

Lone Wolf Terrorists and the Impotence of Moral Enhancement

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The most likely scenario that we have to guard against right now ends up being more of a lone wolf operation than a large, well-coordinated terrorist attack.

—President Barack Obama¹

I hope they can [...] give me the help I need and allow me to get a second chance. I'm not a terrorist, a criminal or a bad person, I'm just a kid who suffered from problems, that made some bad decisions and stupid mistakes.

—Convicted Lone Wolf Terrorist Christopher Cornell²

Abstract

In their recent book *Unfit for the Future*, Persson and Savulescu make a heartfelt plea for the increasing necessity of “moral enhancement”, interventions that improve human capacities for moral behaviour.³ They argue that, with all the technological advances of the 20th and 21st centuries, the sheer scope of horror that humans can now potentially wreak on their neighbours or the world is staggering. Hence, we are morally obliged to use interventions at our disposal to prevent such atrocities. However, as we learn more about human behaviour and decision-making, the argument that we are morally obligated to morally enhance our friends, neighbours, or countrymen starts to fall apart. For us to be more moral requires more than sharpening our reasoning capacities so that we can more effectively recognise what is better or increasing personal motivation so that we are more likely to do what is good. It requires that we all agree on what the good is and how to achieve it, and that there are no social, cultural, physical, or psychological impediments that prevent us from recognising the good or acting on it. To illustrate my position, I use the phenomenon of self-radicalised terrorists as a case study. In particular, I focus on how historians, psychologists, sociologists, criminologists, and political scientists understand the process of self-radicalisation, who self-radicalises, and why, and what all this tells us about it should be “treated”. Part of my purpose in working my way

¹ A. Levine, ‘Obama: Biggest Terror Fear is the Lone Wolf’, *CNN*, 16th August 2011: <http://security.blogs.cnn.com/2011/08/16/obama-biggest-terror-fear-is-the-lone-wolf/>.

² K. Grasha, ‘Man in Terror Plot Says “Allah’s in Control, Not the Judge”’, *Cincinnati Enquirer*, 5th December 2016.

³ I. Persson and J. Savulescu, *Unfit for the Future: The Need for Moral Enhancement* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

through this case study is to demonstrate that many philosophers misunderstand or over-simplify the science behind so-called immoral actions; consequently, their discussions of whether to enhance someone's morality miss their mark.

1. Introduction

The threat presented by terrorism in the Western world is very real. According to the Global Terrorism Database at the University of Maryland there have been over 3,069 incidents in North America and Western Europe from 2000 to 2015.⁴ It is no wonder that international conversations are occurring about how best to combat such potentially destructive behaviour.

Philosophers included. In their recent book *Unfit for the Future*, Persson and Savulescu make a heartfelt plea for the increasing necessity of “moral enhancement”, interventions that improve human capacities for moral behaviour. They argue that, with all the technological advances of the 20th and 21st centuries, the sheer scope of horror that humans can now potentially wreak on their neighbours or the world is staggering. Hence, we are morally obliged to use interventions at our disposal to prevent such atrocities.

Leaving aside practical questions regarding whether such things might actually work or how we might implement such practices, several questions immediately arise from this position: How should we balance individual liberty against the collective good? Is it better to preserve the freedom to choose, even if the choices might be detrimental to others, or would improving the overall good justify restricting an individual's self-determination? Who or what exactly might have this moral imperative? Doctors, parents, neighbours, nation-states? And then, even more fundamentally: what moral code or system should we be reflecting when we enhance someone's behaviour, and who gets to decide this and why?

This chapter addresses this last question, though it comes at it rather obliquely. In particular, I shall argue that as we learn more about human behaviour and decision-making, the less it is clear that there are universal and objective moral codes that ground our behaviour. Consequently, the argument that we are morally obligated to morally enhance our friends, neighbours, or countrymen falls apart, though not because humans should be free to make terrible choices, but for three different reasons. First, the same action can be judged to

⁴ Global Terrorism Database: <https://www.start.umd.edu/gtd/>.

be virtuous or abhorrent, depending on which moral system and the interpretation of relevant events is being used. Second, understanding problematic behaviour from a scientific point of view, which is what you would have to do to develop successful behavioural enhancements, removes that action from the realm of moral judgement and into the realm of clinical treatment. And third, our behaviour is significantly influenced by a whole host of environmental factors. We have to change the surrounding circumstances in order to effect significant behavioural changes; simply changing one's mind is generally not enough.

In short, for us to be more moral requires more than sharpening our reasoning capacities so that we can more effectively recognise what is better or increasing personal motivation so that we are more likely to do what is good. It requires that we all agree on what the good is and how to achieve it, and that there are no social, cultural, physical, or psychological impediments that prevent us from recognising the good or acting on it.

To illustrate my position, I shall use the phenomenon of self-radicalised terrorists as a case study. In particular, I shall focus on how historians, psychologists, sociologists, criminologists, and political scientists understand the process of self-radicalisation, who self-radicalise and why, and what all this tells us about how it should be "treated". Part of my purpose in working my way through this case study is to demonstrate that many philosophers misunderstand or over-simplify the science behind so-called immoral actions; consequently, their discussions of whether to enhance someone's morality miss their mark.

