

## How Moral Is (Moral) Enhancement?

# *We Must Create Beings with Moral Standing Superior to Our Own*

VOJIN RAKIĆ

**Abstract:** Several lines of reasoning have been employed to both approve and disapprove two of Nicholas Agar's positions: his argument that the creation of postpersons (based on moral status enhancement) is imaginable and possible and his inductive argument disfavoring the creation of postpersons. This article discusses a number of these lines of reasoning, arguing that

- 1) The creation of postpersons is imaginable if they are envisaged as morally enhanced beings.
- 2) The creation of postpersons is justified, subject to the condition that we create morally enhanced postpersons.

The reason given for the first point is that it is possible to imagine postpersons who are morally enhanced, provided that we consider moral enhancement as an augmented inclination to act in line with how we believe we ought to act. There are two reasons offered for the second point: the first indicates probability, and the second offers proof. That is, if we assume that the higher moral status of postpersons implies their enhanced morality, we can conclude, inductively, that (morally enhanced) postpersons will not be inclined to annihilate mere persons. For if mere persons have moral inhibitions against obliterating some species of a lower moral status than their own, morally enhanced postpersons will be even less likely to do the same to mere persons. In fact, they might consider it their moral duty to preserve those beings who enabled them to come into existence. Moreover, even if morally enhanced postpersons decide to annihilate mere persons, we can conclude, deductively, that such a decision is by necessity a morally superior stance to the wish of mere persons (i.e., morally unenhanced persons) to continue to exist.

**Keywords:** moral enhancement; postpersons; mere persons; Nicholas Agar; inductive argument; deductive argument; moral status

### Conceptual Clarifications

In the February 2013 issue of the *Journal of Medical Ethics (JME)*, Nicholas Agar published an article about the possibility and justifiability of the creation of beings with a higher moral status than our own.<sup>1</sup> His article sparked both supportive and critical reactions that were published in the same issue of the *JME*. The primary aim of this article is not to defend or criticize Agar's position but to develop a new one. Before embarking on my argument, however, the following conceptual clarifications are in order:

---

This article has been published in the framework of a project that is being funded by the Serbian Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development (project # 41004, relevant subproject realized at the Institute for Social Sciences in Belgrade). A number of issues that are taken up in the text I have discussed with Julian Savulescu, Ingmar Persson, John Harris, Nick Agar, Rob Sparrow, Thomasine Kushner, Milan Ćirković, and Mary Rorty. I would like to express my thanks to all of them for their useful comments.

### *We Must Create Beings with Moral Standing Superior to Our Own*

- 1) Postpersons are beings with a higher moral status than “mere persons.”
- 2) Mere persons are currently existing humans.<sup>2</sup>
- 3) Moral status enhancement is the improvement of a being’s moral entitlement to benefits and protection against harms.
- 4) Moral enhancement is the improvement of the moral value of an agent’s actions or character. It is coterminous with moral disposition enhancement.
- 5) Moral status can be either a threshold concept or envisaged as a continuum between mere persons and postpersons.
- 6) Higher moral status can imply not only cognitive superiority but also superior moral dispositions, that is, a higher moral value of an agent’s actions or character.

Point 5 is not directly relevant for my argument, so I will refrain from discussing it. Point 6 is essential for my position. It implies that moral enhancement not only includes the enhancement of someone’s cognitive abilities to understand morality but also encompasses an augmented inclination to act in accordance with those moral beliefs. It entails the narrowing of the gap between our comprehension of morality (how we believe we ought to act) and our behavior (how we actually act). Hence, I argue that our motivation to *act* morally (i.e., in line with how we believe we ought to act) is an essential disposition of beings with a superior moral status (i.e., postpersons). Consequently, the bridging of the comprehension-motivation gap is of primary importance for moral enhancement.

#### **My Standpoint in Short**

A number of lines of reasoning have been employed to both approve and disapprove Agar’s position that the creation of postpersons is imaginable and possible, as well as his inductive argument disfavoring the creation of postpersons. In sum, the positions of the authors who commented on Agar’s stance in the *JME* issue devoted to his article can be grouped as follows:

- 1) Postpersons are possible but undesirable (Sparrow).<sup>3</sup>
- 2) The eventuation of postpersons is unlikely but not undesirable (Hauskeller and, arguably, Wasserman).<sup>4</sup>
- 3) Postpersons are possible and desirable (Persson and Douglas).<sup>5</sup>

I argue in favor of the possibility to imagine and to create postpersons. Along with offering an inductive argument, on top of the one Agar presents, I also offer a deductive argument for the creation of postpersons—but only under the condition that the higher moral status of postpersons implies their enhanced morality. I consider enhanced morality to be our motivation to *behave* in line with our cognitive conceptions of morality.

