

# *Should Moral Enhancement Be Compulsory?*

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**ABSTRACT.** Some authors fear that humanity is on the verge of its own extinction and must either change its behaviour or inevitably cause its own demise. This situation has spawned a vigorous (bio)ethical debate in recent years concerning whether one should enhance human beings cognitively or morally in order to promote moral action and reduce harm. This article defends making moral bioenhancement compulsory to avoid grossly immoral actions and the global extinction of humanity, if it is available, safe and easy to administer. Two crucial issues will be examined in more detail. First, moral enhancement and free will, and second, the applicability problem, which concerns one particular political approach to accomplishing that goal.

**KEYWORDS.** Compulsory moral enhancement, cognitive enhancement, refined Marxism, free will, God Machine

## I. INTRODUCTION

Some contemporary voices are arguing that humanity is on the verge of its own extinction. Whether this will come overnight, perhaps due to the misuse of weapons of mass destruction, or more slowly over the next few decades, by virtue of overpopulation and related problems (e.g. world poverty and inadequate food supplies) or serious global environmental issues such as global warming, is of minor importance. These figures contend that if humanity does not change, it will inevitably cause its own demise. Against this background, an important debate has arisen in recent years over whether one should enhance human beings in order to avoid this universal disaster. In fact, there are two important debates. First, some well-known authors such as Kass (2002), Fukuyama (2002), Habermas (2003), and Annas (2005) argue that one should not enhance human beings

for the purpose of promoting pro-social behaviour. They reason that doing so would change human nature, that it is against human dignity and human rights, and that bioenhancement is too complex and we should not play with our precious genetic code; in addition, there is a risk of creating super-humans who might exploit or suppress non-enhanced humans. The second debate concerns the question of enhancing human beings cognitively (Harris 2011; 2013a; 2013b), so that they would have better insight into the nature of morality and thus improve their moral behaviour, or by strengthening their motivation to act morally (Persson and Savulescu 2008; 2012a; 2013a; Douglas 2008; Rakic 2013; Savulescu and Persson 2012b).

Although the former debate is important, in what follows I focus on the latter, arguing from the assumption that, if humanity does not improve morally, we will inevitably destroy ourselves sooner or later and contending, therefore, that we should make moral enhancement compulsory. I propose implementing a refined global Marxism inspired by Hans Jonas (1985). By way of background, the next section reviews possible threats to humanity and defines moral enhancement. I then summarize the debate over moral enhancement and its main lines of reasoning, pinpointing two crucial points: moral enhancement and free will, and the applicability problem. These two issues are examined in greater detail in the fifth and sixth sections, respectively. The final section offers some conclusions.

## II. PRELIMINARY DISTINCTIONS

The question of whether to enhance humanity morally and why functions at three different levels: i. the individual and his or her relation to other beings (human nature); ii. humanity's general impotence to keep pace morally with advanced technological developments; and iii. human-induced global environmental problems.

First, as Persson and Savulescu (2012a) point out, human beings are myopic (i.e. psychologically adapted to life in rather small and technologically

primitive communities), aggressive by nature, xenophobic, more concerned with current events than with distant moral issues, and virtually unable to feel proportionate sympathy towards large numbers of sufferers. Moreover, humans prefer to maximize the net utility of their in-group – family members, friends, neighbours, and perhaps other community members – over assisting out-groups, or distant community members and people from other nation-states (‘parochial altruism’). Finally, Persson and Savulescu believe that it is, in general, easier for human beings to harm than to benefit others. We do so for many reasons – such as personal gain, revenge, envy, and anger – and through a variety of means: large-scale organized criminality, human trafficking, forced prostitution, terrorism, religious fanaticism, racism, anti-Semitism, and cruelty to and exploitation of animals, to name a few.<sup>1</sup> In addition, the currently high global reproduction rate is responsible for overpopulation and resulting food shortages among the poor.

Second, many argue that humanity has developed rapidly in technological terms but has not improved proportionately in moral terms, particularly with regard to its primitive and aggressive nature. This imbalance between advanced technology and moral failures is more problematic than ever now that the potential misuse of technology has become a threat to humanity’s very survival (Gordon 2014; Persson and Savulescu 2012). For example, the use of weapons of mass destruction (whether atomic, biological or chemical) in wars between nation-states or by terrorists could jeopardize the “permanence of genuine life” on earth (Jonas 1985, 11; see also Persson and Savulescu 2012).

Third, we face human-induced environmental threats such as climate change (e.g. global warming and resulting changes in sea level), scarcity of non-renewable energy as a result of unprecedented consumption by industrialized countries, and devastating deforestation.

How should one address these challenges? One promising way might be to morally enhance human beings in order to avoid the negative consequences of these threats. Key aspects of morality – i.e. altruism and a sense of justice – have a biological basis, as demonstrated repeatedly by

studies on a range of topics, such as the moral responses of identical twins raised separately and the relationship between gender and aggressive behaviour. For this reason, morally enhancing human beings through appropriate measures could help our species to avert the ultimate harm (Persson and Savulescu 2012a). How should we understand this so-called moral enhancement?

### III. WHAT IS MORAL ENHANCEMENT?

To answer this question properly, we should first briefly define human enhancement more broadly, which I consider to be a non-therapeutic intervention in the human body to improve particular human capabilities or skills so that the person can achieve greater proficiency in his or her given tasks. Given this definition, one might describe moral enhancement as a non-therapeutic intervention that improves the person's moral capabilities or skills so that he or she eventually becomes more moral.