2. Philosophers' Perspectives on Moral Behaviour

In general, philosophers who worry about the morality of moral enhancement think of moral actions as a product of three things: (1) knowing what is good, (2) being motivated to do the good, and then (3) deciding to do what one is motivated to do on the basis of (1) and (2). It is both an internal process and deliberative one. For example, in his reply to Persson and Savulescu,⁵ Harris notes that 'morality [is] basically a matter of choosing what is for the best all things considered, not simply being well motivated or pro-social; in short, [...] to be good is not simply happening to do no evil but

⁵ I. Persson and J. Savulescu, 'Moral Bioenhancement, Freedom and Reason', *Neuroethics* 9:3 (2016), 263–268.

choosing for a reason, choosing on the basis of evidence and argument, not to do wrong'.⁶

Indeed, the idea of deliberately choosing a course of action is fundamentally important to many philosophers' analyses of morality, for deliberately choosing is bound up with most philosophers' notions of freedom, and it is the tension between individual freedom to choose and the collective good that drives much of their discussion. Harris writes: '[t]he space between knowing the good and doing the good is a region entirely inhabited by freedom. Knowledge of the good is sufficiency to have stood, but freedom to fall is all. Without the freedom to fall, good cannot be a choice; and freedom disappears and along with it virtue. There is no virtue in doing what you must'.⁷ DeGrazia agrees with Harris that 'we are free when we determine our actions through our own will or when we are able to do what we want', and that morality requires choosing freely.⁸ Hence, from their point of view, A engages in moral behaviour X if A believes (correctly) that X is the moral thing to do, A prefers to do X, A has this disposition because A identifies with this preference and prefers to have it, and this preference does not result from influences that A would consider alienating.⁹

Oddly, these philosophers do not engage the question of what to do when A believes, for well articulated reasons, that X is the moral thing to do, but B believes just as strongly, for equally well articulated reasons, that $\neg X$ is the moral thing to do.¹⁰ They appear to be assuming that what counts as the good is already settled, and so the concerns regarding moral enhancement turn on potential conflicts with other presumed goods (like liberty), not on what the good is to begin with or how we know that.

If they are right, then perhaps all we need in order to engage in moral conduct is moral motivation combined with moral insight using the appropriate deliberative process. It would then follow that to enhance our morality, we should improve either knowledge of the good, motivation to do what is right, or our reasoning capacity.

⁶ J. Harris, 'Moral Blindness – The Gift of the God Machine', *Neuroethics* 9:3 (2016), 269–273, 270.

⁷ J. Harris, 'Moral Enhancement and Freedom,' *Bioethics* 25:2 (2011), 102–111, 104; see also 110.

⁸ D. DeGrazia, 'Moral Enhancement, Freedom, and What We (Should) Value in Moral Behaviour,' *Journal of Medical Ethics* 40:6 (2014), 361–368, 366.

⁹ See also D. DeGrazia, *Human Identity and Bioethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

¹⁰ At least I have found no such discussions in anything I have read by these philosophers on the topic.

DeGrazia distinguishes three possible types of improvement: improvements in motives and character, improvements in comprehending what is right, and improvements in behaviour, though he later clarifies that behavioural improvements stem from improvements in motivation and insight.¹¹ Similarly, Shook argues that there are two ways someone may be morally lacking: motivational (she lacks the motivation to do what she thinks is right) and doxastic (she cannot form moral beliefs about what is right).¹² From Shook's point of view, to improve morality would mean improving either one's motivation or one's rational capacity or both. Azevedo, Curtis, and Kabasenche all adumbrate similar perspectives as well.¹³

But all of these perspectives are relying on a false, or at least radically over-simplified, folk psychological account of behaviour – that human action is (fully) explained in terms of beliefs, desires, and rationality. Of course, our behaviour is much more complicated than that. Social anxiety might prevent me from speaking up when I see a wrong. Or paranoia might provide me with unconventional interpretations of the world such that my actions appear inexplicable to others, but are perfectly rational using my assumptions. There could be nothing wrong with my reasoning capacity, my belief-making machine, or my motivational strength, and yet still my behaviour could be socially compromised because psychological context for these cognitive modules is compromised, so to speak. Regrettably, philosophical discussions of the morality of moral enhancement often rely on cartoonish views of what drives human behaviour. Equally importantly, they often presume robust psychological health in the moral decision-makers, a health that few of us, if any, have.¹⁴

¹¹ DeGrazia, 'Moral Enhancement, Freedom, and What We (Should) Value in Moral Behaviour', 363.

¹² J. R. Shook, 'Neuroethics and the Possible Types of Moral Enhancement', *AJOB Neuroscience* 3:4 (2012), 3–14.

¹³ M. A. Azevedo, 'The Misfortunes of Moral Enhancement', *Journal of Medicine and Philosophy* 41:5 (2016), 461–479; B. L. Curtis, 'Moral Enhancement as Rehabilitation?', *AJOB Neuroscience* 3:4 (2012) 23–24; W. P. Kabasenche, 'Moral Formation and Moral Enhancement', *AJOB Neuroscience* 7:2 (2016), 130–131.

¹⁴ In 2015, the National Institute of Mental Health in the United States estimated that 18 percent of all adult Americans suffered from a diagnosable mental illness in the previous year; this does not include Substance Use Disorders, which would only make the percentage higher: <https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/statistics/prevalence/any-mental-illness-among-us-adults.shtml>. Their study did not include Attention Deficit

Different philosophers emphasise different aspects of human psychology as most relevant to moral enhancement. Douglas, for example, claims that moral enhancement ‘will expectably leave the enhanced person with morally better motives than she had previously’.¹⁵ In particular, Douglas is focussed on reducing things like an impulse toward violence such that ‘a reduction in the degree to which an agent experiences those emotions would, under some circumstances, constitute a moral enhancement’.¹⁶ Persson and Savulescu agree that enhancing moral motivations would enable us to act better.¹⁷ Harris, in contrast, holds that moral enhancement must essentially require cognitive enhancement because morality requires the ability to distinguish right from wrong as well as rational capacity.¹⁸ In response, Rakić suggests that a lot of immoral behaviour comes from weakness of will; hence, cognitive enhancement alone would not be enough.¹⁹

But in each of these cases, whether one is enhancing motivation or cognition, what is being adjusted is internal to the agent; the way the world is structured around the agent is immaterial to moral improvement. Indeed, Simkulet argues that enticing certain behaviours by arranging the world in particular ways is antithetical to morality itself.²⁰ If I set an alarm to remind myself to check on my ailing mother, and I believe that checking on my mother is a good and moral thing to do, then, because the alarm does not change my moral intentions, it is not enhancing my morality even if it makes it more likely that I get in touch with my mother. Any inducements that bypass my deliberative process might even undermine my moral behaviour by impinging on the freedom I have to choose what to do. However, if all human behaviour is constrained by environmental factors, then it becomes more challenging to connect improvements

Disorder or Autism Spectrum Disorder, both of which can impact upon behaviour and decision-making significantly. It is important to keep in mind that psychological problems have to interfere with daily life in order to be classified as a mental illness.

