

Challenges for Moral Enhancement: A Research Proposal

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Abstract:

Throughout history, determining the nature of morality and promoting philosophical ideals of moral behavior have been central concerns in human societies. These concerns have involved not only trying to determine what is good and right, but also trying to determine how to ensure people will in fact be good and act rightly; and while the former has received a great amount of philosophical attention, the latter has – until recently – been somewhat overlooked. The attention that has been given to the question of how to inculcate values has focused on traditional methods such as education, (dis)incentives and social pressure. In my thesis, however, I intend to address new scientific developments that will, in the near future, enable us influence individuals' moral dispositions and behavior through biomedical interventions, particularly in the form of chemical or, more speculatively, genetic manipulation. I plan to investigate why these forms of moral enhancement face unique challenges not found in other forms of enhancement such as health or cognition and will focus in particular on the issue of moral disagreement.

Moral disagreement problematizes moral enhancement in two ways: the fact of moral disagreement casts some doubt on the possibility of moral enhancement, and the desirability of moral disagreement may make moral enhancement undesirable. I intend to develop arguments and show that the problem of moral disagreement can be, to a degree, sidestepped by enhancing moral dispositions indirectly rather than directly, through what might be termed 'rationality enhancement.' Increasing the probability that people will think about moral problems in a considered and unbiased fashion will engender more reliable and justifiable moral opinions and dispositions. This, in turn, can help bring about a more prosperous, fair and ethical future for humanity.

Outline:

My thesis will begin with a discussion of the definition of moral enhancement, providing an overview of the forms of interventions that are available now or will likely be available in the near future. I go on to explore the moral considerations of moral enhancement by turning to the issue of disagreement and explain the challenges it presents to biomedical moral enhancement. I then propose a partial resolution: we can perform moral enhancement indirectly by enhancing individual rationality.

The first problem for moral enhancement is that moral disagreement is desirable and could be subverted by moral enhancement. Consider: by altering our very moral instincts and notions, we will inevitably change our ideas about what actions and dispositions are morally right and proper – presumably including our ideas about moral enhancements. Immediately, the problem of self-validating cycles arises: the proponent of moral enhancement presumably believes that moral enhancement is good and favors enhancing people such that they have the correct moral beliefs and/or do the right thing. Thus, it would be a moral enhancement to make individuals more strongly believe moral enhancement is desirable and/or more likely to support and carry out moral enhancement on others (or even, to make individuals more strongly favor theories or approaches that imply the acceptability/desirability of moral enhancement). The result is a form of groupthink: any group that favors moral enhancement will promote instinctual beliefs in moral enhancement, leading that group to even more strongly favor moral enhancement.

Yet this result is inimical to open inquiry and the ideal of truly reflective moral reasoning. Indeed, a similar problem emerges in other areas: we do not want a morally stagnant and unified society; disagreement over substantive issues is important and helps ensure that potentially flawed moral ideas are not simply accepted by everyone outright but subject to challenge and revision.

The second problem is that moral disagreement makes the possibility of moral enhancement dubious. There is, at present, a sort of intractable pluralism that pervades moral thought. Philosophers vigorously disagree about what the right moral principles are – competing theories include deontology, consequentialism, virtue ethics and a wide variety of alterations and combinations of those. In addition, there is serious disagreement about the proper moral judgments in a wide range of cases, including abortion, euthanasia, stem cell research and enhancement itself, in the area of bioethics alone. Presumably, moral enhancements will alter the way we think about those problems. This indicates it will often be extremely controversial which interventions count as ‘enhancements’ at all; we may thus want to refrain from performing any moral ‘enhancements’ that affect judgments of such controversies, as it would not be clear whether the enhancements are really improving people’s morality at all. Indeed, when we consider specific interventions that currently manipulate moral judgment and behavior, disagreement about such moral judgments and behavior make it very controversial whether they actually make people more or less moral. We would have to resolve millennia-old disputes in moral philosophy before we could be confident in being able to improve people’s morals through biomedical interventions – but the possibility of such resolution is, in the near term, dim to say the least.

While it may be hopeless to try and identify particular traits or dispositions that are uncontroversially moral as well as desirable to enhance via biomedical interventions, it is much more plausible to identify traits or dispositions that uncontroversially promote moral traits and dispositions. Various facets of rationality, construed broadly and not limited to self-interested concerns, fit this requirement. While we might disagree about what it is to be moral, we can agree that moral ideas should be coherent, revisable based on relevant evidence and argument, not influenced by irrelevant factors, and so on. We can also generally agree that moral *akrasia* (when someone does not act on what they take to be sufficient moral reason for action) is problematic and to be avoided. By promoting interventions that improve people along these dimensions of rationality, we can avoid substantive moral disputes. And, as rationality is itself integral to our ability to disagree with and challenge one another, enhancing rationality will not run afoul of the desirability of disagreement. Moreover, enhancing rationality should lead to more reliable and justified moral opinions and dispositions among people – they should be more likely to do and think the right thing.

The benefits of having a society composed of more moral people should be obvious, and hardly need to be defended. The arguments above are meant to put pressure on the notion that biomedical interventions directly manipulating people’s moral attitudes and behavior is a permissible means that can accomplish the goal of a more moral society. We should not give up on the possibility of moral enhancement through biomedical interventions, however; focusing on indirect enhancement via improving rationality avoids such concerns while nevertheless genuinely improving people’s moral dispositions and actions. The upshot of this analysis is that moral enhancement is both possible and desirable, so long as it is appropriately focused.