

# Why Is It Hard for Us to Accept Moral Bioenhancement?

: Comment on Savulescu's Argument

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The figure is taken from the following essay.

-- Morioka, Masahiro. "A Phenomenological Study of "Herbivore Men." *The Review of Life Studies*, Vol.4 (September 2013):1-20.

# Why is It Hard for Us to Accept Moral Bioenhancement? : Comment on Savulescu's Argument<sup>I</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

In my paper I would like to criticize Julian Savulescu and his colleagues' argument on moral bioenhancement. If we want to improve our society, it would be easier and more effective to improve social conditions. Our personality ought to be constructed upon our inner foundation, which should not be tampered with by outside intervention or control, and I dare say this belief is a healthy one that should not be overturned.



## WHAT IS MORAL BIOENHANCEMENT?

Julian Savulescu and his colleagues have recently advocated the necessity for developing moral bioenhancement technologies, while Peter Singer and Agata Sagan discussed a 'morality pill' in *The New York Times* (Singer and Sagan 2012). Moral bioenhancement is, according to Persson and Savulescu, 'moral enhancement not merely by traditional means, such as education, but by genetic or other biological means' (Persson and Savulescu 2011: 2). Savulescu argues that, in the future, in addi-

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tion to pharmacological means, non-pharmacological methods such as transcranial magnetic stimulation, deep-brain stimulation, genetic manipulation and targeted optic stimulation could be used to influence one's moral motivation and behaviour (Savulescu 2012).

Persson and Savulescu's argument for moral bioenhancement is eloquently presented in their 2008 paper, 'The perils of cognitive enhancement and the urgent imperative to enhance the moral character of humanity'. They argue that we are now living in an age of cognitive enhancement, and 'this expansion of scientific knowledge and cognitive ability will put in an increasing number of people's hands "weapons of mass destruction" or the ability to deploy them' (Persson and Savulescu 2008: 166). With these weapons, even a small terrorist group will be able to devastate the whole world. Hence, '[t]o eliminate this risk, cognitive enhancement would have to be accompanied by a moral enhancement which extends to *all* of us, since such moral enhancement could reduce malevolence' (Persson and Savulescu 2008: 166). They further argue that:

*'[i]f safe moral enhancements are ever developed, there are strong reasons to believe that their use should be obligatory, like education or fluoride in the water, since those who should take them are least likely to be inclined to use them. That is, safe, effective moral enhancement would be compulsory' (Persson and Savulescu 2008: 174).*

## SOCIAL IMPROVEMENT AND MORAL BIOENHANCEMENT

Persson and Savulescu talk about two different kinds of moral bioenhancements: moral bioenhancement applied to individuals, such as criminals; and that applied to a group of people or to an entire population in an area. An example of the former is hormonal manipulation treatment prescribed to pedophiles, and an example of the latter is altruism-enhancing drugs blended in the tap water in an entire area for the purpose of preventing actual use of weapons of mass destruction by terrorists.

The former, a drug treatment for pedophiles and other criminals, has already been performed in some countries, and it may be effective in preventing future crimes. However, this kind of drug therapy targeting a single criminal individual is not the main aim of Persson and Savulescu's moral bioenhancement agenda. What they

really have in mind is compulsory manipulation of the minds of a group of people by coercing them to take moral bioenhancement drugs. Their aim is moral bioenhancement of the whole population.

John Harris severely criticises Persson and Savulescu in his paper titled ‘Moral enhancement and freedom’ (Harris 2010). He argues that human immorality, such as racism, has been ‘reduced dramatically in the last hundred years by forms of moral enhancement including education, public disapproval, knowledge acquisition and legislation’, hence, ‘racism can be defeated by such means without resorting to biological or genetic measures which might have unwanted effects’ (Harris 2010: 105).