¹⁵ T. Douglas, ‘Moral Enhancement’, *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 25:3 (2008), 228–245, 231.

¹⁶ Douglas, ‘Moral Enhancement’, 231.

¹⁷ Persson and Savulescu, *Unfit for the Future*.

¹⁸ Harris, ‘Moral Enhancement and Freedom’.

¹⁹ B. Rakić, ‘Voluntary Moral Enhancement and the Survival-at-Any-Cost Bias’, *Journal of Medical Ethics* 40:4 (2014), 246–250.

²⁰ W. Simkulet, ‘Intention and Moral Enhancement’, *Bioethics* 30:9 (2016), 714–720.

in behaviour to enhancements in morality, as opposed to a milieu that is more conducive to doing the right thing, regardless of intention or motivation.

In this chapter, I am not going to adjudicate the details of where moral enhancements might occur or what exactly comprises moral behaviour. Instead, I am going to focus on a prime example of what drove Persson and Savulescu to adumbrate for the moral imperative to morally enhance in the first place: the increase in terrorism around the world as well as the level of destruction that terrorists can now inflict. I do this to illustrate how my three complaints about philosophers' arguments concerning the putative morality of moral enhancement work to undermine their positions.

3. A Brief Primer on Self-Radicalised Terrorism

In the mid-2000s there were several large-scale terrorist attacks and plots, including the 2004 Madrid train attack, the 2005 7/7 attack in London, the 2005 plots disrupted in Sydney and Melbourne, and the 2006 plot disrupted in Toronto.²¹ In each of these cases, overseas organisations were directly linked to the perpetrators. But since the mid-2000s, the pattern of terrorist activity has changed in both the United States and Western Europe. In particular, the number of terrorist incidents as a whole has declined, especially where group-based terrorist attacks co-ordinated from afar are concerned. But, at the same time, “homegrown” terrorism has increased in frequency.²² That is, the number of attacks carried out by citizens against their own neighbours or country, without co-ordination or training from abroad, has risen significantly in the past decade.

A Hastings Report lists 50 publicly known terrorist plots against United States that have been thwarted since 9/11; of those, 42 were

²¹ M. Zekulin, ‘Endgames: Improving Our Understanding of Homegrown Terrorism,’ *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 39:1 (2016), 46–66.

²² C. Hewitt, *Understanding Terrorism in America: From the Klan to Al Qaeda* (London: Routledge, 2003); G. LaFree, L. Dugan, and E. Miller, ‘Integrated United States Security Database (IUSSD): Terrorism Data on the United States Homeland, 1970 to 2011’, *Final Report to Resilient Systems Division, DHS Science and Technology Directorate* (College Park, MD: National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism, University of Maryland, 2012); R. Spaaij, *Understanding Lone Wolf Terrorism: Global Patterns, Motivations and Prevention* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2012).

homegrown.²³ George Washington University's Program on Extremism reports that post-9/11, 79 people in the United States convicted of jihadist-inspired offenses were completely unconnected to the Islamic State, al-Qaeda, or Al Shabaab. In the vast majority of these cases the perpetrators adhered to jihadist movement ideology in general, but displayed no particular loyalty to a specific group and had no formal links to any terrorist organisation. They were also US citizens.²⁴

In theory, the reasons for this change are not mysterious. After the 9/11 attacks the West and its allies demolished many terrorist networks, dismantling their training camps and killing their leaderships. As a result the organisations have become more decentralised, which means they depend more on partners and friends to carry out their missions. At the same time, an increased focus domestically on anti-terrorism measures have upped the ante regarding the capabilities needed for carrying out a successful attack in the Western hemisphere from afar. Consequently, co-opting homegrown terrorists have become more appealing to distal operations, and they are what al-Qaeda and other terrorist organisations have been pushing as an alternative to co-ordinated and fully supported attacks as of late.²⁵ Why waste the resources implanting a complex operation from afar when locals will do approximately the same thing already?

Importantly, distant terrorist masterminds do not recruit terrorists in the West to use them as "remote-controlled weapons", as it were. They rarely induce converts to affiliate with them as part of some long-term plan to acquire the capacity to carry out a spectacular attack in the convert's home country. Instead, the converts themselves are normally pro-actively looking for access to a militant environment, which the militants can then exploit to their advantage.

²³ S. Bucci, J. Caragano, and J. Zuckerman, 'Fifty Terror Plots Foiled since 9/11: The Homegrown Threat and the Long War on Terrorism', *The Heritage Foundation Report* (2012): <http://www.heritage.org/terrorism/report/fifty-terror-plots-foiled-911-the-homegrown-threat-and-the-long-war-terrorism>.

²⁴ S. Gilkes, 'Not Just the Caliphate: Non-Islamic State-Related Jihadist Terrorism in America', George Washington University Program on Extremism (2016): https://cchs.gwu.edu/sites/cchs.gwu.edu/files/downloads/Not%20Just%20The%20Caliphate_0.pdf.