This preliminary definition raises two issues. First, it leaves open the question of whether the particular intervention may be either medical or non-medical in nature. The classic non-medical way of morally enhancing a person is through education – e.g. parental and peer-group guidance, role models, ethical reflection or transmission of knowledge and skills. On the other hand, non-traditional medical interventions aimed at moral enhancement include pharmaceuticals such as Oxytocin (to promote trust regarding the in-group, though it also makes people less sensitive to out-group members), Serotonin (increasing cooperation and reducing aggression) and Ritalin (reducing violent hostility), as well as genetic therapy. The success of these medical interventions remains empirically uncertain. As Rakic correctly claims, “None of these findings show that we already have reliable means of achieving moral bioenhancement, but they do suggest the possibility of further advances” (2013, 1). Indeed, Sparrow has stressed that the empirical evidence on moral bioenhancement efforts

“[...] does currently not support the grand claims made for its potential” and that “there is no realistic prospect any technology of moral bioenhancement achieving what has been claimed for it for the foreseeable future” (Sparrow 2014b, 20; 27). In any case, if key aspects of morality do have (at least to some degree) a biological basis, then, even if we are currently unable to modify this basis, it seems conceivable that at some future point we could bioenhance human beings morally by altering their relevant biological traits. To what extent we could push the biological limits remains to be seen, but at least we should thoroughly examine the advantages and risks of moral bioenhancement before it becomes technologically achievable.

Second, the phrase ‘becomes more moral’ does not specify whether the improvement applies to human action and behaviour, motives and motivation, or character. There is an ongoing and vigorous debate in bioethics as to exactly what the goal of making people more moral should be. Should we attempt to improve the consequences of one’s decisions, to close motivational gaps between knowing what is the right thing to do and acting accordingly, or to make people generally of more virtuous character?

I agree with Persson and Savulescu (2008, 167) that we should focus on the problem of motivation, because only if motivation is triggered properly can we achieve the other two goals of desirable outcomes and virtuous character. This is because ethical dispositions depend on oft-repeated moral actions that shape particular dispositions, which in turn shape a person’s moral character (see Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*). On this basis, we could expand our preliminary definition and say that *moral enhancement is a non-therapeutic, medical intervention in the human body in order to directly improve the person’s moral motivation so that he or she eventually acts accordingly and thereby becomes more virtuous.*

It could be objected that even if human beings are motivated to act morally, they may not be independently able to ascertain what is the morally right action. This objection is correct, but it is also valid in cases

where no moral enhancement is in place. The only way to address lack of moral knowledge is continuous moral education and moral discourse. However, adding moral enhancement to our toolbox of remedies could solve the motivation problem and could change human beings in such a way that they would be unable to commit grossly immoral actions in future. Proponents of moral enhancement, such as Savulescu, Persson, Douglas and myself, contend that this cannot occur through either moral education or cognitive enhancement alone.

Some have vigorously challenged the idea of morally improving human beings directly. For example, Harris (2011; 2013a; 2013b) argues instead in favour of cognitive enhancement in order to make humans more moral. The next section summarizes the two opposing positions in this debate and pinpoints two vital issues requiring further discussion.

#### IV. THE TWO WAYS TO BECOME MORE MORAL: COGNITIVE AND MORAL ENHANCEMENT

All protagonists in the debate over *how* to bioenhance human beings (for an excellent overview, see Rakic 2013) agree that we should do so, if possible, in order to avoid global disaster and save humanity, animals, and nature from extinction. However, the participants disagree on the most plausible way to achieve this objective. I will briefly present the two perspectives and highlight some vital issues that need to be addressed more properly in this regard.

##### *Cognitive Enhancement*

John Harris proposes a combination of enhancing rationality and the classical method of moral education. He contends that if human beings become more rational and intelligent, they will better comprehend the nature of morality and be less inclined to act immorally. Enhancing human beings' moral knowledge and understanding, in combination with

moral education, is viewed as sufficient to bridge the motivational gap between knowing the right thing to do and doing it.

Although a better understanding and comprehension of morality might improve pro-social behaviour, this form of enhancement nonetheless seems insufficient to bridge the gap between knowing and doing. As Rakic correctly claims:

The gap between what we do and what we believe is right to do might well be the greatest predicament of our existence as moral beings. The essential issue is not how to make us understand morality better but how to morally enhance our *actions*. It is motivation rather than cognition that is at the heart of the matter. Hence, the key problem of morality comes down to our motivation to act as we believe we should (2013, 3; italics original).

Harris does not follow the classical stance of the Socratic-Platonic view that once a person knows the right thing to do, he or she will inevitably act accordingly. This account was debunked by Aristotle, who argued in the *Nicomachean Ethics* that human beings are weak-willed and, as such, regularly fail to act in accordance with what they know they should do. Harris instead attempts to prove the weaker claim that better insight into the nature of morality, developed by making people more rational through cognitive enhancement, will improve moral behaviour.<sup>2</sup>

It would be different if Harris claimed, somewhat more boldly, that human beings should be enhanced cognitively to the extent that they become *phronimoi*, or practically wise persons who are (again referring to Aristotle) *unable* to act immorally because they are completely virtuous and do not suffer from weakness of will. Such a human being would have no gap between knowing and doing. This potentially promising line of argumentation might, however, face an objection that has been voiced by, among others, McMahan (2009), Agar (2010a; 2010b), Buchanan (2011), Douglas (2013), Hauskeller (2013) and Sparrow (2013). The objection concerns the vital issue of whether such cognitively enhanced persons, by virtue of their superior abilities in reasoning, would also enjoy a higher

moral status as so-called ‘post-persons’ relative to ordinary non-enhanced persons. This higher moral status might then be used to claim superior political rights, such as the right of ruling the state.

### *Moral Enhancement*

Douglas (2008; 2013) and Rakic (2013) believe in the advantages of *voluntary* moral enhancement, whereas Persson and Savulescu (2008, 2013a) and I (Gordon 2014) argue for *compulsory* moral enhancement.<sup>3</sup> However, all these proponents agree that moral education should accompany moral bioenhancement. The core elements of this moral enhancement view are as follows:

- i. Morality has a biological foundation.
- ii. Moral enhancement can bridge the gap between knowing what is right and acting accordingly because it triggers moral motivation in human beings. Cognitive enhancement cannot solve the motivation problem by simply enhancing human rationality.
- iii. It is necessary to morally enhance human beings in the context of modern technology since the global dangers present today, such as weapons of mass destruction, overpopulation, world poverty, human-induced environmental problems, and animal cruelty, jeopardize the permanence of genuine life on Earth.

