CQ welcomes readers' comments on articles published in the journal. Please send submissions to T. Kushner at kushnertk@gmail.com.

The Art of Misunderstanding Critics

The Case of Ingmar Persson and Julian Savulescu's Defense of Moral Bioenhancement

MICHAEL HAUSKELLER

Despite all the objections and concerns that have been raised during the past few years over the project of moral bioenhancement, its foremost proponents, Ingmar Persson and Julian Savulescu, remain convinced that moral bioenhancement is feasible, coherent, and above all urgently needed. Since the publication of their first seminal article on the topic seven years ago,[1] they have defended their position numerous times, but they have done little to change or refine it in light of the criticisms it received. Nothing that any of those critics have said so far seems to have made much of a difference to their position or triggered the slightest doubt about the sensibleness of their proposal.

The reason for this unflinching refusal to take any of the critics' concerns on board emerges in their latest contribution to the debate, which appeared in this journal under the title "The Art of Misunderstanding Moral Bioenhancement: Two Cases."[2] The two cases in question are those of Robert Sparrow[3] and I,[4] who are accused not only of misunderstanding the whole argument for moral bioenhancement (i.e., the object, the method, the need, and the risks) but also of committing logical blunders and adhering to various strange ideas that are so "totally" and "utterly" implausible that some of them are actually "too absurd to need rebuttal." If that assessment is correct, then it is no wonder that Persson and Savulescu don't see any reason to revise their position.

However, the claim that critics such as Sparrow and I have simply *misunderstood* the proposal is somewhat surprising, given that the idea of moral bioenhancement, as it is presented by Persson and Savulescu, seems to be quite simple and straightforward and not at all difficult to understand: there is a diagnosis and a proposed cure. The diagnosis is that there is a dangerous mismatch between, on the one hand, the "tremendous power" that science and technology have given us and, on the other, our "myopic" moral capacities, which have been shaped by evolution for (!) different circumstances than the ones we face now and hence are unfit to protect the world and ourselves from that power. This mismatch will in all likelihood soon lead to "the downfall of human civilization" and indeed a situation in which all "worthwhile life on this planet" will become

Cambridge Quarterly of Healthcare Ethics (2016), **25**, 153–161.

doi:10.1017/S0963180115000407

"forever impossible." This "ultimate harm" cannot be prevented by any conventional means. *If* it can be prevented at all, then it can only be prevented by moral bioenhancement, which may or may not turn out to be possible but is likely to be so because our central moral dispositions, namely, "altruism and a sense of justice" are "biologically based" and hence amenable to human manipulation. That I take to be the gist of the argument, and one would have to be pretty dense to misunderstand it.

Now what exactly is it that Persson and Savulescu think Sparrow and I have misunderstood? Let me address their main points and respond to them one by one.

Allegation 1

Allegation

Sparrow has misunderstood the object of moral bioenhancement, which is not, as he seems to think, to change moral *behavior* but to change our moral *dispositions*, in particular *altruism* (i.e., a concern for the welfare of others) and a sense of *justice*. He has also misunderstood the nature of those dispositions, which do not prompt us to act blindly, without any consideration of proper *reasons* to act. Instead, they simply motivate us to act in accordance with what we understand is right (i.e., what is good and bad for people, and what is just and unjust). That is why we also need conventional moral education, namely, to *tell* us what is right and wrong. But since *knowing* what is right and wrong is not enough to motivate us to actually *do* the right thing, we need to complement education with a bioenhancement of our moral dispositions.

Response

This allegation and the accompanying explanation are both disingenuous and miss the point. There is no doubt that the object of the proposed moral bioenhancement is indeed to effect a change in people's *behavior* and not simply in people's motivations. Persson and Savulescu's principal concern is not moral but practical. As far as their proposal is concerned, they don't care about whether people become morally better per se. According to their assessment, the planet's survival is in danger, so something needs to be *done*. Because it is people's actions that cause the problem, we need to find a way to make them change their behavior. *How* we do this is of no importance. It just so happens that Persson and Savulescu believe that the most promising and perhaps the only way to achieve the desired practical outcome is by manipulating human biology so that people become able to do what their antiquated moral psychology prevents them from doing. The question of what exactly should count as moral enhancement and whether what Persson and Savulescu propose we do does or does not qualify as moral enhancement is beside the point. All we need to know and discuss is what is being proposed, and whether this proposal is sensible and worth pursuing in the light of what it is supposed to achieve.