²⁵ Bucci, Caragano, and Zuckerman, 'Fifty Terror Plots Foiled since 9/11: The Homegrown Threat and the Long War on Terrorism'.

From the convert's perspective, becoming affiliated with jihadists is the end goal, rather than a means to something else.²⁶

And nowadays, the process of radicalisation usually begins at home and it often ends there as well. For example, in 2009, the United States' Federal Bureau of Investigation (F.B.I.) estimated that there were approximately 15,000 websites and online forums supporting terrorism, and over three-quarters of them were based in the US.²⁷ Deep connections with well-developed overseas organisations are just not necessary to be a domestic terrorist in the West anymore.

But who are these people? Who become terrorists in their own nation? Recent data collection and analyses reveal not only how common these attacks have become but also commonalities among the backgrounds of the perpetrators.²⁸ For example, the Chicago Project on Security and Threats (CPOST) has looked in detail at over 100 individuals indicted for Islamic State-related crimes or who died during the commission of such crimes between the beginning of 2014 and the end of 2016.²⁹ Project leaders found striking and counter-intuitive patterns to the alleged perpetrators. Despite how they might be portrayed in the press, most homegrown terrorists are not poor, young, ignorant, uneducated, unemployed, irresponsible, or have a criminal history. As a group, the individuals look pretty much like average Western males (and the vast majority of

²⁶ M. Crone and M. Harrow, 'Homegrown Terrorism in the West', *Terrorism and Political Violence* 23:4 (2011), 521–536.

²⁷ J. Ryan, P. Thomas, and X. Olivares, 'American-Bred Terrorism Causing Alarm for Law Enforcement', *ANC News.com*, 22nd July 2010.

²⁸ E.g., P. Gill, J. Horgan, and P. Deckert, 'Bombing Alone: Tracing the Motivations and Antecedent Behaviors of Lone-Actor Terrorists', *Journal of Forensic Sciences* 59:2 (2014), 425–435; J. Gruenewald, S. Chermak, and J. D. Freilich, 'Distinguishing "Loner" Attacks from Other Domestic Extremist Violence: A Comparison of Far-Right Homicide Incidents and Offender Characteristics', *Criminology and Public Policy* 12:1 (2013), 65–91; G. Michael, *Lone Wolf Terror and the Rise of Leaderless Resistance* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2012); R. Spaaij, 'The Enigma of Lone Wolf Terrorism: An Assessment', *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 33:9 (2010), 854–870; Spaaij, *Understanding Lone Wolf Terrorism: Global Patterns, Motivations and Prevention*; see also J. Kaplan, 'Leaderless Resistance', *Terrorism and Political Violence* 9:3 (1997), 80–85.

²⁹ R. Pape, J. Decety, K. Ruby, A.A. Rivas, J. Jessen, and C. Wegner, 'The American Face of ISIS: Analysis of ISIS-Related Terrorism in the United States, March 2014-August 2016', Australian Strategic Policy Institute (2017): https://www.aspi.org.au/publications/the-american-face-of-isis-analysis-of-isis-related-terrorism-in-the-us-march-2014august-2016/ASPI_CPOST_ISIS_Indictees.pdf.

terrorists are men; CPOST identified only one woman in their database). Their average age was 27, with almost a third being over 30. Almost half were in a relationship, and a third were married. Three-quarters had jobs or were in school. In short, they seem just like your and my neighbours, which, of course, they are.

A significant number of those were also self-radicalised; they acted alone without any real connection to any terrorist organisation, so-called *lone wolf terrorists*. However, even though the incidence of lone wolf terrorism is increasing and – as President Obama’s comments above testify – lone wolf terrorists are more on people’s minds these days, they are not a new phenomenon by any stretch of the imagination. Perhaps the Biblical figure Phineas (*Numbers* 25:1–9) might well be credited as being the first lone wolf terrorist, as he averted God’s wrath by deciding to murder an Israelite man and a Midianite woman whose interracial relationship threatened the survival of the Hebrew people.³⁰ And they have been operating ever since.

The United States especially seemed to provoke lone wolf terrorists. For example, solitary or only very loosely affiliated actors primarily committed the violence wrought by anti-civil rights and anti-Black extremists, right-wing militias, eco-terrorists, and anti-abortion activists in the United States. Indeed, until 2005, the US considered only white supremacists, anti-government militias, eco-terrorists, and anti-abortion radicals “homegrown” because it believed that jihadist terrorists had to be foreign.³¹ But terminology aside, fully 40% of terrorism cases in the US from 1968 to 2007 have been “leaderless”. In contrast, just over 1% of all terrorism cases worldwide were comprised by “lone wolves” during the same time period.³² In sum, violent solitary actors have a significant history in the United States, and their numbers have steadily risen since 9/11.³³

Research has shown that lone wolf terrorists are primarily motivated by a failing sense of identity. Often disempowered, alienated,

³⁰ J. Kaplan, H. Loow, and L. Malkki, ‘Introduction to the Special Issue on Lone Wolf Terrorism and Autonomous Cell Terrorism,’ *Terrorism and Political Violence* 26:1 (2014), 1–12.

³¹ L. Vidino, ‘The Homegrown Terrorist Threat to the U.S. Homeland’, Real Instituto Elcano (2009): http://www.realinstitutoelcano.org/wps/portal/rielcano_eng.

³² Spaaij, ‘The Enigma of Lone Wolf Terrorism: An Assessment’.

