

Commentary: What Price Freedom?

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In his article in this issue “Is it Desirable to Be Able to Do the Undesirable?” Michael Hauskeller contends with a problem that manifests in relation to recent bioethical discussions of moral enhancement (ME): whether interventions that constrain our ability to act immorally—to do the bad, as well as the good—can be considered either morally desirable, or a form of ME.

Enhancement for Whom?

The first difficulty with ME as it has generally been discussed is in determining from whose point of view it is an enhancement. As Hauskeller notes, there is an ambiguity about ME: is it an intervention that enhances moral capacities, or is it an intervention that results in morally better outcomes?

Ingmar Persson and Julian Savulescu have argued for ME on the grounds that it may be necessary to “prevent ultimate harm”;^{1,2} the consequential nature of this justification seems to appeal to the latter, outcome-based interpretation. In that case, however, perhaps “moral enhancement” is a bad term (or as Hauskeller puts it, a “smoke screen”): engineering the weather to avoid hurricanes that pose a danger to life and property might result in morally better outcomes, but nobody would seriously suggest it constituted “moral enhancement.” We might nevertheless think that it would be morally *desirable* to do so, but not because it would be morality enhancing as such.

What proponents of ME must have in mind, then, are interventions that relate in some way to human reasons and actions and *via these* also have the effect of bringing about a better world. The problem is, however, that it is hard to say what kinds of modulations would lead to greater capacity to exercise moral agency, or to better outcomes in the short term, or to a better world, all things considered.

To illustrate the dilemma as he sees it, Hauskeller draws upon Anthony Burgess’ character Alex, anti-hero of *A Clockwork Orange*, whose forcible “moral enhancement” via aversion therapy leaves him so disinclined toward violence that he is unable to defend himself and becomes a target for violence from others. This sort of unintended side effect of supposed “moral enhancement” is something that John Harris and I have noted elsewhere to be a problem for some technologies that purport to be potential ME: simple harm aversion does not necessarily equate to ME, nor does it always lead to better outcomes.^{3,4}

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The “Little Alex Problem” is broader than this, however. It suggests that some forms of what might be considered ME may be worse not (just) in terms of local outcomes but could also result in a worse world all things considered, because of the harms that they would pose to human freedom.

To Err is Human?

As Hauskeller acknowledges, the question of freedom to do evil has been addressed by others in relation to ME, notably by John Harris, who argues that morality *requires* the “freedom to fall,”⁵ and that this freedom is of the utmost value, even perhaps above that of survival. It is interesting, therefore, to compare this argument with Hauskeller’s reading of it and with his own position.

First, I believe that Hauskeller places too much weight on the terms “virtue” and “God” in interpreting Harris’s position. As someone who has elsewhere declared God to be “wicked or dead,”⁶ Harris is unlikely to be making a literally theistic argument. A *literary* theistic one, on the other hand, is much more comprehensible: Milton’s God appears in Harris’s interpretation not as an all-powerful Creator from whom moral law derives, but as a mouthpiece for humanist philosophy. Likewise, for a philosopher who has generally rejected species-typical thinking as a determinant of what is morally right or permissible,⁷ the language of virtue is perhaps less tendentious than claiming that we would become “less than human.” Hauskeller himself is more willing to attribute the value of freedom directly to its being what he sees as an essential aspect of humanness by quoting Burgess’s chaplain, who says: “When a man cannot choose, he ceases to be a man.”

Much concern about enhancement in general has centered on the question of what it means to be human and how enhancement might disrupt this. ME, it seems, is no different. The question in each case is whether we value our imperfections, whether in fact we *should*, and if so how much?

I suggest that this approach to ME unconsciously echoes bioconservative attitudes toward other forms of enhancement, for example as expressed in Michael Sandel’s “Case Against Perfection.”⁸ It seems an odd position for Harris in particular to take: if we reject imperfection as either definitive or characteristic of our valued “humanness” with respect to other forms of enhancement, such as physical enhancement, why should we embrace it in the context of ME?

