

Harris Wiseman, *The Myth of the Moral Brain: The Limits of Moral Enhancement* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2016), 340 pages. ISBN: 9780262033923. Hardcover \$38.00.

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In this wide-ranging book, Harris Wiseman argues that there is nothing to be gained, and much to be lost, from talking about moral enhancement per se; rather, adding nuance and detail to accounts of moral enhancement can lead us to appreciate the useful, albeit limited, role that various interventions might play in advancing the goal of moral improvement. An interweaving of different considerations and the insistence that morality must be seen as complex and embedded characterize the contributions of this book. Wiseman attacks biologically reductive approaches to moral enhancement—and, indeed, any reductive account of morality—arguing forcefully and from different angles that moral concepts are extremely complex and that morality needs to be seen as something located in a wider social and cultural context. “What is needed, above all, is some way of grasping a person’s moral powers, without objectifying that person to a ‘biological machine’ and without treating their moral agency as something to be managed in the way one deals with a bacterial infection or some kind of unsightly growth” (p. 194). A guiding principle of the book is a keen eye on which moral enhancements might actually be of use—not just “could this affect moral behavior?” but “can this feasibly be implemented socially and politically?”

Wiseman draws useful distinctions between different approaches to moral enhancement, and he characterizes the book as a discussion of “hard” approaches, in which moral enhancement is the explicit aim, versus “soft” ones, in which some assistance toward moral enhancement may be seen to arise from interventions that go under other names, such as treatment for alcoholism.

Wiseman gives an account of the long history of humanity’s attempts at moral improvement. This account helps orient us to how persistent themes and metaphors have appeared that mold and may distort the debate, such as the “Jekyll and Hyde” metaphor of conflict and domination that has recurred in various guises. This also warns us of moral enhancement’s potential horrors.

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In his critiques of empirical work in the area, Wiseman shows that such metaphors affect how research findings are (over)interpreted to bolster support for a reductionist account of the human person that exaggerates and simplifies the role that biology might play in morality. Indeed, Wiseman produces a wealth of reasons for skepticism about biological approaches, such as those drawing on data about the effects of oxytocin, serotonin, and dopamine; approaches looking at brain structure; and genetics. His critiques include concern about the validity of much of the empirical data, the variable nature of findings, pragmatic considerations about the feasibility of the pharmaceutical industry actually developing drugs for moral enhancement in current conditions, and philosophical considerations of the sheer complexity of the important moral concepts being subjected to examination by scrutinizing a handful of undergraduates trapped in a lab somewhere (in a nutshell). A trait such as aggression—insofar as we can even pin down what this is—can be dangerous in one context but morally good in another. But he also describes the seductiveness of the “sexy” lure of the biological model.

Approaches to enhancement that focus on the brain are subjected to particularly trenchant critique, not because biology is immaterial but because morality is far more than our whole biology, let alone our brain. Moral virtues need to be embodied and enacted over time and in context. Wiseman wishes to deal with the whole human person, and he insightfully places the role of biology in the context of what can be seen as the battle between facticity and transcendence. Furthermore, he argues that rather than focus on the individual human to be enhanced, morality might be best seen in a group model in which individuals have a moral role to play in a wider social context and need not all be moral clones; however, the moral enhancement literature rarely considers this.

In developing his argument, Wiseman picks out certain writers from the philosophical literature to illustrate problems. It is probably fair to say that Ingmar Persson and Julian Savulescu’s recent work is savaged, described as a “monkeys with guns” approach, with far too much faith pinned on impractical solutions that simplify morality and might themselves fairly be called immoral.¹ However, Wiseman points out that they do at least show the political nature of the issues.

Of great interest and insight is the work on faith, which Wiseman argues is a large hole in the enhancement literature that needs attention given its great importance in the moral lives of even those who may not

Book reviews

be overtly religious. For pragmatic reasons taking Christianity as the example, he shows the idiosyncratic nature of a faith-based morality. The discussions of how this is embedded in community are very useful as a counter to the individualistic reductionist approaches of much of the moral enhancement literature. The discussion of the salvatory nature of Christian faith-based morality is also a fascinating counter to philosophical discussions of enhancement, as it vividly helps us see the importance of the question “enhancement in relation to what vision of morality, exactly?”

The focus on “soft” enhancement lets Wiseman show how enhancement is not some high-tech futuristic possibility needed to fend off apocalyptic disaster but something that is already with us. His discussion of how mental health interventions edge toward moral enhancement demonstrates this, as does his chapter on alcoholism, which demonstrates the embeddedness of moral enhancement with other interventions. The very idea of imposing moral enhancement on someone is

self-defeating, although in some extreme instances, the compulsion to avoid harm to others might be considered. Above all, a case-by-case approach is needed, and a realistic, embedded account that sees any use of enhancement as one tool in the armory of moral improvement, in the context of a whole life, lived in a particular social setting.

The Myth of the Moral Brain would make a very useful introduction to the moral enhancement literature for anyone new to the area, and it provides a comprehensive and thoughtful critique of the field to date for those who are already familiar with much of the literature, together with some useful indicators of how to take the questions forward.

References

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