It is, however, difficult to do that because there is so much, and indeed too much, that the proposal assumes without proper investigation. Are we really stuck with a stone-age moral psychology that is no longer fit for purpose today? What is the evidence for that? Has not the circle of concern in fact expanded considerably since then, to include not only people belonging to one's own "kin and a small circle of . . . acquaintances" but also people from different tribes and races, people living in other parts of the world, future generations, animals, and even ecosystems? And why should our alleged moral myopia have affected only our

motivation to act and not also our ability to recognize what is right and what is wrong? *Do* we know what is right and wrong and what needs to be done? Is that really so obvious? And if we do lack the motivation to do what we should be doing, and what we *know* we should be doing, are there really no other ways to boost our motivation? Can that not be achieved through moral education? Why not? Because we are biologically incapable of doing it? But some people seem to have the necessary motivation already. How is that possible? And are we really doomed to bring "ultimate harm" on ourselves and the planet if we don't morally enhance ourselves? Are there no other options to prevent that from happening? And what would happen if we really managed to rid ourselves of our alleged motivational shortcomings—if we no longer had any bias toward the near future; if our altruism were unlimited, so that everybody's welfare would be as important to us as our own; if we sympathized with everyone without exception; and if we felt just as responsible for what we allowed to happen as we do now for what we directly cause to happen? Perhaps those alleged shortcomings of our moral psychology are actually quite useful to ensure our well-being and indeed survival.[5]

All these questions need to be asked and thoroughly investigated before they can be answered. And as long as they haven't been properly answered, it is virtually impossible to assess the merits of the proposal: that is, in practical terms, whether it makes any sense to pursue moral bioenhancement along the suggested lines, which would, after all, require the redirection of an enormous amount of resources to the project (and also, in all likelihood, a global government powerful and determined enough to see this through until there is nobody left who might feel tempted to cause ultimate harm).[6] Yet Sparrow's main point—with which I completely agree—is not this but rather the radical context-dependency of morality, which makes it highly doubtful that much can be achieved by increasing the scope or intensity of our altruistic leanings or our "sense of justice." The issue is not so much whether such moral or protomoral feelings or dispositions can increase our ability to act for the right *reasons* but, rather, whether they cannot just as well increase our ability to act for the *wrong* reasons. "Justice" and "good," even if the good in question is the good of other people, are very abstract and fairly empty notions that can be filled with all sorts of different content. This should be obvious in the case of the weapon-of-mass-destruction-wielding terrorist who threatens to bring ultimate harm on us. The problem we have with such terrorists is certainly not that they are not sufficiently motivated by what they think is just and what they think is good for us. They don't seem to suffer from moral myopia, at least not from the kind that Persson and Savulescu are talking about. What makes them dangerous is not that they don't care for justice or other people, but that they care too *much* about justice and what other people do or do not do. I'd rather they were less concerned with my life and thought only of themselves. In consequence, motivating them even more to act in accordance with their conception of what is good and right won't do anything to alleviate the danger of ultimate harm—on the contrary.[7] Leaving aside sheer force, the only thing that can help in this situation is moral *education*, namely, one that manages to make them *think* differently about justice and what is important in life—or not to think about it so much at all and be more selfish and self-absorbed instead.

Climate change and environmental destruction are of course a different

case, in which it seems more plausible, at least initially, to see the problem in a lack of moral motivation, which then prevents us from working toward effective countermeasures to prevent disaster. However, it is by no means clear that this is indeed an accurate assessment of the situation, which is likely to be far more complex. Usually the threat of environmental destruction is not framed as an us-versus-them (people living elsewhere or in the far future) situation. Instead, we are constantly reminded that this is a problem that affects us all, and pretty much now. So it is not so much our *altruism* that is in vain called on but rather our enlightened *self-interest*. We are told that if we continue like this, we will destroy the conditions on which our own (good) lives depend. And still we are not doing anything about it, or at least not as much as we are told is necessary to prevent "ultimate harm." This is clearly *not* because we lack moral motivation but more likely because we are having trouble imagining the whole thing to be real. We tend to trust in the future, tend to think that all those scientific doomsayers are probably exaggerating. This may indeed create a serious problem affecting our chances of survival, but it is certainly not one that can be solved by increasing people's altruistic impulses or "sense of justice."

