

On the need of moral enhancement. A critical comment of “Unfit for the future” of I. Persson and J. Savulescu

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Persson and Savulescu have examined rigorously in this essay a crucial and disquieting question: Are the human beings prepared to deal with the threats to their survival raised by modern scientific technology? In the book the authors argue that the future of human species depends on our urgently findings to bring about radical enhancements of the moral aspects of our own human nature. In this paper I try to discuss some of their proposals: what's moral enhancement? And in the case that this could be elucidated, should it be compulsory for all humans? Third, it would be necessary to consider the scope of the enhancement in each individual. That is to say, it is necessary to distinguish between enhancements within the range of a typical human being, and enhancements with posthuman effects: increasing the personal skills above the range typical of the human species. And finally, through the Fable of the Bees of Mandeville I will try to show that the moral enhancement project cannot be implemented in one or several societies, because these would run the risk of being dominated by others. But the practical problems of extending moral enhancement over all societies implies to fall in a situation of prisoner dilemma.

Persson and Savulescu offer in this book a description of the natural circumstances of our technologically developed world and the human psychology that makes the Ultimate Harm possible: the threat that our world, as we currently know it, could disappear.

The idea is actually very straightforward (and captured in the title of the book): we are rational and psychologically unable to deal with the problems that we face today - with global terrorism, environmental destruction, climate change, and mass starvation in countries that we euphemistically call developing. Liberal democracy doesn't help. On the contrary, it makes matters worse because it can only ever allow popular policies, and the restrictions that we would have to impose on ourselves in order to save the planet for future generations and non-human animals are never going to be very popular as long as we are as morally restricted as we are today. Thus we tend to believe that we are morally responsible only for what we actively cause, not for what we merely allow to happen. Our altruism is usually limited to people that are nearby (in space and time), and we are emotionally unaffected by large numbers, so we can stomach the starvation of millions more easily than the starvation of one person right on our doorstep. So as it stands, we really are about to mess it all up and before long it will be too late to do anything about it. Thus, the authors predict sure doom for the planet.

The second part of the book focuses on examining some possible answers to this fatal possibility. The authors claim that what we need to do, if we can, is to improve our moral dispositions and find a way to overcome the deficiencies that are part of our evolved nature.

Let me say something about the first part of the book, putting it in relation to three historical myths on the relation between humankind and technology, as was described by G. H. von Wright in "The Tree of Knowledge".

"Knowledge is power" wrote Francis Bacon, that is, if humankind understands how to question nature methodically and work on the answers, then it will also be in a position to prevail over reality, exploit natural resources and guide the forces of nature according to his plans and desires.

Developments have in a convincing manner reinforced the truth in that saying. But we have begun to doubt the consequences of the progress of technology. The obvious fact, in itself self-evident, that knowledge can be equally used for good proposals as for bad ends, has been one reason why not only mankind's self-acquired happiness, but also his self-inflicted suffering has acquired previously unknown dimensions. The increased possibilities of technologically controlling reality have also increased man's desire in a way that has become dangerous. Technology, created as the servant of man, has become his master" (von Wright, 138).

The question whether technology is good for man to know appears to be as old as the question of whether man is a being of culture. In the discussion surrounding this topic, Renaissance "science-optimists" and the "civilisation-pessimists" of our day expressed in works like *1984* or *Brave New World*, *Gattaca* or *The Island* two extremes.

The perspective of our question deepens when we recognize it in some of the origins of contemplative writing and thinking in myth. There are at least three variations in grand style of the theme of man's right to develop the rational aptitude within him: The Old Testament story of the Tree of Knowledge, the myth of Prometheus and the legend of Doctor Faust.

The Book of Genesis in the Bible contains the tale of the golden age when man lived in happiness and innocence, freely able to enjoy the wonders of creation. But man was forbidden to eat of the Tree of Knowledge, which God planted in addition to the Tree of Life in the Garden of Eden. If he ate from the Tree of Knowledge he would be deprived of the fruit of the Tree of Life. But man transgressed God's prohibition. So he was driven out of the Paradise and since then he eats his bread by the sweat of his brow until he returns to the soil from which he has come.

Greek mythology also knows of a golden age in the childhood of man and a god angered by the wretchedness of man. Zeus wishes to destroy the creatures he has created. But Prometheus feels pity for them, steals the fire from Zeus and gives it to man. The Promethean fire is primarily a symbol for man's technological skills, his ability to exploit the resources

of the earth, to improve his prosperity and increase his power. But it soon also becomes a symbol of the striving of the human spirit for justice, freedom, beauty and wisdom.

Zeus' punishment of the defiant Titan became, as is known, that he was to be chained to the rock and condemned to eternal torment. And Zeus took revenge on men, who had accepted the stolen divine gift, by sending to them Pandora with the box out of which all sorrows and suffering flew over the world.

In impressive contrast to Prometheus in the Greek saga, is Mephistopheles, the representative of the powers of darkness in the Germanic legend of Doctor Faust, who was said to have made a deal with the Devil in order to gain insight into the mystery of nature and control over the forces that provide pleasure, wealth and power to man. The price of this knowledge which brought power was the soul of the learned man, who, when Faust had emptied the chalice of life, was made to suffer eternal torment in hell.

It is easy to see that the three myths have something to do with the question of the relationship of human rationality and the technological development that has turned out to be a threat to human survival, as is expressed in "Unfit for the future". Our knowledge of human biology – in particular of genetics and neurobiology – is beginning to enable us to directly affect the biological or physiological bases of human motivation, either through drugs, or through genetic selection or engineering, or by using external devices that affect the brain or the learning processes. We could use these techniques to overcome the moral and psychological shortcomings that imperil the human species.

