

# Introduction: 15 years of discussion on moral enhancement

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## 1. *For and against moral enhancement*

Improvement in knowledge of the neurobiological bases of behavioural disposition with moral relevance have stimulated ethical reflection on the opportunity to employ biotechnological devices and resources to improve human morality (Clarke *et al.* 2016). Discussion on biotechnological moral enhancement, as a separated issue from that of biotechnological cognitive human enhancement, has started after the publication of two seminal articles in 2008: “The Perils of Cognitive Enhancement and the Urgent Imperative to Enhance the Moral Character of Humanity” written by Ingmar Persson and Julian Savulescu, and “Moral Enhancement” written by Thomas Douglas.

Since that moment, bioethical debate on this topic has been divided in two separate fields: anti-moral-enhancement views, which consider the attempt of morally enhancing human beings as immoral, and pro-moral-enhancement views, which consider the attempt of morally enhancing human beings as moral. In both sides there are more radical and less radical views.

Radical anti-moral-enhancement views refuse any kind of moral enhancement as well as any kind of cognitive enhancement aimed to improve agent’s knowledge and rationality. According to such a bio-conservative view, any attempt to enhance human nature beyond its normal biology is claimed to be perfectionist and dehumanizing. Examples are Michael Sandel (2007) or Leon Kass (2008). On the other hand, moderate anti-moral-enhancement views accept cognitive enhancement as a means to increase human capacity of reasoning and acting but refuse moral enhancement. We are morally justified to enhance human beings by improving their cognitive abilities, but not by intervening on their moral motivations. As John Harris states, quoting Milton’s “Paradise Lost”, human beings ought to remain “free to fall”, free to do immoral things: “there are substantial issues of liberty [...] which could conceivably be threatened by any measures that make the freedom to do immoral things impossible, rather than simply making the doing of them

wrong and giving us moral, legal, and prudential reasons to refrain” (Harris 2016: 64).

On the contrary, radical pro-moral-enhancement views consider moral enhancement morally obligatory: an action that the agent ought to perform. An example is Persson&Savulescu (2012, 2: “we shall contend that in order for the majority of citizens of liberal democracies to be willing to go along with constraints on their extravagant consumption, their moral motivation must be enhanced so that they pay more heed to the interest of future generations and non-human animals”. On the other hand, moderate pro-moral-enhancement views consider moral enhancement as merely morally permitted: an action that the agent is free to perform or not to perform. An example is Douglas (2008: 233): “I will tentatively argue that it would sometimes be morally permissible for people to biomedically mitigate their counter-moral emotions”.

## 2. *Varieties of moral enhancement*

Yet, the picture of pro-moral-enhancement positions arisen the last 15 years is much more complex. Indeed, there are many kinds of moral enhancement, and all these kinds may be accompanied by different moral evaluations.

Firstly, moral enhancement can be direct or indirect. Properly, what is at issue in the debate is not indirect moral enhancement (the common way to slowly improve human moral motivations through education, culture, examples and so on: these traditional enhancers are usually considered morally right), but only direct moral enhancement, the new possibilities of fast improving human moral motivations using biotechnologies (mental drugs, genetic engineering and so on: the new moral enhancers), which is much more controversial.

Secondly, moral enhancement can be negative or positive. Negative, if morally enhancing human beings is directed to eradicate anti-social motivations, connected to emotions like anger, hate, aggressivity etc. (Douglas 2008; 2013 are an example of this kind of moral enhancement). Positive, if morally enhancing human beings is directed to enforce pro-social motivation, connected to attitudes like altruism, sympathy, sense of justice (Persson *et al.* 2008; 2012 are an example of this kind of moral enhancement). Thirdly, moral enhancement can be voluntary or involuntary, according to whether a person wants or does not want to be morally enhanced. But it can also be compulsory, because performed against the person’s will.

All these distinctions are enough to clarify why such a matter can be considered a very contentious problem. But the problem seems to be even more contentious when we add other distinctions useful to complete the picture. Moral enhancement can be internal or external, according to whether it is di-

rected to modify agent's moral mental states (attitudes, emotions, motivations and so on), or it is directed to create external conditions that can affect agent's moral decisions (because of technological devices, artificial intelligence and so on). Moreover, moral enhancement can be procedural or substantive, according to whether it regards the mental process of elaborating moral decisions or the very content of these decisions: how individuals arrive at deciding to do the good, or what individuals endorse to be good. Finally, moral enhancement can be specific or general, depending on whether it is intended to be confined to a particular set of people (violent people, psychopaths, murderers and so on) or to be directed toward every people: to all the human beings.

### 3. *The articles in the Focus*

The elaboration of such a picture and these latter distinctions are helpful to introduce the articles of our focus. Matteo Galletti's article, "Internal and External Moral Enhancements: The Ethical Parity Principle and the Case for a Prioritization", separates the moral evaluation of internal and external enhancement, giving priority to the internal one, and defends this position from the critique made by Neil Levy, who has endorsed the so-called Ethical Parity Principle between internal and external enhancement. In "Creating Capabilities to be Better", Francesca Guma endorses a kind of procedural moral enhancement directed to improve human free-will, intended, in the light of a distinction originally posed by J.L. Austin's, as opportunity and capacity to will otherwise. Both the articles deal with a kind of general moral enhancement, potentially directed toward every human being.

On the other hand, in "Public Reason and Biotechnological Moral Enhancement of Criminal Offenders", Elvio Baccarini defends a kind of specific moral enhancement directed to criminal offenders, based on a Rawlsian method of public reason. Such a method could justify the legitimacy of the proposal to use biotechnology to perform a moral enhancement of people who have committed serious crimes and represent a persistent danger to society. According to Baccarini, such a compulsory moral enhancement against the agent's will could be legitimate, but it must be publicly justified by reasonable agents.

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