If a higher moral status for postpersons implies an enhanced morality, I contend that morally enhanced postpersons will not be inclined to annihilate or severely harm mere persons, because they will presumably consider it their moral duty not to cause detriment to those beings who enabled them to come into existence. If mere persons have moral inhibitions against annihilating species of moral status lower than their own, it is even less likely that morally enhanced postpersons will annihilate mere persons. But in addition to this inductive argument, I also offer a

deductive argument supporting the creation of morally enhanced postpersons: even if morally enhanced postpersons should decide to obliterate mere persons, such a decision is by necessity morally superior to the wish of mere persons (i.e., morally unenhanced persons) to continue to exist. I also show that the creation of morally enhanced postpersons is not only justified but also our moral duty.

### An Elaboration of the Problem

Nicholas Agar believes that the creation of postpersons is too risky, as they might “sacrifice” mere persons. It is morally permissible to sacrifice objects with no moral status in the interest of sentient nonpersons (e.g., to use carrots for feeding rabbits). It is also morally permitted to sacrifice sentient nonpersons for the benefit of human persons (e.g., experiments on rhesus monkeys in order to find better treatments for diseases affecting humans). These permissions provide inductive support for a moral justification for sacrificing mere persons for the sake of postpersons.<sup>6</sup>

Agar also argues that we cannot express the criteria for postpersonhood, because they allegedly consist of capabilities that are cognitive. The fact that criteria for postpersonhood are cognitive transcends mere persons’ “powers of expression and imagination.”<sup>7</sup> Nonetheless, says Agar, the inability of our powers of expression and imagination to establish criteria for postpersonhood is not a reason for us not to believe in them.<sup>8</sup> We have evidence of variation in moral statuses up to and including persons, which provides us with “moderately strong inductive support” for the possibility of postpersons.<sup>9</sup>

I argue, however, that Agar falls prey here to the bias of limiting morality to cognitive criteria. He assumes that criteria for postpersonhood are necessarily cognitive. But they don’t have to be. The narrowing of the cognition-motivation gap is not a merely cognitive capacity. It is a capacity that pertains to our will. It is an absence of something implicated in the ancient Greek notion of *akrasia* (which in this context means to act against our judgment because of weakness of the will, i.e., because of motivational impairment). If we add motivational criteria to cognitive criteria, the creation of postpersons becomes both imaginable and expressible. This is relevant not only to the question of whether postpersons are possible but also to whether they are desirable. It points to the need to assume a noncognitive or not exclusively cognitive faculty imaginable to mere persons that can delineate them from postpersons.

Moreover, the claim that it is impossible to imagine cognitive abilities higher than the ones we have is dubious. Why wouldn’t we be able to imagine the *possibility* of cognitive properties that we lack, such as the possibility of visualizing unknown dimensions?<sup>10</sup>

The gap between what we do and what we believe we *ought* to do I have elsewhere described as “possibly the greatest predicament of our existence as moral beings.”<sup>11</sup> One of the essential ways in which humans differ from (other) animals is that they are capable of autonomous practical reasoning, and moral reasoning in particular. But if someone is frequently unwilling to act in accordance with what she knows is right, she is in such cases incapable of moral action—capable of moral thinking, but incapable of moral acting. Wouldn’t a being who is always behaving in line with what she believes to be moral be someone with a higher moral status than the one we have? Wouldn’t that be a postperson? I argue that it

would, because the difference between beings who are capable of moral reasoning only and those who practice their moral beliefs is a qualitative difference amounting to a differentiation in moral status.

We undoubtedly have a sense of morality, a sense of right and wrong. We frequently hear people say things like the following: "Why didn't you help your friend out when he was in trouble? He was always so good to you." "She always keeps promises; she is such a reliable and nice person." "I don't have anything good to say about him: he has betrayed the man who had saved his life." But how frequently have we heard the opposite? "You shouldn't have helped your friend when he was in trouble. I am sure you won't need him anymore; he has become useless to you." "She always keeps promises, but that is because she is naïve; I break promises when it is in my interest, because I am smart." "He might have betrayed the man who had saved his life, but he shouldn't care about that; he doesn't need him anymore." Although we might hear such statements from time to time, they are exceedingly rare, and any people who would make them are deemed despicable.