Rakic (2013) criticizes Persson and Savulescu for adhering to compulsory moral enhancement, giving two related reasons. The first supports Harris’s (2011) objection that moral enhancement undermines, at least to some extent, free will and human autonomy if enhanced human beings are eventually made unable to act immorally. Rakic claims:

If we wish to diminish the danger of UH [Ultimate Harm] by restricting our freedom, we encroach upon a crucial element of our existence. If freedom is essential for our morality (i.e. for us acting *intentionally* in a morally appropriate manner), and morality is a key element of us being ‘human’ (as Persson and Savulescu themselves argue when claiming that it is morality rather than biology that ensures us human



status), the implication is that making ME [moral enhancement] obligatory would deprive us, to some extent, of an important part of our human existence. It is critical that we keep our freedom intact. If we fail to do that, we will dispossess ourselves of something that is vital for our human status and will have already embarked upon the path of inflicting serious (if not ultimate) harm upon ourselves. Hence, I argue in favor of voluntary instead of compulsory ME (2013, 3-4).

Rakic's second criticism concerns the idea that human beings should "[...] give up on the imperative to survive at any cost" since it is impossible to rule out "the possibility of self-annihilation" (2013, 4). This means that we should not curtail human freedom (by advocating compulsory moral enhancement) in pursuit of a goal that cannot be fully achieved. Hence, humanity must live with the possibility of its extinction if we can safeguard our freedom only in that way. Here Rakic clearly values freedom over safety. One might object that, even if we cannot eliminate the risk of global extinction through compulsory moral enhancement, it seems nonetheless correct to make it obligatory in order to promote safety by preventing serious crimes. Many people might find this form of public protection appealing, even if it limits human freedom to some extent.

The above discussion raises two fundamental problems that are addressed in more detail in the next two sections: the problem of free will and the applicability of moral enhancement.

## V. DOES MORAL ENHANCEMENT UNDERMINE FREE WILL?

In *Moral Enhancement and Freedom* (2011), Harris argues against Persson and Savulescu (2008), contending that they underestimate the extent to which moral enhancement undermines free will and moral responsibility. In their responses to Harris, Persson and Savulescu (2013a) state that moral bioenhancement will not limit our freedom in the context of either a deterministic or non-deterministic world, because human beings either lack free will (and hence have no freedom to lose) or have a completely

free will, which restricts the effectiveness of moral bioenhancement. In their earlier book, they argue – following Harry Frankfurt’s famous argument in *Alternate Possibilities and Moral Responsibility* (1969) – that if, for example, the “freaky mechanism” (which would trigger people to make the proper decision if they are about to make an erroneous choice) remains idle, one could after all concede that “Harris’s ‘freedom to fall’ is not essential for moral choice and action” (Persson and Savulescu 2012a, 115). In a thought-experiment in *Moral Enhancement, Freedom, and the God Machine* (2012b), Savulescu and Persson introduce the so-called God Machine with the following description:

The God Machine would monitor the thoughts, beliefs, desires and intentions of every human being. It was capable of modifying these within nanoseconds, without the conscious recognition by any human subjects. The God Machine was designed to give human beings near complete freedom. It only ever intervened in human action to prevent great harm, injustice or other deeply immoral behavior from occurring. [...] The God Machine would not intervene in trivial immoral acts, like minor instances of lying or cheating. It was only when a threshold insult to some sentient being’s interests was crossed would the God Machine exercise its almighty power (2012b, 10).<sup>4</sup>

Savulescu and Persson pose the important question: “What is so bad with such a world after all,” given that people are still free to be moral but admittedly unfree to perform “grossly immoral acts, like killing or raping” (2012b, 11)? Here they make use of the refined distinction between *free will* and *free action* in the sense that people connected to the God Machine are still able to enjoy their free will, but are limited in terms of acting according to grossly bad intentions (a so-called Frankfurt-style case applied to the moral enhancement debate). As we have already seen, Rakic (2013) is convinced that their argument eventually limits human freedom, at least to some extent. However, his idea that, for this reason, one should not champion compulsory moral enhancement seems premature (at least, at first sight) if one acknowledges the following line of argument.

If the person's decision in the Frankfurt-style case and in the God Machine thought-experiment has not been infringed by the particular mechanisms involved, then the person remains fully responsible for his or her choice and has also enjoyed full human freedom, because he or she had the chance to *initiate* an alternative act (even if the machine would have prevented it). The person's free will (assuming for the present that human beings do have free will) is restricted only when he or she starts to perform grossly immoral actions that cause the mechanism to intervene. Of course, traditionally, believers in free will have claimed that, to have free will, a person must be able to perform both moral and immoral actions. This is why Harris claims that human freedom is restricted by the God Machine in a way that goes beyond general limitations of human action and is more akin to the totalitarianism of *Brave New World* or *1984*. One might respond to Harris by saying that human freedom and moral responsibility remain intact in all cases where the person does not want to commit grossly immoral actions. Granted, human freedom seems restricted in that persons are no longer able to act on a motive to commit murder or rape. But is this really a disadvantage? The refined approach seems convincing and protects potential victims from great harm. It also benefits suspects by helping them not to commit horrible deeds that would incur severe punishment from society (such as long imprisonment or the death penalty). Thus, in both the Frankfurt-style case as applied to moral enhancement and the God Machine thought experiment, full moral responsibility and human freedom are not jeopardized in cases where actions are not grossly immoral (i.e. in all cases where the machine does not intervene).