³³ M. Becker, ‘Explaining Lone Wolf Target Selection in the United States’, *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 37:11 (2014), 959–978.

marginalised, and frustrated, they lack meaning in their lives. They wish to belong to something inspiring and significant. Affiliating with (what they believe are) distal terrorist organisations can provide the break from their former lives that they had been seeking, offering a new life of notoriety, starkly different from what they had previously known.³⁴ And organisations like al-Qaeda and the Islamic State work to provide a strong sense of belonging and purpose. They do so by helping converts to identify with those being hurt or oppressed, fueling a group-based sense of relative deprivation.³⁵ That is, even though the potential individual lone wolf terrorists are generally not personally deprived in any way, they start to identify with a community that they believe are deprived and, as a result, see themselves as exploited as well.³⁶ At the same time, many simultaneously withdraw from mainstream society, which prevents them from experiencing any counter-narratives to those they pick up from jihadist propaganda.³⁷ Constants across lone wolf terrorists are a malleability of self-identity, a religious fervour that legitimises violence against their enemies, and a disdain for their countrymen.³⁸

Of course, to become a lone wolf jihadist most effectively requires 21st century technologies. While the Internet is not the sole driver here, it has allowed for smaller, informal, and largely independent networks that promote leaderless jihad to form via social media,

³⁴ J. McCoy, and A. Knight, 'Homegrown Terrorism in Canada: Local Patterns, Global Trends', *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 38:4 (2015), 253–274.

³⁵ A. Speckhard, *Talking to Terrorists: Understanding the Psycho-Social Motivations of Militant Jihadi Terrorists, Mass Hostage Takers, Suicide Bombers, and 'Martyrs' to Combat Terrorism in Prison and Community Rehabilitation* (McLean, VA: Advances Press, 2012); N. R. Springer, 'Patterns of Radicalization: Identifying the Markers and Warning signs of Domestic Lone Wolf Terrorists in our Midst', (Naval Postgraduate School: unpublished thesis, 2009).

³⁶ M. King, and D. M. Taylor, 'The Radicalization of Homegrown Jihadists: A Review of Theoretical Models and Social Psychological Evidence', *Terrorism and Political Violence* 23:4 (2011), 602–622; see also Canadian Security and Intelligence Service (CSIS), 'Annual Public Report 2010–2011' (Ottawa: Government of Canada, 2013): https://www.csis-scrs.gc.ca/pblctns/nnlrprt/2010/2010-2011PublicReport_English.pdf.

³⁷ Spaaij, 'The Enigma of Lone Wolf Terrorism: An Assessment'.

³⁸ P. Bergen and B. Hoffman, 'Assessing the Terrorist Threat', Bipartisan Policy Center (2010): http://ctcitraining.org/docs/BPC_AssessTerroristThreat.pdf.

chat rooms, video archives, and so on. The cumulative effect of exposure to interactive forums and violent multimedia materials is that ‘people acquire a skewed sense of reality so that extremist attitudes and violence are no longer taboos but – rather – are seen as positive and desirable’.³⁹ It is not surprising that lone wolf terrorists have become the greatest security threat to the West.⁴⁰

What is most important for our purposes here, though, is that lone wolf terrorists see their violent actions as moral behaviour.⁴¹ People usually do not engage in what others might take to be reprehensible conduct until they have justified to themselves the morality of their actions.⁴² Because lone wolf terrorists look to their new communities to define what constitutes the good, they believe that they are pursuing laudable goals. All humans do this sort of social calibration; we all use our reference groups to mirror good and bad choices for us.⁴³ The differences, of course, are which reference groups we each use.

This naturally raises the question of how we should justify our moral systems, a question that philosophers writing about moral enhancement pointedly and explicitly do not answer. Persson and Savulescu hold that they do not need to define what a moral system is or morality *per se*, because their focus is on enhancing moral motivation, which is to ‘do what you *think* is just and beneficial’.⁴⁴ Obviously, I do not think that they really want to give that advice

³⁹ P. Neumann, ‘Options and Strategies for Countering Online Radicalization in the United States,’ *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 36:6 (2013), 431–432.

⁴⁰ M. Sageman, *Leaderless Jihad: Terror Networks in the Twenty-first Century* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008).

⁴¹ B. Beck, ‘Conceptual and Practical Problems in Moral Enhancement,’ *Bioethics* 29:4 (2015), 223–240.

⁴² A. Bandura, ‘Mechanisms of Moral Disengagement’, in W. Reich (ed.), *Origins of Terrorism: Psychologies, Ideologies, Theologies, States of Mind* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 161–191; A. Bandura, ‘The Role of Selective Moral Engagement in Terrorism and Counterterrorism’, in F. Moghaddam and A. Marsella (eds), *Understanding Terrorism: Psychological Roots, Consequences and Interventions* (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association Press, 2004), 121–150.

⁴³ A. Speckhard, ‘The Boston Marathon Bombers: The Lethal Cocktail that Turned Troubled Youth to Terrorism’, *Perspectives on Terrorism* 7:3 (2013), 64–78.

⁴⁴ I. Persson and J. Savulescu, ‘Moral Hard-Wiring and Moral Enhancement’, *Bioethics* 31:4 (2017), 286–295, 295. To be fair, they also discuss increasing empathy and a sense of justice as ways to improve morality in other publications. However, lone wolf terrorists’ activities are often fueled by a strong empathy with the sufferings of their new community

to terrorists. They, like other philosophers who discuss moral enhancement, assume that what counts as moral is fairly obvious, and the challenge is getting some to act on what we all agree is the right thing to do. People fail to be moral either because they reason incorrectly about the good or they lack the motivation to follow through on doing what is good. They do not fail to be moral because their value system differs fundamentally from those around them.

But changes in value systems are exactly what happen in the self-radicalisation process. To see this more clearly, let us take examine the case of one particular lone wolf in detail.