This, however, would seem to be the position adopted by both Hauskeller and Harris: that something valuable would be lost if we were to foreclose the possibility of moral imperfection. For Hauskeller, the “human” aspect is particularly important: he chooses Burgess’s story because it is reflective of a “moral intuition... that it is... bad or wrong or inhuman to force people into goodness.” He sees the ability to choose as the “essence of being human,” and considers that for those who have been deprived of this ability, “their humanity would in fact have been lost,” or that they would be “in some significant way no longer human.”

Hauskeller’s view thus implies an essential relationship between humanness and value, in that the ability to choose to act wrongly “defines what we are, our very humanity,” and that “being human is... something that is worth preserving and important to protect.” In other words, humanness is something to be valued; therefore, if the capacity to make morally worse choices is essentially human, being deprived of that capacity also deprives us of something valuable.

The “Moral Sense of Human”

This concern for peculiarly and uniquely human qualities that might be eroded by enhancement is, again, characteristic of the wider debate over technological means of enhancement. Fears about “post-human enhancement” are often phrased in terms of becoming something other than human, or losing our essential humanity. To analyze these objections to ME as to other forms of enhancement, we must attempt to discern what it is we actually value about humans, or more precisely: what is it we value about humanness, the state of being human?

Philosophers in the early days of bioethics, seeking to explore questions about the moral status of human life, grappled with the problem of the “moral sense of ‘human,’”⁹ meaning the special status of “humans” as “full-fledged member[s] of the moral community.” Today it has been possible to sort out this conceptual and terminological tangle, at least philosophically if not popularly: the concept of the person is a less clunky way of indicating “the moral sense of human,” and it can be recognized that not all humans are persons, nor need all persons be human.

When it comes to the possible effects of ME, what is at issue is a different “moral sense of human,” meaning “human: as moral agent”; however, in the same way as the infelicity and imprecision of using “human” to mean “person” or “being with the *kind of moral status* we think we ought to have,” are now recognized, it would seem equally “unhappy philosophically”¹⁰ to conflate “human” with “moral agent,” or “being with the *capacity for moral agency* we think we ought to have.”

Harris and I have elsewhere argued that there is nothing particularly special about being or remaining human, as such; the properties about us and beings relevantly-like-us that we value and think make us morally valuable are incidentally, rather than essentially, possessed by most (but not all) humans.¹¹

It is notable that both Harris and Hauskeller choose to draw on literature to suggest that something of value might be lost by (coercive) ME: their sources are rich in emotional resonance and descriptive material illustrating the value of freedom and the wrong of constraint, but are less useful when it comes to analytical philosophical support for this position. Both Hauskeller’s ideas of “essential humanness” and Harris’s reference to Miltonian-God-given nature are really just ways of stating that there is some intrinsic value in the freedom to decide to do wrong.

Moreover, it seems that what Hauskeller, at least, laments is not the nonexistence of “a man” but the extinguishment of something that was *once* “a man”: the conversion of a morally fallible human into something less fallible and therefore less human. This raises an interesting question: what would be lost if henceforth we created all children from birth without the ability to do evil? A “human” disabled with respect to this capacity might be a poor or diminished moral agent, or perhaps no kind of moral agent at all. We are not obliged, however, to maximize the number of moral agents that exist, or to confer moral agency on beings that lack it in general. This being the case, if we want to assert that we ought to continue creating humans as “free to fall,” are we subscribing to some kind of species-typical thinking about humans and moral agency?

Although Hauskeller’s frequent references to “humanness” and moral agency as an essential property suggest this, we do not have to base our claim on such reasoning. Instead we might say that it is better *for* us and beings-relevantly-like-us, and better for the types of entities that future-created human or indeed post-human beings would be, to be free to choose to do wrong. That is to say, it is better

for us not “as humans” in the biological sense, but as self-conscious agents, to be able to exercise fully our capacity for moral agency. Therefore, whereas we do not have an obligation to create moral agents where none existed previously, if we are going to create self-conscious agents, we should create them with full capacities for morality because it will be in their interests.

