a justification or excuse for slavery.⁴² But the essential point is that a lot of deaths and injuries are being inflicted on innocents as the result of routine activity that hardly anyone, not even moral philosophers, thinks is morally questionable, never mind actually wrongful.⁴³ The reason why almost no-one sees fit to question the morality of car driving (aside from the indirect and aggregative environmental harm it causes) is of course that nearly everyone participates in and benefits from it.

The conclusion of this section is that where progressive changes to an established practice or way of life would seem to entail substantial costs to its responsible agents, no enhancement of their moral psychology would bring them to see the status quo as a moral problem, or motivate them to take the required action if they do see it. How, then, can the new moral problems be addressed if the idea of moral enhancement is otiose, as I have argued it to be?

4. How is "Moral Enhancement" to Be Achieved?

In essence, there are two main problems with the idea of moral enhancement: it is overly individualistic, focussing too much attention

⁴¹ Douglas Husak, 'Vehicles and Crashes: Why is this Moral Issue Overlooked?', *Social Theory and Practice* 30:3 (2004), 351–70, 354.

⁴² See for example, Moody-Adams, 'Culture, Responsibility'.

⁴³ Husak, 'Vehicles and Crashes', 364.

Would Aristotle Have Seen the Wrongness of Slavery

on individuals and their personal moral psychology, and too much is asked of it *vis-à-vis* the scale and magnitude of the moral problems we face. I readily concede that it is easier to identify what is wrong with the idea of moral enhancement than it is to diagnose how the new moral problems should instead be conceived and tackled. I offer a number of observations.

Let us first remind ourselves of the nature and basic structure of the new moral problems themselves. They share a number of core features, principally: their scale and the difficulty of solving them; the perceived costliness to the responsible agent of attempting to solve them; the pervasive taken-for-granted permissibility and normality of acting in ways that perpetuate the harm suffered by victims, or of being unconcerned with aiding victims that one could aid. In sum, the new moral problems are embedded in socially structured, institutionalised, and highly normalised ways of living that are impervious to the putative moral demands raised by the plight of the victims. Because of these features, the measures required to address the new moral problems must be of a fundamentally *collective* nature, and this is why modes of moral enhancement directed at individuals' moral psychology are bound to be ineffectual.

The historical examples canvassed in section 2 show that there has been substantial moral progress in addressing and rectifying unjust forms of oppression, exploitation, disregard, contempt, and discriminatory treatment of whole groups of people. Indeed, one could say that this is moral enhancement, albeit moral enhancement of the *ways of life* shared by the victims and the morally responsible agents – but not, as I argued previously, moral enhancement of the character or psychology of the responsible agents themselves.

I contend that our new moral problems are closely analogous to these historical ones in terms of the aforementioned dimensions of magnitude and institutionalisation of the way of life that sustains them. If the analogy is justified it provides optimistic inductive support for the new moral problems being soluble in ways that the “old” ones were/are. The new moral problems are just like the old ones (at the latter's early stage of evolution) in being recognised as moral problems only by what I call ‘dissident critics’.⁴⁴ Dissident critics are those isolated radicals that publicly object to an institutionalised and normalised practice, and the behaviour, beliefs, and attitudes entwined with it, on the grounds of its alleged cruelty, disrespectfulness, and injustice to victims. In taking this stance, such critics attract bewilderment and ridicule from the

⁴⁴ Pleasants, ‘Institutional Wrongdoing’.

Nigel Pleasants

incredulous and indignant majority, who either (especially in the early stages of critique) find the criticism too absurd to take seriously, or react with hostility to what they take to be an attack on something constitutive of their way of life.

Dissident criticism has played a vital role in stimulating and promoting progressive societal moral change. Without dissident criticism – thus no criticism at all – there is not even a *prima facie* case for anyone to consider the justness of an institutionalised practice in their society.⁴⁵ But as the examples of now-acknowledged unjust institutionalised practices such as slavery, racism, sexism, and homophobia show, such criticism on its own, without widespread support from persons of respected epistemic, moral, and political authority, and the wider public, is utterly ineffective. The new moral problems that I have identified already have dissident critics advocating their victims' cause, which is what constitutes the behaviour and practices in question *as* putative moral problems. So the question is, how might this merely dissident, isolated criticism be converted into a respectable popular moral crusade?

I argued in section 2 above that there is no reason to think that enhancement of individual moral psychology was involved in the transition from isolated dissident criticism to popular moral crusade in the historical cases, and section 3 presented further reasons why it would not be efficacious in advancing the contemporary new moral problems. I suspect that there is very little of substance that can be said on how to promote the transition from merely dissident criticism to popular moral crusade. There simply is no “magic bullet” that would show how this is best pursued in all cases. I think the best strategy, therefore, is to seek to learn from what *has* been achieved with other moral problems.

The main lesson that I derive from our historical experience is that too much emphasis on the need for responsible agents to become morally better persons, through enhancement of their moral psychology, is likely only to hinder moral progress. Telling the responsible agents that they need to undergo moral enhancement to face up to the moral problems confronting them⁴⁶ just reinforces the main barrier to them not recognising, or acting on, these moral problems in the first place, namely, the ostensible demandingness

⁴⁵ Notwithstanding Husak's maverick, but outlandish, critique, this is currently the situation regarding car-driving as such, as discussed above.