Let me give another example. Mere Vojin (in his morally unenhanced state) steps onto a bus with one unoccupied seat left. An elderly lady or a woman in the ninth month of pregnancy is slower than he is, and he grabs the only seat left, just under her nose. It is something that is not polite, not very moral, but Mere Vojin might have felt so tired that he closed his eyes to that and acted in line with his most basic egoistic need at that point. It doesn't seem to me that Mere Vojin is necessarily to be classified as a sociopath because of his act. If, on top of that, however, he brags about what he did, saying something like, "I was so fast and smart that I succeeded in grabbing the only seat left in the bus, just in front of a pregnant woman who thought she would be there first," well, in that case there certainly is something profoundly wrong with his moral sense.

There are also situations that are not as extreme as those described previously. For instance, we might fail to perform a supererogatory act. We fail to give to a charity, but we know we should and are not proud of being insufficiently motivated to do so. On the whole, we are aware that any of us may sometimes fall prey to an immoral act that we will not be proud of in the future.

And that is precisely the point when I say that we frequently act differently than we think we ought to act. That does not make us sociopaths, but our moral dispositions are in that case certainly inferior to the dispositions of those who practice their moral beliefs. Those who act with disregard for all generally accepted social behaviors belong to a relatively small group of people who we sometimes describe as sociopaths. Most people differ from individuals with such a disorder in that they do have a notion of right and wrong, whereas the majority of people around us differ from morally enhanced postpersons (as I define them in this article) in that they do not consistently practice their moral beliefs.

Hence, the following two issues are the most relevant where the comprehension-motivation gap is concerned:

- 1) Most people have a notion of right and wrong. That notion can be upgraded by cognitive enhancement. Such enhancement can be traditional enhancement or cognitive bioenhancement.
- 2) Most people have a tendency not to act as they believe they ought to. They have some kind of motivational impairment (for whatever reason) against doing what they believe is right. That lack of motivation can be dealt with by

moral enhancement. Such enhancement can be traditional enhancement or moral bioenhancement.

Moral enhancement, if understood as an intervention that does not just make us understand morality better but also results in us *behaving* more morally, is an intervention with such enormous implications that it amounts to nothing less than a moral status enhancement, and consequently results in the creation of postpersons. I don't know what alternative other than the motivation to become better people, with our morally enhanced behavior as its result, could be considered as an enhancement amounting to transcending the current moral status of humans, thus creating postpersons.<sup>12</sup>

All things considered, the taxonomy ranging from sentient nonpersons to morally enhanced postpersons would look as follows:

- 1) Sentient nonpersons who are incapable of autonomous practical reasoning in general and moral reasoning in particular
- 2) Mere persons who are capable of moral reasoning but who at times are incapable of acting in accordance with this reasoning
- 3) Postpersons who are capable of moral reasoning and who always act in line with this reasoning

My standpoint on the possibility and desirability of the creation of postpersons implies that moral enhancement ought to be part of the creation of any such postpersons. I have argued elsewhere that moral bioenhancement is to be included in the moral enhancement enterprise; in this I partially side with earlier writings of Persson and Savulescu.<sup>13</sup> But, in addition to the reasons I gave in earlier articles in support of voluntary moral enhancement,<sup>14</sup> I insist here on one additional reason: the superior standing as moral beings of postpersons would be diminished if they acquired such a status by being coerced into it. Our decision to create morally enhanced postpersons ought to be voluntary. If it were imposed on us, our status as moral agents would be downgraded. A free will is an essential component of our morality. Without it, we cannot be moral agents. Consequently, postpersons would be less likely to consider it their moral duty to refrain from annihilating, sacrificing, or severely harming those who decided to make it possible for them to come into existence, if such a decision were not made voluntarily.

My position can thus be summarized as follows:

- The creation of postpersons is imaginable if they are envisaged as morally enhanced beings.
- Morally enhanced postpersons should be pictured as beings who have bridged the gap between what we do and what we believe is right to do.
- Moral (bio)enhancement is what humans should embark on.
- Moral (bio)enhancement is to be voluntary.

### **An Alternative Inductive Argument**

An *inductive* argument indicates probability only. Hence, the truth of all its premises is logically compatible with the falsehood of its conclusion. It is therefore not a proof. In this section I lay out an inductive argument, and in the following one I go

beyond probability and offer a deductive argument for proof of the desirability of postpersons.