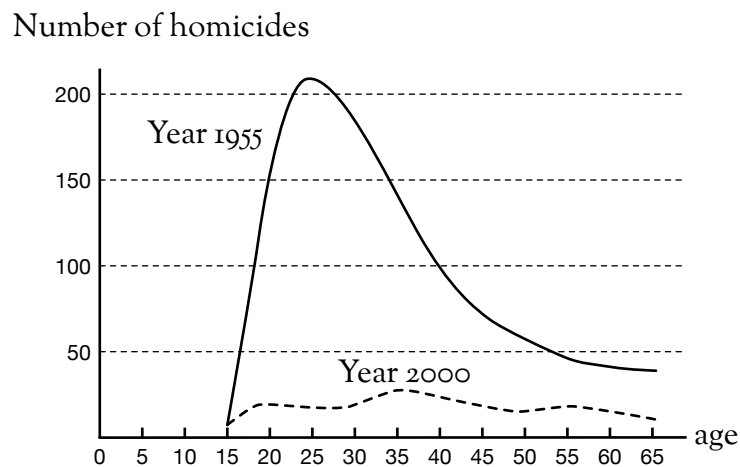


Fig.1. Number of Homicides committed by men per one million people in Japan

I agree with Harris’s argument. Let me present an interesting example that might illustrate the relationship between moral enhancement and social improvement. Figure 1 shows the number of homicides committed by men per one million people in Japanese society in 1955 and 2000.<sup>2</sup> You can see a drastic reduction in the number of homicides during the 45 years, particularly by men in their twenties. This is attributable to Japan’s economic prosperity and 45 years of peace in our society. (Japan has not directly waged war against any country in more than 55 years, since the end of World War II.) Japan has succeeded in reducing the number of homicides by improving social conditions and environments. This implies that social improvement is easier and more effective than moral bioenhancement.

Of course, in the future, by taking enhancement drugs, people may have the ca-

2. This graph was created by the author using the statistical data in Hiraiwa-Hasegawa 2005.

capacity to run 10 times faster, see in the dark and instantly kill more than 10 people by hand. They could easily steal dirty bombs and detonate them in cities. This appears to be one of the things that Persson and Savulescu fear. However, coercive moral bioenhancement would not be able to prevent the occurrence of such events. The only way to prevent them would be to strictly control the access to those problematic pharmaceutical substances and establish laws to punish individuals for possession of those drugs. Japan has succeeded in prohibiting the possession of guns among ordinary citizens. (I have never seen a real gun in our country in my life.) Hence, prohibition should be possible in the case of cognitive enhancement drugs or advanced technologies that could be detrimental to humans. (Nevertheless, it might not be possible in countries where people have the right to carry guns for self-protection. This suggests that gun control among citizens ought to be the first challenge for ethicists in favor of moral bioenhancement.)

#### COMPULSORY MORAL BIOENHANCEMENT OF ALL PEOPLE IS IMPOSSIBLE

Persson and Savulescu insist that moral bioenhancement ought to be forced on all of us, but this is impossible because powerful, rich and greedy people would use every conceivable method to avoid taking moral bioenhancement drugs. Even if drugs are blended into the tap water in an area, it is possible to get pure water from elsewhere. Furthermore, it is difficult to force moral bioenhancement on those who are in a position to force it on ordinary people. Hence, a moral bioenhancement policy will create two groups of people: those who are forced to take moral bioenhancement drugs, and those who can avoid taking such drugs. Then, what would happen among them?

Imagine lifeboat ethics. There are six people on a lifeboat with a capacity for five. One of the six individuals is a morally bioenhanced person. Savulescu argues that self-sacrifice and altruism are the two central characteristics of morality, and that these traits can be enhanced by biological determinants. If Savulescu is right, the morally bioenhanced person in the lifeboat would think that she has to sacrifice herself to save her fellow passengers by her plunging into the sea. As a result, the other five greedy people would be saved. A lesson from this episode is that when there are

both morally bioenhanced people and non-enhanced people, the latter could survive at the expense of the former. Is this what ethicists in favor of moral bioenhancement would aim at?