Is Amorality Worse than Immorality?

The concern that certain attempts at ME would foreclose the possibility of true moral behavior by removing any choice as to whether to be moral prompts consideration of whether the absence of morality (via the absence of choice) can be worse than the deliberate exercise of moral agency for ill: whether amorality is worse than immorality.

Hauskeller says, of “someone who has the good imposed on him” rather than choosing to be good: “It would not follow... that he is in any way worse.” But it makes no sense to evaluate an amoral agent as being “better” or “worse”; one can only evaluate the consequences. Any comparison between amorality and immorality therefore needs to take account of the question: better or worse *for whom*? It may be better for me to be a moral agent and free to choose to act immorally, but worse for others if my choice inflicts harm on them.

In Hauskeller’s view, “[i]t is the result, the being-good-without-a-choice... that is thought to be problematic.” Choice, then, is a key factor in what is valued. Similarly, for Harris, freedom exists in the “space between knowing the good and doing the good”;¹² he contends that “liberty... could conceivably be threatened by any measures that make the freedom to do immoral things impossible.”¹³

I suggest that it is possible to open up a further space for consideration, between our willed action to do good or evil, and the successful completion of that act. Action is a part of moral behavior, or rather, the decision to act, having weighed relevant factors and applied moral reasoning, is. Would an intervention that allowed us to decide to do evil but prevented us from actually doing it be a constraint upon freedom? Yes, it would, but we do not generally consider that limiting one’s freedom to *act* on a recognized impulse to do harm is an *unjustifiable* or *wrongful* imposition on freedom; else why do we lock up criminals? Or, looking at the problem from the opposite side, some have expressed concern over certain politicians having access to nuclear missile codes, presumably for fear that they might be misused. If, however, maximal freedom to fall is to be valued, then perhaps everyone not just the president, ought to be given unfettered access to the codes.

The question, however, is whether we should be free not simply to fall but also to bring the entire world of thinking, feeling, reasoning beings down with us if we do. Perhaps the best compromise between conscience and consequence is to be given freedom to fall—or even wilfully to jump—but with adequate safety nets in place to protect others from the consequences of our potential folly. The place to erect such safety nets so as to be minimally harmful to freedom might be in the space between willed action and actual consequence: to allow scope for the exercise of every step of moral agency except for its final effect.

What is the Freedom We Value?

Are we required to enhance people who are too “naturally good” in order to give them more choice about whether actually to be good? Most of us are not genuinely

maximally “free to fall”; most humans have some degree of natural aversion to violence and may in fact find the character of Alex, with his wanton enjoyment of violent harm and destruction, somewhat repulsive. The genius of Burgess’s novel is that in coming to sympathize with Alex despite his repugnant nature, we discover something that is important to us about ourselves, something that we value. That something may well be freedom of a sort, but it does not necessarily follow that we wish to become more like a pre-Ludovico-enhanced (or de-hanced) Alex in being freed from our natural disinclinations to inflict the sorts of harms that he describes in the book’s opening spree of assault, armed robbery, rape, property destruction, and manslaughter.

What, then, is the “freedom to fall” that we seek, and how can we protect it while also protecting ourselves and others from the potential harms that might be inflicted by the fallen?

Savulescu and Persson propose the story of the God Machine¹⁴ as a means of preventing “deeply immoral behaviour”: a machine that would intervene to modify the thought processes of a person who formed the intention to commit murder or other deeply harmful act, such that these people would instantly and unknowingly change their minds. The authors agree that this would be a constraint upon freedom, but note that “[f]reedom... is only one value... [T]he loss of freedom in one domain of our lives—to commit evil deeds—would be worth the benefits.” They also acknowledge that the God Machine would not be a “moral enhancement,” because it would simply prevent immoral actions. People would still, they say, be able to form immoral intentions, but given the God Machine’s mechanism of action, it is doubtful that this would be true, at least from an experiential point of view. The closest thing to “immoral intentions” we would experience would be having considered the possibility of acting with immoral intent but then changing our minds. We would never know whether, without the intervention of the God Machine, we might have been killers or not.