4. Christopher Cornell

In 2015, 20-year old Christopher Lee Cornell, a native-born US citizen, raised in a typical middle-class family in the suburbs of Cincinnati, Ohio, was arrested for planning a massacre that was to occur during President Obama's annual State of the Union address in Washington, D.C. He was arrested in a gun shop parking lot near his home, after he had just purchased two M-15 assault rifles and 600 rounds of ammunition. He admitted to using the Internet to research how to build pipe bombs and to pick targets in the D.C. area, as well as to pledge allegiance to ISIS and celebrate terror attacks online. 'I'm with the Islamic State', he said shortly after his arrest. 'I'm very dedicated to establish the Sharia in America, to wage war on the kafr [an Islamic term for "unbeliever"] and raise the word of Allah above all'.⁴⁵ He later pleaded guilty to attempted murder of government officials, attempting to provide material support to a foreign terrorist organisation, and possession of a firearm in furtherance of a crime of violence, and was ultimately sentenced to 30 years in prison.⁴⁶

These are the broad facts of the case. And I will admit that on the surface this appears as a textbook case for what Persson and Savulescu

and a sense of needing to right what is perceived as a strong injustice, so I do not believe that these suggestions would help much either.

⁴⁵ As quoted in T. Macke and J. Barr, 'Terror Suspect Christopher Cornell: "I'm So Dedicated That I Risked My Whole Life"', *Cincinnati Fox 19 News*, 19th March 2015.

⁴⁶ D. Ernst, "'Allah Is in Control, Not This Judge!': Capital Terror Plotter Receives 30-Year Sentence', *The Washington Times*, 5th December 2016; see also K. Grasha, 'Court: No Appeal for Green Township Man Who Admitted Terror', *Cincinnati Enquirer*, 12th May 2017.

adumbrate: if we could only somehow change Cornell such that he no longer desired to massacre his fellow citizens, or least no longer thought it was a good idea, then we would all be safer and the world would be a better place. But surface facts do not tell the whole story, and the details matter.

Dovetailing with the discussion in the previous section, Cornell himself believed that he was doing the right thing by orchestrating the massacre: ‘Yes, they might say I’m a terrorist, but we see the American troops as terrorists as well, coming to our lands, invading, stealing our resources and killing our people, raping our women. [...] Have you seen the photos and videos of the innocent children being killed, bodies upon bodies, stacked inside the back of a truck? You know, that’s what’s happening to our kids. America is funding and giving weapons to Israel. Israel is using these weapons to kill our children in Palestine every single day’.⁴⁷ He, like other lone wolf terrorists, found a new identity and cause through an international organisation. He talked of foreign soil as being ‘our land’, associating himself with the parents of Middle Eastern children. If you sincerely believed that your own children were being brutally slain by an outside enemy, then it becomes more difficult to maintain that all that needs to happen to prevent terrorism is to stiffen one’s moral fortitude. If anything, the opposite should occur! Obviously, whose morality – and the “facts” that underlie that morality – we should adopt are fundamental questions that must be answered before we start any sort of moral enhancement project.

The history of the West, and much of the world in general, is a history of violent uprising; it is a history of slave rebellions, revolts against colonisation, and pro-civil rights revolutions. In hindsight, we generally see these violent acts as necessary goods. But at the time, there were many white slave owners who believed that rebellious slaves were upsetting the natural moral order of the world, Europeans who believed that native attempts to rid themselves of colonisers were in denial about what was good for them. Even today there remain many who see homosexuality as a moral stain. My point is that often the driver of cultural violence is a deep and fundamental clash in moral perspectives; each tribe is convinced that righteousness is on its side. Jihadist terrorists are no different; they believe that they are in the moral right. It misunderstands Cornell’s and other terrorists’ world-view to claim that enhancing their morality would remove their propensity for violence. It would not. What has to change is their world-view itself.

⁴⁷ Macke and Barr, “Terror Suspect Christopher Cornell: “I’m So Dedicated That I Risked My Whole Life””.

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However, if the violent actions of lone wolf terrorists can be traced to psychological problems, then any work done to change their behaviour should be seen as treatment, not moral enhancement. Once we enter the clinical realm we are looking to reduce symptomatology, enhance everyday functioning in patients, and increase pro-social interactions. In this context questions of morality largely disappear.⁵³ Or, at the least, “moral enhancement” is the wrong name for something done as part of a medical practice;⁵⁴ clinical interventions are “treatments”.

It is easy to see how someone with Cornell’s psychological profile might get swept up in online propaganda, especially if the messaging were targeted to his or her particular background. It therefore should come as no surprise that videos and recorded lectures made by Western jihadist clerics can have a tremendous impact. For example, Anwar Al-Awlaki, a Yemeni imam and Islamic lecturer born and raised in New Mexico, influenced multiple US lone wolf terrorists, including Omar Mateen (2016 Pulse nightclub shooting in Orlando), Abdul Razak Ali Artan (2016 Ohio State attacker), Ahmed Khan Rahami (2016 New York-New Jersey bomber), Syed Rizwan Farook (2015 San Bernardino massacre), Dhokhar Tsarnaev (2013 Boston Marathon bomber), Minh Quan Pham (2012 thwarted suicide bomber), Faisal Shahzad (2010 Times Square bomber), Nidal Hasan (2009 Fort Hood shooting), Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab (2009 “underwear bomber”), as well as Cornell, among others. (According to the Counter Extremism Project, Al-Awlaki has been tied to 55 homegrown violent extremists in the United States, and at least 34 more in Western Europe).⁵⁵

Al-Awlaki can speak to Americans and Western Europeans using their common cultural background as a bridge to radical terrorist ideals. And in a “digital legacy” that has lived on in the ether years after his death in a US targeted drone strike, he continues to persuade others to join the rebellion. He might even be more persuasive since

⁵³ V. G. Hardcastle, ‘The Morality of Moral Enhancement? A Case Study of Traumatic Brain Injury and American Vets’ (forthcoming); D. Horstkötter, R. Berghmans, and G. de Wert, ‘Moral Enhancement for Antisocial Behavior? An Uneasy Relationship’, *AJOB Neuroscience* 3:4 (2012), 26–28.