Savulescu suggests that oxytocin could be used to enhance morality, since, according to several studies, it enhances pro-social attitudes such as trust, sympathy and generosity (Savulescu 2012). Is this really good news for moral bioenhancement? The answer is negative because after providing a group of people with oxytocin, we could effectively dominate them, use them and finally exploit them as slaves. This shows that moral bioenhancement can be used to control the minds of people who do not have social resources or social status to bypass the coercion to take moral bioenhancement drugs. Moral bioenhancement functions as a tool to divide our society into two layers.

Savulescu and colleagues might emphasise that moral bioenhancement should be mandatory for all without exception, but it is virtually impossible as mentioned above. Even if it becomes possible to force everyone to take moral bioenhancement drugs, there still remains a very difficult problem. Let us assume that everyone in a society becomes morally bioenhanced by drugs blended in the tap water. The morally bioenhanced people would become highly vulnerable to aggression, violence and exploitation by other people. If a group of people immune to those drugs were to appear, they could easily dominate and exploit the morally bioenhanced people in way similar to that in which wild colonists enslaved empathetic and generous indigenous peoples in the past.

In the first place, can we imagine a morally bioenhanced police force or a morally bioenhanced army? If they are under the influence of moral bioenhancement drugs, they cannot accomplish their tasks properly. I am basically a pacifist who believes that the army should be reduced as much as possible; however, I do think that a society needs a well-organised police force who perform their jobs in a law-abiding manner, and that they should even execute violence and aggression in order to save the lives and properties of ordinary citizens in case of emergencies. The police whose hearts are filled with empathy and generosity would never be able to complete their mission in emergency situations. Then, should the police be an exception? But if the police are considered an exception, it would open a route for them to become conquerors of society, thereby leading to police despotism.

In short, compulsory moral enhancement will lead to the exploitation of one group of people by another. Persson and Savulescu emphasise the danger of ter-

rorist attacks carried out by a small terrorist group with weapons of mass destruction (Persson and Savulescu 2008: 166). However, I suspect that the most dangerous players in the contemporary world would still be the military forces, equipped with a variety of weapons, which take many lives every year.

### ENHANCEMENT OF MORAL SENSITIVITY IS NOT ALWAYS GOOD

Savulescu writes that '[o]ur point is merely that, in many people, enhancing one or more of the traits we have discussed would, in many circumstances, result in that individual being more likely to act morally than would otherwise have been the case' (Savulescu 2012). This is a fairly naïve idea. Persson and Savulescu state that moral bioenhancement can be achieved by enhancing people's disposition toward altruism and their sense of justice or fairness (Persson and Savulescu 2008: 168–69). In other words, moral bioenhancement requires the strengthening of a person's moral sensitivity; but empirically speaking, the strengthening of moral sensitivity does not necessarily bring happiness. Consider the number of immoral and unfair acts that we commit every day. Remember what you said to your partner last night when you were quarrelling. Remember the sumptuous dinner you had at a fabulous party, and think about how many starving people's lives in a developing country could have been saved if the cost of the dinner had been spent on helping them. Think about why you did not invite a stranger, who was standing outside your apartment shivering in the cold, into your home. That person might have suffered hypothermia and frozen to death during the night. Without moral bioenhancement drugs, such ideas would only come to mind for us for a very short period of time, quickly disappearing without any traces. However, morally bioenhanced people could not easily escape these disturbing ideas. They would be trapped in such moral dilemmas every day and might become distressed day and night.

Morally sensitive people worry about every immoral and unfair deed they commit. They are not saints. They cannot save every suffering individual whom they encounter or call on every suffering individual who resides in their neighbourhood. They might think that this is their own fault. Morally bioenhanced people might wish to escape from this type of psychological stress and take other drugs to forget their painful memories and thoughts. The reason why ordinary people can survive every day is that they are not so morally sensitive as to worry about such 'small' matters.

Hence, at first, a society filled with morally sensitive people might be considered a good society, but in reality, against our expectations, people living in such a society might not necessarily be happy.

### CASES IN WHICH MORAL BIOENHANCEMENT COULD BE EFFECTIVE

In the previous chapters we considered some negative aspects of moral bioenhancement; however, on closer examination there are some exceptional cases in which moral bioenhancement could be effective.