Two important objections may be raised here.<sup>5</sup> The first objection is concerned with the relevance of the Frankfurt-style case to disputes about the permissibility of obligatory moral enhancement. In response, it is certainly correct that Savulescu and Persson must provide more specific information on what moral enhancement would involve and how the intervention could take place. This is important because it is unclear how

the person's decision is changed by moral enhancement and whether this particular process is adequately captured by the thought experiment of the God Machine. Admittedly, their appeal to the God Machine is an idealized picture of how things may work; it plays with our intuitions and provides some thought-provoking ideas on how moral enhancement could be visualized. Savulescu and Persson do not attempt to offer any empirical evidence as to whether moral enhancement could be delivered in a fashion similar to the God Machine. The idea of modifying a person's decisions unbeknownst to that person is particularly uncertain. At this point, we should appreciate the God Machine as an interesting example that has indeed enriched and promoted the debate while acknowledging the limited details provided as to what moral enhancement would entail and how the intervention could be conceived more properly. In that respect, Sparrow is certainly right when he claims, "There is little we can learn from considering this case about the ethics of the application of more mundane technologies to reshape dispositions and behaviour" (2014a, 28).

The second objection is that, in cases of moral enhancement, decisions made by the morally enhanced person are not really his or her own, but rather the result of a political decision made by others to modify the people's moral character. Sparrow (2014a, 24; 26-30) champions this objection, contending that the morally enhanced person is ultimately not responsible for his or her impossibility of performing some immoral actions, because that status was caused by someone else who enhanced the person's character. In this way, the debate moves from the ground of free will to questions of political freedom.<sup>6</sup> This is an important observation, which I will examine further below. At this point, I will concede that intervening to make grossly immoral acts impossible is indeed a political decision to favour safety over freedom. This political decision, however, can be assumed to have a foundation in moral reasoning and public discourse unless the implementation of moral enhancement has somehow been ordered by a powerful minority without democratic approval by the people (for an intriguing discussion, see Sparrow 2014b).

## VI. TRIGGERING MORAL MOTIVATION: A TWO-EDGED SWORD

Thus far it has been argued that moral enhancement attempts to solve the problem of moral motivation by causing agents to act according to what they know is right. At first sight, it seems reasonable to favour this approach; at second glance, however, two quite substantial problems arise that are not easily solved and that probably should make us more cautious about promoting moral enhancement without hesitation. First, it seems difficult to determine how one should properly understand the claim that the agent ‘knows’ what the right thing is. Second, it is possible that moral enhancement may undermine human autonomy to a greater extent than has hitherto been assumed by the protagonists in the debate. I will deal with these two issues in that order.

### *Whose Morality?*

Before we can make people act according to some moral goal, we must first have a clear idea of the goal. That is, what is the right thing for a moral agent to do? Many different ethical approaches – such as deontology, utilitarianism, virtue ethics, principlism, and casuistry – are held by presumably equally rational people, and thus, in many cases, there are multiple proposed solutions for moral problems. As a result, moral agents could differ as to what is the right thing to do. And if we cannot spell out in detail what one should do in moral matters, it seems irresponsible to make people act according to what someone else thinks is the right thing to do in a particular situation, because that choice could be immoral when viewed from another point of view.

Here one should distinguish between two possible interpretations of ‘knowing what is the right thing to do’. The first possible interpretation rests on a form of subjectivism; it posits that the right thing to do cannot be detached from any particular person, but is rooted in the person’s preferences and ideas about the moral life. The second interpretation, in

contrast, embodies objectivism, contending that the right thing to do is based on universal, non-idiosyncratic moral reasoning. This particular longstanding debate cannot be solved here; rather, we should focus on the similarities between the various ethical approaches in order to gain a better understanding of what one should *not* do. In other words, one should try to spell out in more detail not how moral agents should act but, rather, what they should avoid doing.<sup>7</sup>

This way of addressing the problem presupposes that all (or virtually all) moral agents agree on at least a short list of actions that should not be performed in order to improve pro-social behaviour. This idea does not rely on a particular moral approach or worldview but attempts to flesh out for all (or most) rational moral agents what the right thing to avoid is. For example, one should not murder or rape another person, and one should not support forced prostitution or human trafficking. We may never be able to agree on a positive account of what all moral agents should do in a particular situation, but in the meantime, when seeking to delineate a realm of activity for promoting moral behaviour and perhaps moral enhancement, we should follow the best available and more pragmatic option – that is, agreeing on a binding list of things we want to *avoid* in our moral lives. It is not necessarily true that all people should behave in the same way (morally speaking) in all circumstances, but it is definitely true that there are some immoral actions that no human beings should do.

### *Moral Motivation and Moral Action*

Savulescu and Persson (2012b) presented the challenging thought experiment of a God Machine that would intervene in someone's behaviour only if that person was about to commit a grossly immoral action such as murder or rape. In all other cases it would remain idle. Analogously, one could argue that moral enhancement should directly trigger moral motivation so that human beings are unable to commit grossly

immoral actions. In this scenario, human beings would still have the freedom in all other cases to act according to their individual autonomy – including what we might consider less severe instances of dubious behaviour such as cheating and lying.

However, if moral enhancement, as has been argued by several authors, is the key to solving the motivation problem between knowing the right thing to do and acting accordingly, then it seems less clear whether directly triggering moral motivation is only limited to grossly immoral actions. The general idea of motivating an agent to avoid committing grossly immoral actions is laudable. Technically speaking, one could perhaps inhibit an agent's ability to perform such actions by initiating a feeling of disgust in the agent if he or she attempts to perform such actions and – by virtue of the feeling of disgust – causing the agent to abstain from doing these actions. Harris raised the objection that human freedom is curtailed if the moral agent is no longer able to commit such actions. The freedom to fail is, according to Harris, an integral part of the notion of human freedom, related to human autonomy and moral responsibility. His objection has already been discussed above.