Allegation 2

Allegation

Sparrow mistakenly believes that biomedical interventions differ significantly from conventional moral education in that they undermine the fundamental moral equality between the educator and the educated that all education tacitly acknowledges. Sparrow believes this mainly because he cannot be bothered by "anything as mundane as *empirical facts*." Ignoring "the empirical knowledge of common sense and science" and misguided by his "enchantment with the 'fundamental' and 'profound,'" he merely sports a common prejudice, because it is "surely evident that when small children are taught language, religion, basic moral rules, or whatever, this education is just as effective, irresistible, and irrevocable as biomedical intervention is likely to be."

Response

Persson and Savulescu have a worrying tendency to ridicule their critics' views and arguments instead of giving them a fair hearing and entertaining the possibility that they might actually have a point. This is always easy to do. I am tempted to respond in the same manner, but because I don't think that ridicule, although it may be a very effective rhetorical strategy, is likely to increase our understanding of substantial philosophical and practical issues, I will refrain from doing so. However, it is hard to imagine a claim that is *less* evident and supported by empirical observation than the one so confidently made by Persson and Savulescu—that whenever children are taught anything at all, this is "just as effective, irresistible, and irrevocable as biomedical intervention is likely to be"—unless, of course, they believe that biomedical intervention is not likely to be terribly effective at all. But because they *must* believe in the effectiveness of the particular kind of biomedical intervention that they propose, given that it is meant to literally save the world (i.e., us and all other living things from ultimate harm) and that it cannot do that if it is not effective, I suspect they really believe that education works very much like programming a computer or injecting knowledge, beliefs, and behavioral dispositions into an empty container and then, once it is filled, sealing it for good so that it

cannot get out again. Nobody who has ever been involved in bringing up a child can seriously believe that what we teach them is "irresistible" and "irrevocable." Such a claim is based neither on common sense nor on empirical observation, and it most certainly is not a scientifically proven "fact." There may of course be ways of educating children that have that indoctrinating tendency. Perhaps that is how education works in North Korea and other totalitarian and equally insular societies, but that kind of education (which should more appropriately be called "brainwashing"), if it indeed exists, is not really what we want education to be. So what Sparrow invokes is an *ideal* of moral education according to which it should proceed as a kind of dialogue between two in principle equal partners in the sense that the one that is being educated is never regarded and treated merely as a passive receptacle but always as an agent who ultimately has to make up his or her own mind about what is right and what is wrong and thus to develop his or her own moral outlook rather than merely aping somebody else's. The point is the rejection of what Sparrow calls the "instrumental or technical mode" of thinking when it comes to shaping the agency of others, and I find it rather alarming that Persson and Savulescu seem not only unable to think in any other mode themselves but also unable to even imagine that *anyone* in their right mind could seriously think in any other mode about the purpose and method of moral education.

Allegation 3

Allegation

Hauskeller falsely believes that all morality is contextual in the sense that whether a particular action is considered right or wrong depends on both the situation and the moral framework one happens to endorse, and that for this reason it is not possible to enhance people's morality as such. That this is plainly false is demonstrated by the fact that no society could "function unless there was widespread agreement about moral norms to the effect that other citizens must not be killed, raped, or robbed of their property; that they should be helped when in need; that their good deeds should be reciprocated; and so on."

Response

That no society could function without a widespread acceptance of some basic moral rules may be true but is largely irrelevant in the present context, for the simple reason that if it is indeed true, then we must already have the required moral outlook and motivation. Obviously our present moral psychology is good enough to ensure the functioning of human society. We don't need any moral bioenhancement for this. What we supposedly need moral bioenhancement for is to be able to deal efficiently with the global problems we face today, especially terrorism and environmental destruction. Persson and Savulescu assume without much argument that making people more disposed to act "altruistically" and "justly" will solve those problems, that we can make them more so disposed by fiddling with their brain chemistry, and that it is fairly uncontroversial what acting more altruistically and justly consists in. That this is clearly not the case is, curiously enough, demonstrated by precisely the kind of empirical research that Persson and Savulescu cite to back their claim that moral bioenhancement is possible. Thus it has been shown that by causing people to be more averse to harming others (i.e., to be more "altruistic"), they also become