One of those cases would be the medical treatment of paedophiles, who are believed to be incapable without medication of overcoming their inner drive for sex with young children. As discussed earlier, this is not the main objective of moral bioenhancement, but I suspect this may be one of the exceptional cases in which moral bioenhancement would be effective and reasonable. There has been considerable debate in many countries over the compulsory pharmaceutical treatment of sex offenders who target young children. I have not reached a conclusion concerning this subject, but if we were to allow our society to impose such treatment on criminals, they should have the right to choose between being forced to take medication or being kept under watch by surveillance technologies.

The second case would be one in which a person voluntarily chooses to take moral bioenhancement drugs to calm his/her strong tendencies toward egocentrism, sexual interest in young children, rape, violence or a desire to harm others physically or mentally. There might be many people who are badly troubled by their own immoral conduct and strongly wish to cure their inner evils through pharmaceutical measures. It would be reasonable for doctors to prescribe such medication to those who come voluntarily to see them. In this case, moral bioenhancement drugs would be given to the patients according to their needs on a voluntary basis. There has been considerable debate about the morality of treating patients with depression through the use of SSRIs, because these drugs can radically modify the personality of the patients who take them. Similar discussions will be needed on voluntary moral bioenhancement.

The third case would be compulsory moral bioenhancement for those who have power and/or tremendous wealth; that is to say, moral bioenhancement would be



forced upon top political and military figures, the chief executive officers of large companies and multimillionaires to mitigate the risk of megalomania. Persson and Savulescu argue that moral bioenhancement ought to be compulsory; however, as discussed above, compulsory moral bioenhancement for all people would be impossible and meaningless. But if the authors persist with the idea of compulsory moral bioenhancement at the societal level, its application to the powerful might be a good starting point for the actualisation of such an idea. Everyone would agree that those who are powerful enough to influence the political and economic policy of a country ought to abide by much higher moral standards than ordinary people. If that is the case, then the compulsory moral bioenhancement of those people under the watch of ordinary citizens might be a promising solution. Persson and Savulescu would probably be against this idea, but I believe this type of enhancement would be at least more effective and meaningful than that which is forced on ‘terrorists’, people who might become ‘terrorists’ or all the people who live within a vast area. Of course, such enforcement would endanger the fundamental human rights of people in power; hence, we must have a deliberate discussion on the morality of this type of enhancement before it actually becomes reality.

#### WHY IS IT HARD FOR US TO ACCEPT MORAL BIOENHANCEMENT?

The most common reaction of ordinary people to the idea of compulsory moral bioenhancement is outright emotional rejection of it. This reaction is understandable, but what is the reason for their rejection of it?

Moral enhancement has been one of the great goals of ethics since the dawn of human civilization. For example, ancient philosophers in Greece and China attempted to discover how to help people to become virtuous, which we could say was an ancient version of moral enhancement. They thought this goal was achievable through adequate education and habituation. Many people would not reject these ideas, but when it comes to moral bioenhancement attained by pharmaceutical means, they may be hesitant about it, at least to a certain degree.

At first glance, moral bioenhancement seems to resemble moral education, which is taught in compulsory school education, because they have in common the compulsory manipulation of morality from the outside; however, interestingly, many

people who are hesitant to accept moral bioenhancement would never reject the moral education of young children at school. Let us take a brief look at the characteristics of the moral education of young children in compulsory school education.

First, children are taught moral values and virtues by teachers. While teachers provide children with the opportunity to engage in dialogue or free discussion in their classes, the basic tone of moral education in school is nothing but a unilateral transmission of ideas from teachers to children. However, through this process, it is expected that a 'kernel of our moral integration' will be formed inside children's minds, and that they will gradually become capable of making moral judgments and carrying out moral conduct in reference to their own kernel of moral integration which has come into being inside them. In other words, moral education begins with a compulsory transmission of external moral values into the minds of children; but after the process is complete, a kernel of moral integration is formed within children, and they become capable of thinking or acting according to their own inner moral standards. It is important that this process be carried out through the personal relationships between children and teachers. This is one of the basic ideas we have of moral education.