⁴⁶ As do Savulescu and Persson, in 'Moral Enhancement': '[a] willingness to sacrifice one's own interests is [...] a feature of even undemanding moralities', 407.

Would Aristotle Have Seen the Wrongness of Slavery

and costliness of doing so. The very idea of moral enhancement, in this context at least, evokes an alienating and demoralising utopianism. Conversely, though, it is cause for optimism that the (relatively) successful historical cases show that enhancement of individual moral psychology is not necessary for progressive moral change. In this light, the prospect of making progress with the new moral problems is less utopian than it first appears.

In an environment where norms of racial, gender, and sexual equality and respect have not been established it is hard and costly for individuals to stand up for those principles because to do so incurs ridicule, disapproval, and hostility, both from the wider public and from family and friends. But in an environment where these norms have become entrenched, adhering to and acting in accord with them is easy, effortless, and routine. Adhering to these norms does involve a change in living compared to how people lived in societies where they were not established, but whilst the prospective changes may have looked onerous and costly then, experience now shows this perception to have been illusory. Likewise, in order to tackle effectively the new moral problems there would have to be changes to the way people currently live. But if the changes were spread across the whole collective of responsible agents, guided and supported by new institutionalised norms of appropriate behaviour and comportment (as occurred with the old moral problems), they need not be as burdensome as they currently appear to be.⁴⁷ When the costs are spread across the whole group, the cost to each individual is minimal, and *ex hypothesi*, the object of progressive change was not really good for the responsible agents anyway (e.g., the consumption of animal products, and energy-intensive and consumerist lifestyles, are deleterious to health and well-being).⁴⁸

One final observation may be worth registering. Proponents of bio-medical moral enhancement have been charged with being prepared to embrace as a consequence of enhancement the suppression of a

⁴⁷ See Robert Goodin, 'Duties of Charity, Duties of Justice', *Political Studies* 65:2 (2017), 268–283, for an argument on how the moral duty to aid the world's poorest people should be institutionalised and thereby transformed from isolated acts of supererogatory charity to a strict (perfect) duty of justice for all liable citizens.

⁴⁸ Kate Pickett and Richard Wilkinson present arresting empirical evidence in their bestselling *The Spirit Level: Why Equality is Better for Everyone* (London: Penguin, 2010), that fundamental inequality, disrespect, exploitation, and injustice is bad for *everyone*, perpetrators as well as victims.

Nigel Pleasants

central human freedom, namely, what John Harris describes as the ‘precious’ ‘freedom to fall’, morally speaking.⁴⁹ The objection is that proponents of moral enhancement want to change people biologically such that ‘the freedom to do immoral things [becomes] impossible’,⁵⁰ and taking away this freedom removes something that is intrinsically morally valuable (more valuable than the good that morally enhanced individuals would bring to others). My argument that historical moral progress is not the product of an enhanced individual moral psychology and that it is now effortless and routine for people not to engage in manifestly racist, sexist, or homophobic behaviour also entails that people no longer have the freedom to act thus – and therefore deserve no moral credit for forbearance. Those particular freedoms have been just as much suppressed, by social and institutional means, as they would be by the vaunted biomedical means. Of course, to remove people’s freedom to behave in overtly racist, sexist, or homophobic ways by social and institutional reconfiguration is not to remove their freedom to “act immorally” at all; there are countless other ways of acting immorally.

5. Conclusion

I share with advocates of moral enhancement the view that we currently face urgent, large-scale moral problems and that we are obliged to search for the most effective ways of addressing them. But I find the idea of the (biomedical) means they propose for addressing these problems fundamentally misconceived. Moreover, I think that the underlying individualist conception of moral agency that these advocates share with most of their critics is flawed in ways that hinder our understanding of what is required to overcome the moral problems. Rather than pinning our hopes on a soon-to-be-available technological fix that will transform our moral nature from that of Kant’s ‘rational devils’ into “moral angels”, I suggest we look *back* to what has already been achieved with other moral problems. And rather than aiming at achieving a non-specific, general moral enhancement *per se*, we should attend to the issues raised by the particular moral problems that we face. Being fixated on our own moral improvement through moral enhancement looks to me potentially dangerously narcissistic (there is much evidence that many, probably most, of the large-scale atrocities of the twentieth and

⁴⁹ Quoted in Savulescu and Persson, ‘Moral Enhancement’, 406.

⁵⁰ Savulescu and Persson, ‘Moral Enhancement’, 409, quoting Harris.

Would Aristotle Have Seen the Wrongness of Slavery

twenty-first century have been perpetrated by people obsessed with their own moral rightness). Societal moral problems, I have argued, are much more tractable when we focus attention on the practicalities of what can be done right now, with the resources we already have, rather than fantasising over a utopian programme of mass enhancement of personal moral psychology.

Acknowledgement

I would like to thank the editors, Michael Hauskeller and Lewis Coyne, for staging the marvellously congenial and convivial conference on Moral Enhancement at Exeter in July 2016, and for their very helpful and sharp comments and suggestions on earlier drafts of this essay.

University of Exeter
n.j.pleasants@ex.ac.uk