The unease that the idea of the God Machine provokes in me, at least, is not related to the lack of freedom to commit evil. I do not feel myself diminished for not knowing the Deplorable Word and hence being un-free to use it to destroy all existence; I would, however, feel alienated from my own being if I knew the Word and yet also knew that the God Machine would step in and change my mind, without my being aware of it, were I ever to decide to use it. Perhaps, then, it is the harm to authenticity or to self-knowledge of having one’s mind changed but never knowing it, that is the source of concern?

A claim about authenticity encounters the problem of determining what constitutes the “authentic” self. Tom Douglas considers the question of restricted freedom and the “true self” in relation to ME via the attenuation of counter-moral emotions. He suggests that emotions originate from the “brute” rather than the “true” self and that suppression of emotions therefore reduces the influence of the “brute” self and increases the “true” self’s freedom.¹⁵ Douglas’s explanation invokes a particular division between reason/emotion and authentic/brute selves that may not sit well with some accounts of the nature of selfhood. Nonetheless, we may accept that reducing the influence of emotions, no matter where they emanate from, which form an impediment to the pursuit of one’s overall projects of self-realization, is a form of increasing freedom.

This may apply equally to reducing what Douglas would term the “moral emotions,” as well as the “counter-moral” ones. To give an example: If my natural

aversion to harming sentient creatures is so strong that I cannot bear the thought of eating meat, and yet I would like nothing more than to be able to enjoy the gastronomic experience of consuming a steak, or perhaps a live octopus, arguably it would enhance my authenticity or 'true self' to reduce my harm-averse emotions so that I can contemplate doing so. Whether I should be permitted to actually eat said steak or octopus is another matter; if it is thought to be a sufficient moral harm, society can intervene by force of law or perhaps even directly to prevent it from occurring. That is, we can respect freedom of authentic moral agency and even act so as to increase it, but intervene at the point when the consequences of exercising that agency would result in harm disproportionate to the harm of intervention.

Conversely, many weak-willed, "akrasic" would-be vegetarians might be more enabled to act in accordance with their authentic selves if meat eating were not so readily permissible by society's current standards and by law. Until such time as that is the case, however, if I think that all things considered it would be morally better not to kill animals for food but am possessed of insufficient virtue to resist temptation, would it be wrong for me to watch a few videos of the gruesome horrors of factory farms to strengthen my resolve?

This seems to be in line with David DeGrazia's interpretation of freedom in relation to moral enhancement; he suggests that perhaps we are "free when we determine our actions through our own will."¹⁶ More than just our own will of the moment, the value of freedom should be understood in a long-term, dispositional sense: the freedom to be, or to make ourselves into, the kind of person we want to be. Interventions that increase our ability to achieve this, whether or not they enhance our capacity to exercise free moral agency or enhance the chance of moral outcomes, can be seen as beneficial to meaningful moral freedom.

Natural Goodness

Hauskeller makes a final attempt with the problem by comparing those whom he describes as "naturally good" with those who have been morally enhanced according to someone else's design. His claim is that the "engineered-to-be-good" have been made to be a certain way based on someone else's ideas of what is good, and that this is bad for them: "others have *gained* control over *them*... Someone else has decided *for them* what is evil and what is not, and has programmed them accordingly." He goes on to explain the wrongness of this in terms of a form of instrumentalization: "They have changed, or have been changed, from something that has *grown* and *come to be by nature*, unpredictably, uncontrolled, and behind, as it were, a veil of ignorance, into something that has been deliberately *made*, even *manufactured*, that is, a product." He also attempts to apply this argument to voluntary or self-induced enhancement, claiming that we would then be slaves to our prior selves.