Although I accept Persson's<sup>15</sup> and Douglas's<sup>16</sup> cases favoring the creation of postpersons, I believe that another essential inductive argument can be added to the contention that postpersons should not worry us too much: the creation of postpersons is possible and desirable *if and only if* postpersons have a higher moral status than mere persons not only because they are cognitively enhanced but also because they are morally enhanced. The implication of this is that if mere persons have moral inhibitions to annihilate some species of a lower moral status than their own, it is even less likely that morally enhanced postpersons will annihilate mere persons.

When I invoke "moral inhibitions" in this context, I am suggesting not that we should not sacrifice other species but that many of us are inclined to question our moral right to do so with all species and for reasons other than vital interests of humans. For instance, we have more moral inhibitions against rooting out chimps or dogs than against rooting out cockroaches. And most of us are more prone to approve of experiments on rats that might benefit our health than to approve of the slaughter of animals merely for their fur, ivory, or horns. Hence, as we have such moral reservations, postpersons who are morally enhanced (in comparison to mere persons) will probably have even more reluctance to annihilate us. That does not exclude the prospect, however, that they will sacrifice us in some cases, such as supreme emergencies or supreme opportunities; and here I side with Agar to the extent that I also do not rule out such a possibility.

There is one additional reason why postpersons may be less likely to sacrifice us than we are likely to sacrifice species of lower moral status than ours. That reason lies in the fact that postpersons would owe their existence to our choice to create them. Morally enhanced postpersons would be likely to infer from this an additional duty to respect the rights of mere persons.<sup>17</sup>

As my contentions in this section are merely inductive arguments favoring the creation of postpersons, they are structurally not any better than are Persson's and Douglas's arguments and Agar's case against creating postpersons. If mere persons have moral inhibitions against sacrificing species of a lower moral status than their own, it is likely, though not certain, that morally enhanced postpersons will refrain from sacrificing mere persons. Hence, similar to the assertions of Agar, Persson, and Douglas, my arguments indicate probability but do not offer proof that postpersons would not be prepared to sacrifice mere persons.

### **A Deduction and Its Implications**

Unlike inductive arguments, deductive arguments count as proofs in that their conclusions are contained in the premises. In the debate about the (un)desirability of the development of postpersons, the deductive argument I propose is the following: even if morally enhanced postpersons should decide to annihilate mere persons, such a decision is by necessity a morally superior stance to the wish of mere persons (i.e., morally unenhanced persons) to continue to exist. This is a deduction following from two premises:

- 1) Morally enhanced persons make better moral judgment than mere persons.
- 2) One of the attributes of postpersons, as I defined them, is that they are morally enhanced.

From these two true statements follows a third statement that is also true:

- 3) Postpersons make better moral judgments than mere persons.

This is a syllogism. We deduced the conclusion by combining the first premise with the second.

The final statement implies that, if we care about morality, we should accept what postpersons judge to be morally preferable, and, in addition to that, we ought to act in accordance with this judgment. Consequently—and *this is essential*—as we are morally obliged to improve our moral judgments, we have a moral duty to create morally enhanced postpersons. This is a crucial way in which I depart from Agar, who claims that we have a moral duty *not* to create postpersons.<sup>18</sup>

Our mere survival, however, as well as the survival of those who are near and dear to us, might make us decide to act differently than morality requires of us. Thus, we might decide *not* to create morally enhanced postpersons. That is something that can be understandable from the point of view of our survival and even the survival of our species. But it is not morally justified, as has been shown in the preceding deduction.

A pragmatic solution might be to refrain from creating postpersons in the near future in order not to be obliterated by them as existing individual mere persons. Or we could commit to only a *gradual* eventuation of morally enhanced postpersons, in order to allow time to prepare ourselves and our immediate descendants for a future with postpersons around, or with us or our immediate descendants being those morally enhanced postpersons ourselves.

Nonetheless, the creation of morally enhanced postpersons (either *de novo* or from existing mere persons) remains our moral duty. It might be understandable why a mere person wishes herself or her species to survive, even to survive at any cost; but that does not make her wish morally justified.<sup>19</sup> Moreover, there is a difference between our wish to survive as individuals, together with those who are near and dear to us, and a wish that our species will survive. The latter wish, if morally dubious,<sup>20</sup> is not even understandable from the point of view of fear for our lives.

