

Introduction

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In 2016 the annual Royal Institute of Philosophy conference was held at the University of Exeter on the topic of moral enhancement, or, more precisely, moral *bio*enhancement. While we can understand and describe moral enhancement as any intervention that improves, or intends to improve, somebody's morality (which would include, for instance, teaching about right and wrong, character-building exercises, or leading by example), moral *bio*enhancement seeks to achieve said improvement directly through the manipulation of people's biological constitution, using pharmacological, neuroscientific, or genetic means of modification.¹

Whether that is possible or indeed desirable has proven controversial. The debate began ten years ago with Ingmar Persson and Julian Savulescu's first paper on the subject, warning against the dangers of cognitive enhancement and urging us to explore the possibility of moral bioenhancement to counter those dangers.² It was followed by many other articles by the same authors, all insisting that we have good reason to think that moral bioenhancement is not only possible – or likely to become possible very soon – but also something we simply cannot afford *not* to pursue. As Persson and Savulescu argued in their 2012 monograph *Unfit for the Future: The Need for Moral Enhancement*, our very survival as a species may well depend on it: without moral bioenhancement humanity is doomed to perish, defeated by our own technological might and constitutional inability to wield it responsibly.³

Naturally, not everyone agreed with Persson and Savulescu's assessment. Various issues have been raised with their proposal,

¹ Throughout the remainder of this introduction – and in most of the contributions, unless otherwise stated – “moral enhancement” and “moral bioenhancement” are used interchangeably.

² Ingmar Persson and Julian Savulescu, ‘The Perils of Cognitive Enhancement and the Urgent Imperative to Enhance the Moral Character of Humanity’, *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 25:3 (2008), 162–77.

³ Ingmar Persson and Julian Savulescu, *Unfit for the Future: The Need for Moral Enhancement*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012.

which, if nothing else, has stimulated a lively and fruitful debate on what can and should be done regarding the moral character of humanity, the effectiveness of the suggested means, and the desirability of the suggested ends. The debate, however, has so far been largely confined to those who have a strong research interest in the ethics of human enhancement *per se*.⁴ But just as the human enhancement debate ultimately revolves around the question of what it means to be *human*, the debate about moral enhancement ultimately revolves around the question of what it means to be *moral*, and that question, as John Harris has rightly pointed out, should be of interest to all moral philosophers and ethicists.⁵ Moreover, precisely because the fundamental question at the heart of the debate is what it means to be moral, it would seem pertinent to seek the advice of those who have studied the nature of morality from a variety of perspectives, and ask them what they think of the idea of moral enhancement. Hence those we invited to contribute to the conference and subsequently to the present volume are not the usual suspects, but rather philosophers, psychologists, cognitive scientists, and other scholars who may not have written on moral enhancement before, but whose expertise and perspective appeared nonetheless highly relevant for a comprehensive assessment of the proposal.

Consequently, the focus of the volume is the question: What *is* morality? After all, how we answer this question determines whether it *can* be enhanced, and if so, *how*. Does morality consist in having the right emotions, or in being rational, or in a combination of the two? Does something called “morality” exist as such, or can there only ever be certain moral belief systems and different moral frameworks, so that before we can enhance someone morally we need to determine *which* morality we would like to see enhanced?

There are, however, various other crucial questions that will be addressed along the way, among them the following:

Are we really “unfit for the future”, as Persson and Savulescu have claimed? Is our moral psychology – with its anti-utilitarian adherence to the act-omission doctrine, and lack of concern about events that occur at a distance – no longer fit for purpose?

Are we constitutionally incapable of refraining from the things that imperil our own existence (climate change, nuclear war, and

⁴ Cf. Michael Hauskeller, *Better Humans? Understanding the Human Enhancement Project*, London: Routledge, 2013.

⁵ John Harris, *How to Be Good: The Possibility of Moral Enhancement*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016, 117: ‘[a]ll moral philosophers, and indeed all ethicists, must have an interest in moral enhancement’.

aggression)? Are the problems that moral enhancement is supposed to solve even caused by a lack of morality?

Is it sufficiently obvious what is right and wrong, good and bad – what is just, fair, or altruistic? Are justice, fairness, and altruism *always* good or *always* commendable?

Would the new moral enhancement envisioned compromise our moral autonomy? Would it matter if it did? What about “traditional” moral enhancement – i.e., education? Does that work, and if so, how?

How likely is it *in practice* that we can morally enhance people, and do so in time? How then would it be implemented? Would we want a (regulated) market for moral enhancement drugs, or instead to make their usage compulsory?

And finally: Who makes the decisions? Who guards the guardians? Who enhances the enhancers?

It is clear, then, that the apparently straightforward prospect of moral enhancement in fact raises many problems. Some of these are of a practical nature and might be answered empirically, while others are questions of principle, permitting less certainty. Both kinds, however, must be satisfactorily addressed if we are to determine the value of the moral enhancement proposal. We hope that the present volume goes some way towards doing so.

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