less inclined to demand a just distribution of goods.[8] In other words, the same intervention that increases their altruistic tendencies also reduces what Persson and Savulescu tend to understand as their sense of justice, which should not surprise us, because it is easy to see that an aversion to harming people is not always compatible with what satisfying our sense of justice would require. Morality comes not in one homogeneous and internally consistent chunk but in various bits and pieces. It is, in one word, multidimensional. Moreover, whether or not we regard a particular change in a person's moral outlook as an enhancement depends entirely on the moral framework we embrace. If by augmenting serotonin neurotransmission in a test subject we can prompt them to respond differently to classic moral dilemmas such as trolley problems (making them, for example, less inclined to push one fat man off a bridge to save a bunch of people on the railway tracks),[9] then clearly this can only be regarded as a moral enhancement if we adopt a nonutilitarian perspective. This is because, for a utilitarian, the right action would be the one that is likely to save the greatest number of lives, which in this situation would consist in pushing the man off the bridge. So if we want to bioenhance people's morality and have to decide whether to do this, as suggested, by increasing or by lowering serotonin levels, then we first need to agree on how people *should* judge in situations like this one, and how we want them to act. That we already agree that people should generally be nice to one another and give to others what is their due doesn't help much at all here.

Persson and Savulescu now deny that pursuing moral bioenhancement requires us to take a stand on such controversial moral issues and argue that the object is merely to make people more "motivated by altruism and a sense of justice" but *not* "to ensure that they act in any specific way in particular situations." This is puzzling because it seems to me that if the latter is not the object, then we no longer have any good reason to pursue moral bioenhancement in the first place. If moral bioenhancement is meant to address the problem that people don't act the way they should (thus allowing ultimate harm to come upon us), then we had better make sure that it *does* ensure that people act in a specific way in particular situations. Otherwise we could just as well leave things as they are. And even if it were possible to morally enhance people in some way without taking a stand on controversial moral issues (which I doubt), it is certainly not true that the kind of moral enhancement that Persson and Savulescu propose (and, more importantly, the kind that they *need* in order to give some initial plausibility to their claim that only moral bioenhancement can save the world from ultimate harm) can be executed without making a decision about at least some substantial questions regarding right and wrong. To see this, we only have to look at Persson and Savulescu's list of our alleged moral shortcomings that moral bioenhancement is meant to redress. If our tendency to discount the importance of events in the more remote future, our tendency to find causing harm more blameworthy than letting harm occur (known as the act-omission doctrine), and our tendency to consider ourselves responsible for an effect in proportion to our causal contribution to it are all considered deplorable *flaws* in our moral psychology, then this implies that all these tendencies are *in fact* (morally) wrong (i.e., they prevent us from doing what is in fact morally right). In other words, it implies that we should not discount future

events, should not think ourselves less responsible for the harm that we fail to prevent than for the harm that we cause ourselves, and should not feel less responsible for events that are only to a very small degree caused by us. Yet none of this is uncontroversial—especially the rejection of the act-omission doctrine, which is a key tenet of utilitarianism, that is, a particular ethical theory. There is certainly no widespread consensus that the act-omission doctrine is mistaken and needs to be abandoned. Thus Persson and Savulescu clearly *do* presuppose the truth of a particular ethical framework in their proposal for moral bioenhancement.

They could of course defend their approach by saying that all that matters is that those beliefs prevent us from saving the world and ourselves from ultimate harm—that they are simply not fit for purpose. However, in that case we would no longer be talking about moral enhancement. We would simply be talking about what needs to be done to protect us from our own power. The proposed enhancement would then be purely instrumental—which of course it is, but then we should stop calling it moral enhancement.

Allegation 4

Allegation

Hauskeller wrongly believes that moral bioenhancement is going to turn us into mere puppets hanging from strings that are being moved by the bioenhancers, apparently because he erroneously assumes "that … bioenhancement must determine us to perform particular actions, the morally right actions." He also has this strange and "totally implausible" idea, which he shares with Harris,[10] that the freedom to do evil might be valuable in itself, which is "too absurd to need rebuttal."

Response

As pointed out previously, if moral bioenhancement does not determine us to perform particular actions, it is difficult to see why we should need it in the first place. But be that as it may, Persson and Savulescu clearly don't have an ethical problem with the idea of determining people's actions. It is just that they are not entirely convinced that it is possible. Yet if it *were* possible, they would wholeheartedly support it. The fiction of the "God machine,"[11] which prevents people from performing morally wrong actions by changing their motives to act whenever they are tempted to do so, is designed to convince us that there would be nothing wrong with changing people's moral psychology in such a way that they become incapable of doing anything that they are not supposed to be doing. That is what I meant when I expressed, in *Better Humans?*, concern about reducing people to "mere means to the end of morality,"[12] which in my view undermines the whole idea of morality because the least that morality requires is that we see and treat others never merely as means (and be it to the end of morality) but always also as ends. (And that is really the whole extent of my alleged Kantianism.) I don't think there is anything self-contradictory in this concern. Persson and Savulescu's thinking is seemingly logical: if we do not want people to do bad things, then surely we do not want them to be *free* to do bad things either. That would be too absurd. Yet that does not really follow at all. It all depends on what price we are willing to pay to prevent people from doing bad things. "Suppose," Persson and Savulescu write,