Here, however, I want to raise a different and probably more severe objection by questioning the simple idea that moral enhancement triggers only the motivation to avoid grossly immoral actions. Proponents of moral enhancement present it as a promising way, at some future time, to make people do what is morally right. But if the problem of moral motivation could be solved in this way, then the solution might not be limited only to grossly immoral actions, but could conceivably affect the whole range of human conduct. If this were the case, however, not only would the valuable Kantian distinction between the morality and the legality of an action vanish into thin air, but human beings would turn into do-gooders because they would be – by necessity – motivated to do the morally right thing in all cases. Obviously, there is a vital difference between moral agents who are unable to perform *any* immoral actions and those who lack only the capability to perform grossly immoral actions.

Most people would welcome the latter, whereas the former might provoke in us a somewhat uncomfortable feeling even though a world full of such people might be more upstanding than ours.

People generally praise the Aristotelian ideal of the practically wise person who always acts morally, has a firm character and performs virtuous actions without hesitation. Indeed, we admire and perhaps strive to become something like the so-called *phronimos*. But the idea of a world in which everyone is practically wise or closely approaches this ideal seems a bit scary to many people. One would not normally claim that the Aristotelian *phronimos* is limited in his or her human freedom, autonomy or moral responsibility; rather, we consider the practically wise person to be a supreme moral agent, a role model *par excellence*. As Aristotle stresses, the *phronimos* is virtually unable to commit any immoral actions, because he or she has left bad intentions, preferences and motives behind and can live in peace with him or herself, with other humans and with nature.<sup>8</sup>

Based on the previous discussion, it seems valuable to explore the possibility of creating supreme moral agents by promoting a two-step model of moral enhancement. The first level consists of directly motivating people to avoid committing grossly immoral actions (Moral Enhancement I). This presupposes that a list of such actions will be developed. Of course, the most difficult part is to actually achieve such a goal, but perhaps by means of pharmaceuticals or genetic engineering we might be able to accomplish this task within the next few decades. The second level concerns the creation of the practically wise person on a global scale, including all or most human beings (Moral Enhancement II). Though of course we cannot know with certainty (since moral enhancement is in its infancy), this wider level of moral enhancement might be possible in order to save humanity from extinction and make the world a better place, incorporating a more positive account of morality (i.e. what is the right thing to do, not just what grossly immoral actions must be avoided) without jeopardizing pluralism.



## VII. ON THE APPLICABILITY OF COMPULSORY MORAL ENHANCEMENT

Let us now assume that it is possible to enhance human beings morally, either through genetic means or by using drugs. Furthermore, let us assume that both ways are safe and easy to administer and that they have a 100 percent success rate. Should we then make moral enhancement obligatory to safeguard humanity from extinction and to promote pro-social behaviour among human beings and towards animals and nature? If we did so, we could totally eliminate serious crimes such as murder or rape (as the God Machine does). I disagree with Rakic’s main claim that in doing so “[...] we might deprive humans of an essential element of their human existence, thus in a way getting already into the business of our self-annihilation”, so that “humanity has no other choice than to give up on the imperative to survive at any cost” (2013, 4). First, Rakic acknowledges that we might not lose human freedom completely, but only to some extent; second, it seems that, as we reasoned from Aristotle, human beings can remain fully autonomous – which is the basis for ascribing moral responsibility – while becoming supreme moral agents.<sup>9</sup> Here one could also agree with Persson and Savulescu, who argue against Rakic that “[...] freedom is only one value and not the sole value; safety is another” (2013b, 1).

In this section, the above-mentioned account in support of compulsory moral enhancement will be examined, first by briefly responding to the crucial question of *why* we should consider making it obligatory and, second, focusing in more detail on the applicability problem by discussing a political option to support the cause of moral enhancement by adhering to a refined form of Marxism.

*Immoral Action and Compulsory Moral Enhancement*

This article presupposes the plausibility of the claim that humanity is on the verge of its own extinction, which has been argued by various authors such as Schumacher (1973), Jonas (1985) and more recently

Savulescu and Persson (2012a). This strong claim may be debatable, although it cannot be conclusively falsified in advance. However, even if it contains a rhetorical element, it correctly highlights the present risks to human existence and alerts us to the need to change our destructive behaviour towards nature and our fellow human beings so that our “[...] actions are compatible with the permanence of genuine life” on earth (Jonas 1985, 11).<sup>10</sup> Many people claim that humanity has made little progress, morally speaking, during the last two or three thousand years, but this rather cynical interpretation of history seems superficial on further examination. Of course, human beings are (currently) not perfect moral beings, but we have made substantial progress on many fronts. For example, the invention of a legal system including an impartial judge, the idea of an appropriate and non-excessive punishment for illegal deeds, the widespread abolition of slavery and shunning of lynchings, the strengthening of human autonomy, and the promotion of international collaboration to solve conflicts peacefully rather than through war all represent examples of moral improvement. At the same time, as already noted, we still experience immoral behaviour in many forms.

As we have seen, some have argued for moral or cognitive enhancement of human beings in response to this threat. Such enhancement could be made voluntary or obligatory. This article defends the view that moral enhancement should be made compulsory. If one already supports the idea of moral enhancement to improve human conduct – i.e. if one believes that one should do it to make the world a better and safer place – then it seems somewhat arbitrary not to support using more radical means, if they are available and safe, to close the deal. In other words, the burden of proof seems to lie on the side of the protagonists of voluntary moral enhancement. Rakic’s claim that we should give up the survival-at-any-cost bias because it might undermine our human freedom simply, as Savulescu and Persson rightly argue, favours the value of freedom over safety. Others, as one anonymous referee claims, might seek to place the burden of proof on

those who would forcibly inflict a non-therapeutic medical intervention upon unwilling subjects rather than on those who would merely allow individuals to freely and autonomously choose such an intervention for themselves. There are two strong counterarguments against this objection, however.