Let us further examine the idea of 'moral integration' mentioned above. The idea of moral integration has at least three implications. The first implication is that within the mind of a moral person there is a kernel of moral integration that cannot be decisively controlled by the desires or intentions of other people. In addition, it is important that this kernel be formed by an interaction between that person and those people who surround him/her at some point in his/her developmental process.

The second implication is that moral judgment and moral conduct are executed not through influence from the outside but through the control of the agent him/herself. That is to say, the starting point of moral judgment and moral conduct is nothing but a kernel of moral integration existing within the mind of the agent, which means that the source of morality exists within the agent.

The third implication is that there has to be a historical integrity in the kernel of moral integration within a person. That is to say, the fundamental inclination of a person's moral judgment and moral conduct cannot change instantaneously without any prior signs. This transformation is made possible mainly by the gradual development or maturation of a person's personality, which is brought about by the accu-

mulated human interactions in which that person engages, and this transformation process ought to be understandable from within, through the everyday experiences of ordinary people.

The above three characteristics are a set of beliefs that many ordinary people have in mind when thinking about the moral integration of a person. It is according to these beliefs that they judge the acceptability of a particular moral enhancement. For example, moral bioenhancement by pharmaceutical means is considered not to be true moral enhancement because it goes against all three of the requirements mentioned above: (1) a person's moral judgment and moral conduct are carried out under the influence of drugs introduced from the outside, (2) the starting point of moral bioenhancement is not the kernel of moral integration within the person, and (3) the person's transformation does not occur through personal development or maturation.

While moral education during compulsory school education basically satisfies these three requirements, moral bioenhancement by pharmaceutical means does not. I believe that this is the main reason why people are hesitant to consider moral bioenhancement by pharmaceutical means as an acceptable means of moral enhancement. Many people might think of this approach as a type of coercion, and might not view it as an acceptable form of moral enhancement. Pharmaceutically enhanced human beings might be viewed as pharmaceutically 'enslaved' human beings, not as 'morally enhanced' human beings.

However, our analysis does not necessarily reject all of the pharmaceutical means used for the moral development of a person. If drugs were employed in a limited way, in other words, if they were used only to support an autonomic moral development or transformation of a person, then the use of these drugs would probably not clash with people's beliefs on moral integration and acceptable moral enhancement, because appropriate supportive uses might not contradict the above three requirements.

Then what about moral bioenhancement attained by the modification of one's own genes, or moral bioenhancement attained by the direct control of one's brain by outside systems or people? I think the above three requirements should also be applied to these cases, and if they fully satisfy them, then they might be considered by many to be an acceptable form of moral enhancement, although I believe such a possibility would be lower than that in pharmaceutical cases.<sup>3</sup>

3. It should be noted that there might be cases in which although these enhancements were not considered an acceptable form of moral enhancement, they may be considered an acceptable form of

## CONCLUSION

My provisional conclusion is that moral bioenhancement might be effective in treating paedophiles and other criminals, but not in other cases, and that if we want to improve our society, it would be easier and more effective to improve social conditions. Many people currently remain hesitant to accept a large part of moral bioenhancement, because those enhancements do not satisfy the three requirements for moral integration.

We are still living in a society in which it is widely believed that our personality ought to be constructed upon our inner foundation, which should not be tampered with by outside intervention or control, and I dare say this belief is a healthy one that should not be overturned.<sup>4</sup> If our society transforms into a new one and our beliefs on personality radically change—for example, if people really come to believe that there is no such thing as a kernel of moral integration inside oneself and that one's personality is completely integrated into external social-technological networks—then my analysis here will no longer hold true.<sup>5</sup> I pray that such a society will not come about in the near future while I am alive.

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coercion, just like legal punishment.

4. Of course, I have to explain why this belief can be said to be a healthy one, but I will leave that to a future paper. For the time being, please see Morioka 2012, in which I discussed issues concerning this topic.

5. Postmodern thinkers have debated these theories, and I find their arguments interesting, but I believe there are few individuals who really live according to those philosophies in everyday settings while maintaining good relationships with the people who surround them.

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