⁵⁴ H. Wiseman, ‘SSRIs and Moral Enhancement: Looking Deeper’, *AJOB Neuroscience* 5:4 (2014) W1-W7.

⁵⁵ Counter Extremism Project, *Anwar Al-Awlaki. Part I: Prosecuted Homegrown Radicals with Ties to Anwar Al-Awlaki, and Part II: European Extremists with Ties to Anwar Al-Awlaki* (2016): https://www.counterextremism.com/sites/default/themes/bricktheme/pdfs/Anwar_al-Awlaki_Ties.pdf.

the US hunted him down and killed him, for he has been made into a martyr for the cause.⁵⁶

This brings me to my third point: the development of violent extremism is as much social as it is individual. The CPOST study gathered data on the propaganda consumption patterns of the vast majority of the 112 individuals they tracked, and of those, nearly 85 percent viewed propaganda videos. Clearly such materials play a central role in the radicalization of lone wolf terrorists.⁵⁷ As de Melo-Martín and Salles remark:

The assumption that humanity's moral ills are the result of mainly *individual* moral deficits is highly suspect. The framing of morally complex situations like war, famine, terrorism, lack of access to medicines, or poverty, as the result of certain types of individual moral failings ignores the role played by structural – social, cultural, political, economic – forces in enabling and often promoting these evils.⁵⁸

It is a mistake to focus solely on individual deficits, for it is only with those deficits in combination with a variety of external pressures that one will be moved to commit violence.⁵⁹ Whatever individual moral enhancing (or clinical treatment) goes on must be in combination with changes to the social and cultural environment of the individual as well. If we could reduce lone wolves' access to incendiary videos, or if we could counter those videos with alternative but still persuasive narratives, then there may be less violence as a result.

At the same time, it is hard to see these social or cultural “nudges” as moral enhancements.⁶⁰ In addition to Simkulet's argument against

⁵⁶ S. Shane, 'Dead Reckoning: The Lessons of Anwar al-Awlaki', *The New York Times Magazine*, 27th August 2015, MM56.

⁵⁷ Pape, Decety, Ruby, Rivas, Jessen, and Wegner, 'The American Face of ISIS: Analysis of ISIS-related Terrorism in the United States, March 2014–August 2016'.

⁵⁸ I. de Melo-Martín and A. Salles, 'Moral Bioenhancement: Much Ado About Nothing?', *Bioethics* 29:4 (2015), 223–232, 228.

⁵⁹ H. J. Ehni and D. Aurenque, 'On Moral Enhancement from a Habermasian Perspective', *Cambridge Quarterly of Healthcare Ethics* 21:2 (2012), 223–234; J. Harris, 'Moral Progress and Moral Enhancement', *Bioethics* 27:5 (2013), 285–290; R. Sparrow, 'Better Living Through Chemistry? A Reply to Savulescu and Persson on “Moral Enhancement”', *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 31:1 (2014) 23–32; I. M. Young, *Responsibility for Justice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

⁶⁰ J. Wilkes, 'Mind, Nature and the Emerging Science of Change: An Introduction to Metamorphology', in G. Cornelis, S. Smets, and J. Van

environmental structures having the potential to be moral improvements, most of these structural changes do little to alter one's fundamental psychology, which is what moral enhancements are supposed to do.⁶¹ Thaler and Sunstein, two prominent proponents of the science of nudging behaviour, define a nudge as 'any aspect of the choice architecture that alters people's behavior in a predictable way [...] without forbidding any options or significantly changing their economic incentives. To count as a nudge, the intervention must be easy and cheap to avoid [...]. Putting fruit at eye level counts as a nudge'.⁶² What they describe has nothing to do with rationally coming to some decision about which action to undertake, as philosophers believe moral actions occur through, though it does have everything to do with why we behave the way we do.

And this fact has dangerous implications, for just as we can manipulate an environment to reduce the chances of a violent response, so too can we manipulate an environment to increase the chances of a violent response. While Christopher Cornell believed he was talking to actual jihadist terrorists online, it turns out that he was primarily interacting with undercover F.B.I. agents. It remains unclear what would have happened in this case if the F.B.I. had taken a different path in its dealings with Cornell, if they had encouraged perhaps more engagement with his actual community instead of offering to help with (and actually financing) his terrorist plot.

Martin Pinales, Cornell's attorney, claims that Cornell was a 'keyboard terrorist', that he would not have done anything violent had he not been persuaded to do so by the undercover F.B.I. informant.⁶³ Cornell's father agrees, saying, '[t]here's no way he could have come up with something like this' on his own.⁶⁴ In her sentencing memorandum, attorney Candace Crouse wrote that he 'lived a fantasy life behind

Bendegem (eds), *Einstein Meets Magritte: An Interdisciplinary Reflection on Science, Nature, Art, Human Action and Society*, Volume 6 (Netherlands: Springer, 1999), 71–87.

⁶¹ Simkulet, 'Intention and Moral Enhancement'; S. Van der Linden, 'Reply to Dolan', in A. Oliver (ed.), *Behavioral Public Policy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 209–215.

⁶² T. Thaler and C. Sunstein, *Nudge: Improving Decisions about Health, Wealth, and Happiness* (New York: Penguin Books, 2008), 6.

⁶³ E. Heisig, 'Cincinnati-Area Man Pleads Guilty to Plotting Terrorist Attack on U.S. Capitol', *Cleveland.com*, 1st August 2016.