First, Sparrow (2014b, 21) correctly identified the reason why moral bioenhancement must be obligatory and not a matter of individual choice (i.e. to favour safety over freedom). The whole point of the undertaking is to reduce the risk of terrorist attacks, to prevent climate change, and to generally make people unable to commit grossly immoral acts. This goal cannot be accomplished if only those people who want to morally enhance themselves are involved in the programme and those who still want to commit grossly immoral acts are permitted to decline enhancement. Therefore, protagonists of moral enhancement must claim to make it obligatory rather than optional:

Thus, the project of voluntary moral bioenhancement to prevent climate change presupposes the sense of social solidarity that it is supposed to bring about. If we want to ensure that everyone has the social solidarity and altruism required to ensure that they do their bit to prevent climate change, we will need to make moral enhancement compulsory (Sparrow 2014b, 21).

In order to exclude free riders and effectively prevent the occurrence of grossly immoral acts, we must favour safety over freedom in this instance.<sup>11</sup>

However, one might object that this argument is unconvincing from an external standpoint because it has already displayed a favouritism for safety over freedom simply by assuming that we should morally enhance human beings at all. The second counterargument deals with this particular objection and provides us with a positive account of why we have good reasons to value safety over freedom. John Stuart Mill famously points out in *On Liberty* (1859) that the freedom of expression can be

legitimately regulated by society where necessary to protect other people from harm. Mill argues in the fourth chapter *Of the Limits to the Authority of Society over the Individual* as follows:

It is far otherwise if he has infringed the rules necessary for the protection of his fellow creatures, individually or collectively. The evil consequences of his acts do not then fall on himself, but on others; and society, as the protector of all its members, must retaliate on him; must inflict pain on him for the express purpose of punishment, and must take care that it be sufficiently severe (2001, 73).

Against this background, if moral enhancement, at some point in the future, is able to successfully prevent the institution of modern slavery (about 40 million people are currently held as slaves, according to Amnesty International), end human trafficking and the sex trade, end torture and wars, and fight against global poverty, then it seems empirically justified on consequentialist terms to make it obligatory for all human beings. The great harm that could be avoided for many people of the global population by making people more moral clearly outweighs the freedom to harm other people. Given the dire situations that millions face around the world and the prospect of global climate change, valuing safety over freedom seems justified if doing so can end human suffering and promote human flourishing by making people unable to commit grossly immoral acts. This, however, presupposes, as Savulescu and Persson admit, that moral bioenhancement is available, safe and easy to administer. Therefore, one might rightly claim that the burden of proof is on those who want to withhold support for moral (or cognitive) enhancement as an additional means to make people morally better and thereby improve the quality of life for millions of people.

A related issue is how to promote this moral enhancement. Should one publicly announce the need for moral enhancement and see what happens, or should a well-informed and benevolent elite carry out the plan without obtaining informed consent – adhering to Plato’s noble lie – because doing so is in the best interest of humanity and its survival?

The following section examines the suggestion that a refined form of Marxism is best suited to carry out the plan.

*In Support of Refined Marxism*

In *Unfit for the Future* (2012a), Persson and Savulescu argue that there are basically two different ways to save humanity from extinction: one could either change the political system of liberal democracies or morally enhance human beings. They believe that the latter option is better, because changing the political system seems too difficult. In contrast, Jonas (1985)<sup>12</sup> critically examined the idea of implementing a temporary Marxist-type tyranny, superintended by a well-informed and benevolent elite, to safeguard humanity from universal disaster, precisely because he thought that capitalist liberal democracies were unable to deal with this complex problem.

Arguably, the utopian ideal and its inherent principle of equality could be helpful tools in resolving the great dangers facing humankind. People in liberal democracies are less likely to accept “[...] the lowering of their living standards, and to endure austerities and other hardships during this long and difficult transition period” (Gordon 2014, 199). Moreover, as Jonas observes, politicians in liberal democracies fear not being re-elected if they support the tough changes necessary to safeguard humanity from extinction.<sup>13</sup> The Marxist enthusiasm for a classless society that adheres to the ideals of freedom, equality and fraternity (i.e. acknowledging each person as a so-called in-group member), is in stark contrast to the non-Marxist liberal democracies in which individuals compete with other members of society for benefits. However, Jonas eventually rejects his intriguing thought experiment of a refined Marxism that is no longer “[...] the bringer of consumption” but “the preventer of disaster”, together with the idea of the new human being (Gordon 2014).

One might suggest that the best approach would be to combine both options, i.e. to reshape the political system *and* bioenhance human beings

morally. The two options are not necessarily mutually exclusive, but could become conjoined twins in the struggle to make the world better and safer. Indeed, a refined form of Marxism and compulsory moral enhancement seem mutually supportive. In the past, opponents of Marxism have claimed that the Marxist idea of a classless society is fallacious precisely because human deficiencies undermine our ability to achieve the admittedly honourable goals of freedom, equality and fraternity. But what if it is possible to enhance the nature of human beings morally so that they could withstand the immoral impulses that prevent them from fully exercising their moral nature?

It seems that the classical Marxist ideas about the new human being and the classless society gain a new and reinvigorated place in the debate over moral enhancement. The supreme moral agent, i.e. the morally enhanced human being, could be able to participate not only in saving humanity from extinction, but also in reshaping social relations among people as well as with animals and nature. Against this background, Jonas's call "[...] to act so that the effects of one's actions are compatible with the permanence of genuine life" (1985, 11) could be a viable maxim for the supreme moral agents.

