

Guest Editorial

Reflections on Moral Enhancement: Can We? Should We?

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The enhancement of human capabilities by biomedical means is one of the central themes of modern bioethics. The question of whether it is justified to upgrade our normal functions is *prima facie* uncontroversial. Controversies arise when it is asked whether the means leading to such upgrades should be biomedical. Negative answers are usually given by those who hold that we should not intervene in what has been ordained by God or given to us by nature. Affirmative answers focus on our moral duty to become better, even by biomedical means.

George Annas,¹ Carl Elliott,² Leon Kass,³ Francis Fukuyama,⁴ Jürgen Habermas,⁵ and Michael Sandel⁶ have all issued landmark warnings on the potential dangers of bioenhancement. In one way or another, they argue that the threats posed by attempts to reshape nature make bioenhancement technologies morally impermissible.

In contrast, proponents of bioenhancement argue not only that it is feasible to use genetic technology to make people healthier, longer lived, and intelligent, but also that doing so is, in most cases, our moral duty as well (see John Harris⁷). What is feared by some is welcomed by others, in that a drastic augmentation of our mental and physical powers will influence the very course of evolution. New types of regenerative medicine appear to open up the possibility of human tissue repairing itself, and techniques are becoming available that can radically extend life expectancy, whereas new drugs can improve concentration and memory and can enable us to function successfully with less sleep. Harris looks forward to these enhancement techniques to make people healthier, longer lived, and cognitively upgraded, supporting the position that we should be able to enhance ourselves.

Julian Savulescu⁸ promotes the view that parents should have the same freedom over their children's genes that they have with regard to their rearing and education. For Savulescu, procreative liberty is to be extended to enhancement for two reasons. First, because the raising of children is a private matter and because parents must endure much of the weight of having children, they have a justifiable interest in the nature of the child. Second, it is only through "experiments in living" that people find out what is best for them. In this way, diversity of choice is essential for discovering which lives are optimal for the flourishing of human beings.⁹

Savulescu rebuts the argument that we should not interfere in God's ordinance or in human nature by pointing out that people already implicitly reject this view when they screen embryos and fetuses for abnormalities, administer antibiotics, provide pain relief, or treat deadly diseases. He concludes that medical interventions

based on new biotechnologies are no more of an interference in nature or divine will and are, in fact, our moral duty.¹⁰

Against this general background of enhancement arguments emerges a fiercer and more specific debate regarding whether neuroscience should be used to enhance human moral capacities. The justification of moral bioenhancement for changing our character or actions is a point at which thinkers who previously agreed on the general benefits of enhancement now take issue with one another. John Harris adopts the stance that moral bioenhancement is not morally justified, as it infringes on our freedom. Ingmar Persson and Julian Savulescu, on the other hand, defend the view that moral bioenhancement is imperative because it lessens the likelihood of humanity facing “ultimate harm”—the very destruction of worthwhile life on this planet.

These clashing perspectives and the additional arguments they generate form this CQ special section. Based on the 2013 Belgrade conference entitled “Enhancement: Cognitive, Moral and Mood” organized by the Center for the Study of Bioethics (Belgrade) and the Oxford Centre for Neuroethics, the following articles reflect the richness of the presentations and point the way to new avenues of discussion.

It is fitting that leading the collection of articles is a transcription of the conference debate between John Harris and Julian Savulescu in which they begin by confirming the common ground they hold concerning other forms of enhancement and proceed to spar when confronting the issue of moral enhancement.

The Savulescu and Harris debate lays the foundation for the topics discussed in the articles that follow, such as the moral justifiability of bioenhancement in general, the problems utilitarians face when defending moral bioenhancement, the imperative of moral bioenhancement, whether moral enhancement ought to be compulsory or voluntary, the relationship between cognitive and moral enhancement, the arbitrariness of moral bioenhancement in light of moral relativism, and which values/virtues are the ones that ought to be bioenhanced.

In “The Harms of Enhancement and the Conclusive Reasons View,” Thomas Douglas questions the moral justifiability of bioenhancement in general. He argues that, although there are stronger harm-based reasons against bioenhancement than have often been proposed by critics of enhancement, they are not obviously decisive. He concludes that opponents of bioenhancement have yet to offer such conclusive reasons.

Nicholas Agar’s article, “Moral Bioenhancement and the Utilitarian Catastrophe,” describes the problems utilitarians face when defending moral bioenhancement. He puts forward the view that moral bioenhancement undercuts utilitarianism. Piecemeal moral bioenhancement, namely, jeopardizes a popular response to the claim that utilitarianism requires repugnant acts. The selective suppression of human emotions, something that moral bioenhancement does, opens up the possibility of repugnant utility-maximizing behavior. This suppression is likely to produce judgments that depart from the compromise between affect and cognition endorsed by moral common sense. Drugs that alter human moral dispositions undercut the compromise between the principle of utility and moral common sense. And it is this compromise that is essential for utilitarianism. Hence, Agar argues, by undermining it, moral bioenhancement undermines utilitarianism.