⁶⁴ Grasha, 'Man in Terror Plot Says "Allah's in Control, Not the Judge"'.

a computer screen'. She goes on to note that Cornell had never even handled a gun before he bought the rifles that led to his arrest, and he believed that he and the undercover F.B.I. agent would go into hiding after the attack. He wanted to create an Islamic State territory in the US for just the two of them. In short, 'his ideas were not rationally possible nor remotely realistic. Chris created a character, with a different name [he called himself 'Rahell Mahrus Ubaydah'], in a fantasy where this character was somebody in the world'.

It is very important to distinguish between radical thought and radical action.⁶⁵ For example, in the United Kingdom, according to a 2005 ICM telephone poll, 5 percent of adult Muslims, or roughly 50,000 of the approximately one million adult Muslims living in the UK, believe that suicide attacks are justified. However, significantly less than a thousand terrorism-related arrests have been made since 9/11, which means that only about 0.1 percent of the Muslim population in the UK have been moved to violent action.⁶⁶ We find similar statistics in the United States. According to the 2007 and 2011 polls conducted by the Pew Research Center, about 8 percent of US Muslims reported that suicide attacks are justified 'often' or 'sometimes'. And yet, relatively few terrorism-related arrests have been made in the US since 9/11.⁶⁷

Just as the environment can induce one to violent thoughts, it can also induce one to violent behaviour. Importantly, Cornell's father points out that there is 'no way he had the money to carry out any kind of terrorist attack'. So where did the funds to buy guns and ammunition come from? The undercover F.B.I. agent provided them, as well as friendship and conversations about jihadism. Cornell thought he was making connections with a welcoming community in the Middle East, when in reality he was talking to someone in a federal office. Indeed, as attorney Crouse explained in her memo: Cornell

⁶⁵ M. Zekulin, 'Islamic-Inspired Homegrown Terrorism: What We Know and What It Means Moving Forward', Occasional Research Paper No.8 (Calgary: Calgary Center for Military and Strategic Studies, 2013).

⁶⁶ As discussed in M. McCauley and S. Moskalenko, 'Toward a Profile of Lone Wolf Terrorists: What Moves an Individual from Radical Opinion to Radical Action', *Terrorism and Political Violence* 26:1 (2014), 69–85.

⁶⁷ Pew Research Center, 'Muslim Americans: Middle Class and Mostly Mainstream' (2007): <http://www.pewresearch.org/2007/05/22/muslim-americans-middle-class-and-mostly-mainstream/>; Pew Research Center, 'Muslim Americans: No Signs of Growth in Alienation or Support for Extremism' (2011): <http://www.people-press.org/2011/08/30/muslim-americans-no-signs-of-growth-in-alienation-or-support-for-extremism/>.

thought what was really the F.B.I. informant was ‘his only friend besides his brother and his cat’.⁶⁸

At what point do we move from protecting society from violent extremists to inciting people with violent thoughts to try to do violent things and then arresting them for trying to do them? The 2012 Heritage Report describes the details of 50 foiled terror plots in the United States since 9/11. Of those I count 13 that had F.B.I.-enhanced plots. As Aaronson reports, there have been 150 F.B.I. terrorism stings since 9/11 that have resulted in prosecutions. Over 250 of the 500 federal terrorism cases involved informants. At least 49 of those involved F.B.I. undercover agents taking a lead in the planning.⁶⁹ In other words, these plots would not have existed but for the F.B.I. In some cases, the perpetrator clearly had no independent means to commit any act of terrorism, and in others, the alleged plots were completely bizarre or unrealistic. Aside from Cornell’s plan to set up a two-person caliphate, there was, for example, a Massachusetts man who believed he was getting ready to destroy the United States Capitol building using a remote-controlled airplane filled with grenades.

I do not have a clear answer to when it is better to nudge in one way rather than the other. I do know that the average timeframe from the initial exploration of extremist ideas to “bang” is just over five years, which gives others plenty of time to interfere with the process in a variety of ways.⁷⁰ My central point here is that the circumstances surrounding any moral actor have a lot to do with how that actor ultimately behaves. And often those circumstances are beyond the control of those ensnared in them. Without managing the environment, any sort of moral enhancements engaged in internally bucking one up is probably doomed to fail. It is too little and too small an intervention.

5. Conclusion: The Impotence of Moral Enhancement

I understand completely the desire to manipulate our neighbours such that they would do no harm to us or to our environment.

⁶⁸ Grasha, ‘Man in Terror Plot Says “Allah’s in Control, Not the Judge”’.

⁶⁹ T. Aaronson, *The Terror Factory: Inside the F.B.I.’s Manufactured War on Terrorism* (Brooklyn, NY: Ig Publishing, 2013).

⁷⁰ J. Klausen, S. Champion, N. Needle, G. Nguyen, and R. Libretti, ‘Toward a Behavioral Model of “Homegrown” Radicalization Trajectories’, *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* **39**:1 (2015), 67–83.

I even understand why such desires are couched in moral terms. However, once we scratch the surface of what really makes people behave the ways they do, it becomes clear that what philosophers want to do would simply not get this job done. As Schaefer notes: '[a]rguably the entire enterprise of moral philosophy is predicated on such an idea that thinking these matters through can lead to the right moral answers – or at least point us in the right direction'.⁷¹ 'Thinking matters through' is but one aspect of what determines our actions, and it is probably a tiny aspect at that. Our beliefs about what counts as the good, our personal psychological profile, and our surrounding circumstances are all determinates of our actions. We would need to change all of these simultaneously to bring about lasting changes in moral behaviour. And without changing any of them, I am afraid that any moral enhancements geared toward helping us to think more rationally or to increase our motivations will be largely impotent.

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⁷¹ G. O. Schaefer, 'Direct vs. Indirect Moral Enhancement', *Kennedy Institute of Ethics Journal* 25:3 (2015), 261–289.