*Deepening the Understanding of the Relation between Compulsory Moral Enhancement, Refined Marxism, and the New Human Being*

Persson and Savulescu (2012a), as noted above, expressed a preference for pursuing moral enhancement rather than trying to change the political system of liberal democracies. This article, however, suggests changing the political system as well by aiming to implement a refined global Marxism that would better support the goals of moral enhancement. Changing the political system would offer a significant advantage in this effort, precisely because one needs a well-organized political administration and logistics to enforce moral enhancement globally, whether it is done either secretly or openly.

It has been argued that the morally enhanced human being is tantamount to the so-called new human being described by Marxism. In Marxist theory, only the new human being can achieve the Marxist goals of freedom, equality and fraternity by establishing the classless society in which people live according to their needs and capabilities and are concerned for the lives of all persons.<sup>14</sup> Needless to say, this idea has not been successfully put into practice yet, because we simply are not the new human beings needed to carry out the task. However, morally enhanced human beings might well be able to pull it off. Protagonists of moral enhancement claim that it will be possible to make human beings less egoistic and aggressive, to improve social relations with all fellow human beings (not only in-group members), to generally promote pro-social behaviour, to make people avoid grossly immoral actions, and to still uphold the idea of pluralism. This is a worthwhile project, but one rife with difficulties. The difficult transition period during which people might question the necessity of moral enhancement to avoid universal disaster might be alleviated as more and more people become enhanced. The growing recognition of the need to morally enhance humanity would support the general movement towards refined Marxism as a means to save and improve human society.

Some people might object that the moral enhancement programme could also be organized by a non-Marxist tyranny and hence it is not necessary to adhere to the idea of a refined Marxism in the first place. This objection, however, overlooks Jonas's (1985) observation that the biggest advantage of Marxism is the political enthusiasm of the people striving for freedom, equality and fraternity. The hardships that may occur during the transition period cannot be adequately compensated by the political system of capitalist-liberal democracies, as Jonas has rightly argued. In that respect, refined Marxism may be better able to support the idea of compulsory moral enhancement, but this presupposes the global political acceptability of refined Marxism to the people. Given the dire history of attempts to introduce Marxism as a political regime, one

could reasonably consider the whole approach infeasible. Even though merging moral enhancement with politics provides an interesting thought experiment, it nonetheless amounts to defending an already controversial doctrine (compulsory moral enhancement) by appealing to an even more controversial political doctrine of refined Marxism. Thus, despite my intellectual attraction to the concept, I must acknowledge with Savulescu and Persson that changing a political system to support the idea of obligatory moral enhancement is not practically achievable.<sup>15</sup>

Rakic (2013) claimed that we should give up the survival-at-any-cost bias and live with the possible consequences of our deeds – that is, we should live with the possibility that we will become extinct through our own immoral behaviour – if the alternative is to undermine human freedom, at least to some extent, by making moral enhancement compulsory. Although I find the idea of achieving a morally enhanced world by means of biotechnology enticing, I am also concerned that we might be unable to achieve the high standards required by the project. It would be necessary to track failures and implement systematic threshold reviews so that one could assess at an early stage whether anything was going wrong. If moral enhancement is in humanity's best interest, we should take the appropriate steps to ensure that human beings will survive and to promote moral actions that make life good for all living beings and for nature, as long as the requisite technology is available and safe.

### VIII. CONCLUSION

The present contribution has defended the claim that one should make moral enhancement obligatory in order to make the world, morally speaking, a much better and safer place. This is a reasonable step in the face of the threats to humanity's survival if it is available, safe and easy to administer. Compulsory administration is preferable to voluntary enhancement only of those who are already (before their enhancement) willing to contribute their fair share towards a better world. I explored



the benefits of linking moral enhancement to refined Marxism so that one could make use of the advantages of this political system, including a well-organized administration and logistics, to change the world and achieve a morally enhanced, classless society, but I ultimately rejected this option due to its implementation problems.

Behaviour that harms other people and animals on purpose and recklessly harvests nature for profit in such a way that it will soon become no longer able to sustain the vital needs of humanity cannot continue. Whether moral enhancement actually jeopardizes human freedom must be closely evaluated “[...] when safe and effective techniques of moral bioenhancement have been developed” (Persson and Savulescu 2013b, 1). Limitations on human freedom might indeed be justified in certain particular cases, and therefore we should continue to pursue the debate regarding the circumstances under which we are willing to prefer safety over freedom and vice versa.<sup>16</sup>

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## NOTES

1. One might object that Savulescu and Persson are, in general, not concerned primarily with concrete actions – apart from their example of terrorism – but with ordinary moral failures that create disasters by virtue of an unrestrained use of modern technology (e.g. Persson and Savulescu 2012a). This impression would be inaccurate, however, since they clearly state in *Moral Enhancement, Freedom, and the God Machine* (2012b) that the God machine intervenes "[...] in human action to prevent great harm, injustice or other deeply immoral behaviour from occurring" and stress that people are still free to be moral but admittedly unfree to perform "grossly immoral acts, like killing or raping" (2012b, 10-11). I take this as an indication that their general idea of moral enhancement also concerns concrete immoral acts.

2. Rakic (2013, 2) provides a brief but instructive discussion of Harris's position and its difficulties.

3. One might have the impression, with Rakic (2013, 2-3), that Persson and Savulescu no longer propose compulsory moral bioenhancement in their book *Unfit for the Future* (2012a). In their brief response to Rakic, however, Persson and Savulescu (2013b) claim that they still adhere to this view. They state that because "[...] research into moral bioenhancement is still in its infancy [...] we do not raise the issue of whether moral bioenhancement should be compulsory or voluntary in that book" (2013b, 1). I see no reason why they should no longer adhere to their previous position that moral bioenhancement should be made compulsory if it can be made safe and effective in the future (Persson and Savulescu, 2008, 174). My position is additionally substantiated by a discussion between Savulescu, Harris, and Rakic on cognitive and moral enhancement at the international conference *Enhancement: Cognitive, Moral and Mood* in Belgrade (2013) where Savulescu justified his view that one should make moral enhancement compulsory if it is safe and proven to be effective ([www.vimeo.com/67633548](http://www.vimeo.com/67633548) [accessed December 22, 2015]). Furthermore, even if Savulescu and Persson have changed their view, or if they are more cautious in adopting a more gradual view with respect to *compulsory* moral enhancement (as one anonymous referee suggests, against my particular reading of them as wanting to make moral bioenhancement obligatory once it is safe and easy to administer), that fact would not affect the substantive discussion of possible approaches to obligatory moral enhancement presented here.