The argument regarding being "made" rather than having "come to be by nature" is again one that is often applied in relation to other forms of enhancement, and has been addressed with respect to these. As far as the self-enslavement argument, we are always in a sense beholden to our past and future selves: avoiding voluntary enhancement because it would make our future selves slaves to our past makes no more sense than saying that an unenhanced future self who defies the wishes of the past self has enslaved that past self. Instead, it is the long-term dispositional autonomy of the person that we should consider.¹⁷

I believe that where the argument ultimately fails to convince, however, is with respect to the significance of “being made to be good.” Hauskeller’s problem with the morally engineered is that they have been “made” to be good based on someone else’s notions of the good. The “naturally good,” however, although not engineered, have still been placed in the category of “good” based on someone else’s ideas of *what it is* to be good; they have, in a sense, been “constructed” as good even if not “engineered” to be that way. They are no more “naturally good” than those whose behavior is made to conform to norms; it is just that the norms that are made by society happen to accord with their behavior. What makes someone “good” is as much the idea of what it is to be good as it is whether that person was made to conform to the idea; and when we judge our own actions as more or less good and decide how we want to live our moral lives, we are applying standards that have been constructed in cooperation with others.

Therefore, the idea of freedom to be good entirely on our own terms and no one else’s is one that does not really make sense. Our thinking about who we should be and who we want to be is also shaped by social norms and expectations; our concept of “the good” is itself something that is “made,” something that is decided in ways beyond our control. The “social, relational freedom” that Hauskeller says we should treasure is necessarily and simultaneously a constraint; we can only ever be free in this sense in relation to, and with the “making” of, others.

Notes

1. Persson I, Savulescu J. The perils of cognitive enhancement and the urgent imperative to enhance the moral character of humanity. *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 2008;25(3):162–77.
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3. Chan S, Harris J. Moral enhancement and pro-social behaviour. *Journal of Medical Ethics* 2011;37(3):130–1.
4. Harris J, Chan S. Moral behavior is not what it seems. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America* 2010;107(50):E183, author reply at E4.
5. Harris J. Moral enhancement and freedom. *Bioethics* 2011;25(2):102–11.
6. Harris J. Wicked or dead? Reflections on the moral character and existential status of God. In: Blackwell R, Schüklenk U, eds. *50 Voices of Disbelief: Why We Are Atheists*. Oxford: Wiley Blackwell; 2009:33–41.
7. For example, Harris J. *Enhancing Evolution*. Princeton: Princeton University Press; 2007.
8. Sandel M. *The Case Against Perfection: Ethics in the Age of Genetic Engineering*. Harvard: Harvard University Press; 2009.
9. Warren MA. On the moral and legal status of abortion. *The Monist* 1973;57(1):43–61, at 53.
10. Tooley M. Abortion and Infanticide. *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 1972;2(1):37–65.
11. Chan, S, Harris, J. Post-what? (And why does it matter?). In: Lippert-Rasmussen K, Thomsen MR, Wamberg J, eds. *The Posthuman Condition: Ethics, Aesthetics and Politics of Biotechnological Challenges*. Aarhus: Aarhus University Press; 2012:77–89.
12. See note 5, Harris 2011.
13. See note 5, Harris 2011.
14. Savulescu J, Persson I. Moral enhancement, freedom and the God machine. *The Monist* 2012;95(3):399–421.
15. Douglas T. Moral enhancement. *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 2008;25(3):228–45.
16. DeGrazia D. Moral enhancement, freedom, and what we (should) value in moral behaviour. *Journal of Medical Ethics* 2014;40(6):361–8.
17. Savulescu and Persson make a similar point using the legend of Ulysses to illustrate how overriding a person’s present wishes can facilitate his long-term autonomy; see note 14, Savulescu, Persson 2012.