Furthermore, the desire not to have postpersons around is reasonable only if the scenario of postpersons annihilating mere persons is a prospect of the relatively near future. If postpersons are to develop or to be developed only in the future, or if we are the ones who are to become at one point those postpersons ourselves, our worry about survival is only a concern for our species. Such a concern might then come down to nothing more than a sort of species narcissism.<sup>21</sup>

## Conclusion

- 1) The creation of postpersons is imaginable. Overcoming the comprehension-motivation gap is not "beyond human expressive powers."<sup>22</sup>
- 2) The creation of postpersons is desirable because of inductive arguments, offering evidence that makes such a conclusion probable. The creation of morally enhanced postpersons is also our moral duty, because of a deductive argument. Unlike the inductive arguments, which do not in themselves constitute a proof, my deductive argument is a better-substantiated claim that it is our moral *duty* to create morally enhanced postpersons (contrary to the claim that Agar makes<sup>23</sup>).

## *We Must Create Beings with Moral Standing Superior to Our Own*

- 3) As it is our moral duty to create morally enhanced postpersons, it is our moral duty to devote ourselves to moral enhancement—with the important proviso that such enhancement is to be voluntary. If it were compulsory, our status as moral agents would be downgraded.

### Notes

1. Agar N. Why is it possible to enhance moral status and why doing so is wrong? *Journal of Medical Ethics* 2013;39:67–74.
2. To this definition I add the proviso that some currently existing humans do not satisfy the criteria for personhood.
3. Sparrow agrees with Agar in that regard.
4. Hauskeller M. The moral status of post-persons. *Journal of Medical Ethics* 2013;39(2):76–7, and Wasserman D. Devoured by our own children: The possibility and peril of moral status enhancement. *Journal of Medical Ethics* 2013;39(2):78–9.
5. Persson I. Is Agar biased against “post-persons”? *Journal of Medical Ethics* 2013;39(2):77–8, and Douglas T. The harms of status enhancement could be compensated or outweighed: A response to Agar. *Journal of Medical Ethics* 2013;39(2):75–6.
6. See note 1, Agar 2013, at 72.
7. Agar discusses the “inexpressibility problem” as follows: “It is an implication of accounts that make a cognitive capacity, or collection of such capacities, constitutive of moral status, that those who do not satisfy the criteria for a given status find these criteria impossible to adequately describe” (see note 1, Agar 2013, at 69).
8. See note 1, Agar 2013, at 69.
9. Agar N. Still afraid of needy post-persons? *Journal of Medical Ethics* 2013;39(2):81–4, at 81.
10. See Powell R. The biomedical enhancement of moral status. *Journal of Medical Ethics* 2013; 39(2):65–6.
11. Rakić V. Voluntary moral enhancement and the survival-at-any-cost bias. *Journal of Medical Ethics* 2014;40(4):246–50, at 248.
12. However, it is not inconceivable that, as we approach the required technologies in the future, be they of the pharmacological, biotechnological, nanotechnological, or artificial-intelligence variety, we might become aware of other criteria for postpersonhood.
13. Cf. Rakić V. From cognitive to moral enhancement: A possible reconciliation of religious outlooks and the biotechnological creation of a better human. *Journal for the Study of Religions and Ideologies* 2012;11(31):113–28. And see note 11, Rakić 2014.
14. See note 11, Rakić 2014.
15. See note 5, Persson 2013.
16. See note 5, Douglas 2013.
17. I am indebted here to John Harris, who disagreed with me on this during a conversation. My argument was the following: One might attempt to make a comparison between a postperson who was voluntarily created by mere persons and a human who came into existence as a result of her mother having been raped (and who would not feel she is morally indebted to her mother). However, this comparison contains an important disanalogy in that the latter’s mother did not decide to bring her into existence, whereas in our argumentation mere persons are the ones who voluntarily opt for the creation of postpersons.
18. Agar N. We must not create beings with moral status superior to our own. *Journal of Medical Ethics* 2013;39(11):709. The title of the present article asserts the opposite of the title of Agar’s article: we must create beings with moral status superior to our own.
19. For my argument against the “survival-at-any-cost bias,” see note 11, Rakić 2014. For a reply to my argument, see Persson I, Savulescu J. Should moral bioenhancement be compulsory? Reply to Vojin Rakić. *Journal of Medical Ethics* 2014;40(4):251–2, as well as Selgelid M. Freedom and moral enhancement. *Journal of Medical Ethics* 2014;40(4):215–16.
20. That is to say, the wish that our species will survive is morally dubious, for example, if its implication is that the state, in order to avoid ultimate harm, deprives humans of their freedom by imposing moral bioenhancement.
21. I am indebted to Nicholas Agar and Rob Sparrow for a discussion we had about this.
22. This argument is contrary to the claim in Agar 2013, at 67 (see note 1).
23. See note 18, Agar 2013.