4. The pagination of this article refers to the manuscript available in PMC, dated August 30, 2012.

5. I thank the two anonymous reviewers for directing my attention to these two objections in the context of the thought experiment of the God Machine.

6. “The real concern about moral enhancement is – to borrow a phrase made famous in another context by John Rawls – ‘political not metaphysical’. That is, the threat posed to freedom by biomedical manipulation of behaviour and/or motivations arises out of the prospect that the ‘enhancers’ will be wielding power over the ‘enhanced’” (Sparrow 2014a, 24).

7. This substantial difference really concerns the basic idea that ‘knowing the right thing to do’ might refer to all moral situations, whereas ‘avoiding immoral actions’ is limited to grossly immoral conduct in the first place. In this article I favour the latter view.

8. One anonymous referee objects that even though we do accept the practically wise person “as free and responsible despite her inability to commit immoral actions”, we do so mainly because she is at least partially responsible “for making herself this way”. This, however, is different in the case of people who are morally enhanced against their will and hence are not responsible for becoming this or that person. Therefore, how the discussion of the *phronimos* would fit into this context seems problematic. There are two responses to this concern. First, from a consequentialist perspective, it matters only that the results are morally better than before, regardless of their particular origin. Second, even if the *phronimos* is partially responsible for making herself this way (i.e. she is unable to commit immoral actions by virtue of her own decision), one cannot rule out the possibility that the person who has initially been forced not to commit immoral actions will, at some future point, start to develop a moral disposition – with the support of a morality pill, for example – that enables her to resist committing immoral actions without being permanently restrained by external causes. In that scenario, the morality pill only supports the person in the beginning by helping to properly develop her moral character and reasoning until she can make her own decisions. Whether a morality pill, however, would serve as a temporary solution until the person is *morally healed* remains to be seen. In any case, one cannot rule out this possibility from the start. Against this background, one could view the morality pill as analogous to moral education. Moral education also forces young children and teenagers, initially, to comply with certain moral standards by sanctioning their immoral behaviour (e.g. punishing them if they kill or torture animals for fun) in order to support their development of proper moral character and reasoning so that they will independently avoid immoral actions – and hopefully promote morally good decisions – in their later lives.

9. Here I agree with Douglas (2008, 239-240), who claims that immoral impulses limit the freedom to autonomously exercise the moral self, whereas moral enhancement increases that freedom.

10. Of course, the effort to save humanity presupposes that humanity should rather be than not be. The idea that it would not be bad at all if humanity vanished into thin air, or even that we should welcome this event, has been proposed by David Benatar: “Each one of us was harmed by being brought into existence. That harm is not negligible, because the quality of even the best lives is very bad – and considerably worse than most people recognize it to be. Although it is obviously too late to prevent our own existence, it is not too late to prevent the existence of future possible people. Creating new people is thus morally problematic” (2006, 8). His book has been critically discussed in a number of articles in a special issue of the *South African Journal of Philosophy* on “Contemporary Anti-Natalism” (2012). Unfortunately, I cannot discuss his claim here, but I will assume, for the sake of argument, that it is in general better for humanity to exist than not exist.

11. One might fear, as one anonymous referee argues, that this line of reasoning is undermined because, if rights must be violated for a policy to be implemented effectively, that would not constitute a reason to implement the policy. Of course, that statement would be true if taken out of the present context, but the punch line rather is that, *if we already agree* that one should reduce the risk of terrorist attacks, prevent climate change, and generally make people unable to commit grossly immoral acts, then one must make moral enhancement universal for it to be effective. Hence, the policy of making moral enhancement obligatory is based on the previous reasoning of our agreement to avoid grossly immoral actions in society.

12. Jonas (1985) was among the very first to warn of the possibility of a global disaster as an unintended consequence of ever-increasing scientific and technological development, along with the potential negative impact of such a disaster for humanity's survival.

13. For this reason, Jonas proposed treating the plan as a state secret. In this respect, he argues that it might be necessary to adhere to Plato's concept of the noble lie in order to avoid a public outcry, because sometimes the truth might be intolerable to the public and even dangerous to the survival of the state (or, in this case, to all humanity).

14. The relation between Marxism and protection of nature is problematic and must be reconsidered in order not to endanger nature in pursuit of human goals. Therefore, refined Marxism should be not the "bringer of consumption" but the "preventer of disaster", as Jonas repeatedly claims. This could be done if refined Marxism abandons "[...] the utopian goal – the ultimate material abundance of a classless communist society in which every person lives according to his or her needs – by restraining its exploitative and reckless use of modern technology regarding nature" (Gordon 2014, 187).

15. Likewise, Sparrow argues, "When it comes to thinking about the implementation of any real-world program of moral enhancement, then, the political issues over-determine the ethical questions. Without an educated, empowered, and rights-respecting citizenry, moral enhancement will be too dangerous to attempt" (2014a, 30).

16. This paper is based on two previous talks that I delivered at the University of Bonn in Germany and at the Vytautas Magnus University in Kaunas, Lithuania. I would like to thank Christoph Horn and his students for their valuable comments in Bonn, and Viktoras Bachmetjevas and the participating colleagues for their feedback in Kaunas. Since then, I have worked further to develop my position. I also thank the two anonymous reviewers who helped me to refine and strengthen my arguments.