In “The Art of Misunderstanding Moral Bioenhancement: Two Cases,” Ingmar Persson and Julian Savulescu address challenges to the argument for the imperative of moral enhancement put forward in their book *Unfit for the Future*.¹¹

They specifically reply to arguments advanced by critics Robert Sparrow¹² and Michael Hauskeller.¹³ Persson and Savulescu do not deny the dangers of a technology of moral bioenhancement, but, in view of the fact that some authors express optimism about our capacity to handle other sorts of scientific technology (e.g., devastating nuclear weapons), they ask why the same people are so much more pessimistic about our capacity to handle the technology of moral bioenhancement.

Vojin Rakić's article, "We Must Create Beings with Moral Standing Superior to Our Own" criticizes Agar's stance that the conception of moral bioenhancement leading to the creation of postpersons (i.e., persons with a higher moral status than "mere persons") is undesirable and impossible. Rakić takes the stance that (1) the creation of postpersons is imaginable if they are envisaged as morally enhanced beings and (2) the creation of postpersons is our moral duty, subject to the condition that we create morally enhanced postpersons. As it is our moral duty to create morally enhanced postpersons, it is our moral duty to devote ourselves to moral bioenhancement—with the important proviso that such enhancement is to be voluntary. If it were compulsory, argues Rakić, our status as moral agents would be downgraded and we would achieve exactly the opposite of moral enhancement.

The thesis of Chris Gyngell and Simon Easteal's article, "Cognitive Diversity and Moral Enhancement," is that moral bioenhancement is a useful addition to cognitive bioenhancement. They favor pursuing cognitive enhancement technologies on the grounds that their widespread availability will likely increase population-level cognitive diversity, with some people choosing to enhance different aspects of their cognition and others choosing no enhancement at all. The authors point out that cognitive diversity carries potential pitfalls, but they suggest that the problems, such as a possible increase in difficulties with interpersonal cooperation, could be mitigated by moral enhancement technologies, thus maximizing overall social benefits.

Y. M. Barilan is critical of the very conception of moral bioenhancement. In "Moral Enhancement, Gnosticism, and Some Philosophical Paradoxes," he argues that modification of morally relevant traits is not equivalent to the moral enhancement of the person, and that, in the absence of metrics for moral judgment and behavior, every attempt at enhancing people is explicable only in terms of projecting one's values and desired character traits on others. He believes that the moral enhancement discourse commits a fundamental attribution error in believing that biomedical enhancement will produce consistent and stable outcomes; consequently, he concludes that the entire moral bioenhancement enterprise is misguided.

The collection concludes with "Moral Enhancement Requires Multiple Virtues," in which James Hughes transcends moral relativism, showing which values/virtues are the ones that are important and ought to be enhanced. All virtue theories, both secular and religious, have articulated multiple virtues that temper and inform one another in the development of a mature moral character. The project of moral enhancement requires a reengagement with virtue ethics and contemporary moral psychology to develop an empirically grounded model of the virtues and a fuller model of character development. Each of these virtues may be manipulated with electronic, psychopharmaceutical, and genetic interventions. Hughes proposes a set of interdependent virtues, along with some of the research pointing to ways they could be enhanced.

Moral bioenhancement is a topic that will only increase in controversy as neuroscience advances. We hope that the articles in this collection will trigger readers' responses and commentaries. We would look forward to reading such responses in future issues of *CQ*.

Notes

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2. Elliott C. *Better Than Well: American Medicine Meets the American Dream*. New York: W. W. Norton; 2000.
3. Kass LR. *Life, Liberty and the Defense of Dignity: The Challenge for Bioethics*. San Francisco: Encounter Books; 2002.
4. Fukuyama F. *Our Posthuman Future: Consequences of the Biotechnology Revolution*. London: Profile; 2003.
5. Habermas J. *The Future of Human Nature*. Cambridge: Polity Press; 2003.
6. Sandel M. The case against perfection. *Atlantic Monthly* 2004 Apr:51–62.
7. Harris J. *Enhancing Evolution: The Ethical Case for Making Better People*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press; 2007.
8. Savulescu J. Genetic interventions and the ethics of enhancement of human beings. In: Steinbock B, ed. *The Oxford Handbook of Bioethics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press; 2007:516–35.
9. See note 8, Savulescu 2007, at 526–7.
10. See note 8, Savulescu 2007, at 528–9.
11. Persson I, Savulescu J. *Unfit for the Future: The Need for Moral Enhancement*. Oxford: Oxford University Press; 2012.
12. Sparrow R. Better living through chemistry? A reply to Savulescu and Persson on “moral enhancement.” *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 2014;31:23–32.
13. Hauskeller M. *Better Humans?* Durham, NC: Acumen; 2013.