But the question is that the almost uncontrollable advance of the technology can also offer us the solution that allows to avoid the different threats that put the human race in danger. According to the authors, this possibility crystallises in morally enhancing human beings through the different tools that biomedical sciences can currently or in the near future offer. Enhancing our moral motivation

would enable us to act better for distant people, future generations, and non-human animals.

But there are some problems that surround the claims of Persson and Savulescu.

1.

What is moral enhancement? It is far from being clear if this moral enhancement is emotional, behavioral, empathetical, or rational.

To Douglas, the notion of moral enhancement consists in reducing the force of some specific emotions, such as aggression and racism that are ethically problematic. To Karim Jebari, moral enhancement should be understood as Empathy enhancement. To her, this enhancement "seems thus to be an ideal moral enhancement strategy, for a number of reasons. First, empathy is closely linked to pro-social behavior on a conceptual level. Although a definitive empirical demonstration of the causal role of empathy and pro-social behavior has yet to be done, there is consistent evidence of empathetic concern and pro-social behavior. Empathetic people act in accordance with what all major normative theories would consider moral acts in everyday cases. Empathetic people avoid harming others, are more willing to cooperate with strangers and are more willing to benefit others, for example. Second, empathetic people are not less rational, contrary to cultural stereotypes."

Schaeffer, on the other hand, proposes an alternative solution: we can perform moral enhancement indirectly by enhancing individual rationality.

In any case, emotions are quite complex, and the difficulties in assessing the consequences in tampering with them should lead us to be careful. Douglas and other proponents of emotional enhancement seem to underestimate the difficulties of disentangling the effects of specific emotions in our daily lives. On the other hand, it is not always the case that altruism/empathy and a sense of justice go hand in hand. It could be perfectly possible that they oppose each other.

Irrespective of these critical comments, I think that for Persson and Savulescu moral enhancement is multifactorial enhancement than encompasses emotions, empathy and rationality. I think that we could understand that the underlying purpose to Persson and Savulescu's project is related to moral constructivism: the morally correct behaviours are those that human beings situated in specific ideal conditions would choose. The content of these ideal conditions varies but all are directed at having agents in ideal conditions who would be impartial human beings with optimal cognitive and emotional capacities able to give off of the prejudices and clumsiness that disturb our suitable vision of the things. (Moreso, 2009)

If it were the case, then moral enhancement is supervenient regarding the enhancement of our rationality and of our emotions.

But with regard to these types of enhancement, it would be necessary to make some distinctions in terms of its scope. In the first place, if only a small number of individuals experienced this enhancement or instead, it would be applied universally.

As far as I have understood, the authors seem to adopt the view that the scope of those who should undergo moral enhancement is universal, provided that it would be otherwise virtually impossible to solve problems that affect the world at the global level (like climate change and terrorism) by enhancing morality in only a few individuals. But this universal moral enhancement should be, at the same time, compulsory. There are two reasons to support this conclusion: a) without the convergence of the majority of the population, it would not be feasible to reach the result; b) if the scope of the enhancing project were not universal, then the not morally enhanced people could benefit of the "good faith" of the enhanced and in this way, they would satisfy their selfish interests. But this project of extending moral enhancement to a worldwide level is currently a technical impossibility. Besides, it would be highly morally debatable.

Second, it would be necessary to consider the scope of the enhancement in each individual. That is to say, it is necessary to distinguish between

enhancements within the range of a typical human being, and enhancements with posthuman effects: increasing the personal skills above the range typical of the human species.

This distinction is relevant because to solve the problems that Persson and Savulescu worry about, I am not sure if mere “normal” enhancement would be sufficient. I do not think that mere moral enhancement will be enough to solve the dilemma of the tragedy of the commons or the prisoners dilemma. But assuming the alternative, a moral posthuman enhancement will introduce other obstacles: to be effective, it would have to be adopted universally. But as I have said before, if it was not the case, the not-enhanced people could act for their own gain and take advantage of the moral willingness of the rest. That is to say, we are yet in a situation of a prisoner’s dilemma.

2. The Mandeville’s Argument

In *The fable of the bees*, Mandeville tackles the representation of the human society, using the simile of a beehive in which there are virtues and the vices.

Therefore, there exist, in the beehive, doctors, lawyers, corrupt priests, crooked judges, etc. Anyway, in the beehive, in addition to the queen activity and production reign supreme. All the members behave in a selfish way, but, without knowing it, they are working to satisfy the needs of the community.

However, one day “one of the members of the beehive” began to complain about the widespread vices and the “moral decadence of the society”. He convinced a lot of members of the beehive and all of them prayed to God so that virtue would reign.

The god Jupiter listened to the clamour: their habits were reformed to respect the morality, luxury, hypocrisy, and even bureaucracy disappeared. Poverty as well as wealth disappeared. Peace reigned; and, thus, also, the arts, the sciences and trade all ceased.

Finally, the population of bees diminished and the beehive, attacked by a enemy superior in number, fell down. The few bees that survived withdrew to a hole of a tree and continued considering themselves superior in virtue to the rest of the bees.

In summary, for Mandeville, individual virtues only are possible living in society. If ethical virtue reigned exclusively, States would disappear.

Society would not be the result of the need for cooperation, but of the fear of death. Man cannot be forced to work for altruistic reasons, but only to satisfy his natural needs, by the pursuit of food, ambition and power.

According to Mandeville, obedience, submission, sacrifice and humility are virtues invented by politicians to better ensure the continuity of their government. After all, the natural goodness and the civilisation are incompatible things.

What the fable clearly shows is that the moral enhancement project cannot be implemented in one or several societies, because these would run the risk of being dominated by others. If the project wants to be successful it would be necessary to implement it universally. But there is another lesson in the fable: if our psychology is changed in order to promote altruism and empathy, we could lose some elements that make some important things in our societies possible, such as the force of progress: self interest.

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