> the police force of a state were so effective that it was capable of catching every criminal in the act. Would such effective intervention be something

> morally decent citizens should fear because it makes them unfree to perform the many noncriminal actions that they in fact perform? Surely not—they should unequivocally welcome such efficiency because it makes their lives safer.

How politically naïve is that? This is exactly the kind of rationale that is commonly used to justify the existence of a pervasive state security apparatus that leaves nothing to chance and controls every aspect of people's lives. That "decent," noncriminal citizens have no reason to fear any of this provides little relief as long as it is entirely up to the state to define who should count as a criminal and who not. Even with the most benevolent government, this is hardly something we would have reason to welcome.

Let me conclude with a passage from William James's essay "The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life," which makes it very clear why we have, despite Persson and Savulescu's assurances, every reason to worry about the prospect of being subjected to a directed program of moral bioenhancement:

> The very best of men must not only be insensible, but be ludicrously and peculiarly insensible, to many goods. … Think of Zeno and of Epicurus think of Calvin and of Paley think of Kant and Schopenhauer … no longer as one-sided champions of special ideals, but as schoolmasters deciding what all must think,—and what more grotesque topic could a satirist wish for on which to exercise his pen? … Think, furthermore, of such individual moralists, no longer as mere schoolmasters, but as pontiffs armed with the temporal power, and having authority in every concrete case of conflict to order which good shall be butchered and which shall be suffered to survive,—and the notion really turns one pale. All one's slumbering revolutionary instincts waken at the thought of any single moralist wielding such powers of life and death. Better chaos forever than an order based on any closet-philosopher's rule, even though he were the most enlightened possible member of his tribe.[13]

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;25:162–76.
2. Persson I, Savulescu J. The art of misunderstanding moral bioenhancement: Two cases. *Cambridge Quarterly of Healthcare Ethics* 2015; 24(1):48–57.
3. Sparrow R. Better living through chemistry? A reply to Savulescu and Persson on "moral enhancement." *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 2014;31:23–32.
4. Hauskeller M. *Better Humans? Understanding the Enhancement Project*. Durham, UK: Acumen; 2013.
5. For a more systematic treatment of these and other unexamined assumptions, see de Melo-Martin I, Salles A. Moral bioenhancement: Much ado about nothing? *Bioethics* 2014;29(4): 223–32.
6. Vojin Rakic (Rakic V. Voluntary moral enhancement and the survival-at-any-cost bias. *Journal of Medical Ethics* 2014;40:246–50) has recently argued for voluntary moral enhancement in order to preserve human freedom, which he thinks should under no circumstances be sacrificed. I agree with the sentiment, but it is very unlikely that we will all voluntarily subject ourselves to a novel procedure designed to make us pursue a certain course of action that we are not really willing to pursue now. And it will certainly not reach the bad guys that threaten us with ultimate harm. For Persson and Savulescu's proposal to work, moral bioenhancement has to be made *compulsory* and *enforceable*. This point was forcefully made by Timothy Murphy: Murphy TF. Preventing ultimate harm as the justification for biomoral modification. *Bioethics* 2014;29(5): 369–77.
7. This point was also recently emphasized by Birgit Beck: Beck B. Conceptual and practical problems of moral enhancement. *Bioethics* 2014;29(4): 233–40.
8. Crocket MJ, Clark L, Hauser MD, Robbins TW. Serotonin selectively influences moral

judgment and behaviour through effects on harm aversion. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America* 2010;107(40):17433–8.
9. See note 8, Crocket et al. 2010, at 17437.
10. Harris J. Moral enhancement and freedom. *Bioethics* 2011;25(2):102–11.
11. Persson I, Savulescu J. Moral enhancement, freedom and the God machine. *The Monist* 2012;95(3):399–421.
12. See note 4, Hauskeller 2013, at 52.
13. James W. The moral philosopher and the moral life. In: James W. *Pragmatism and Other Writings*. London: Penguin; 2000, at 255–6.