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Voluntary Moral Bioenhancement Is a Solution to Sparrow's Concerns

Vojin Rakić, University of Belgrade

In "Egalitarianism and Moral Bioenhancement" Rob Sparrow (2014) offers four arguments against moral bioenhancement. His first is that a society-wide program of biotechnological interventions of the sort required to achieve the purported objective of moral bioenhancement would necessarily implicate the state in what Sparrow calls a "controversial moral perfectionism." I argue against this position. His three additional arguments against moral bioenhancement I would concur with, under certain conditions, but since a full elaboration of my position would exceed the format of this commentary, I limit myself to commenting on the first argument, which I (and apparently Sparrow) consider the most important objection to moral bioenhancement.

Sparrow's first argument is valid only under the condition that it applies to compulsory moral bioenhancement. Sparrow argues that relying on voluntary moral bioenhancement to prevent catastrophic climate change (and presumably other things that Persson and Savulescu call "ultimate harm," which Sparrow does not mention here¹) would presume the sense of social solidarity that it is expected to bring about. Consequently, if we wish to make sure that everyone has the social solidarity required to guarantee that they do their bit to prevent catastrophic climate change (and ultimate harm in general) we would need to make moral bioenhancement compulsory. Sparrow observes that Persson and Savulescu concede this (Persson and Savulescu 2008, 174). I have argued elsewhere against compulsory moral enhancement and the position Persson and Savulescu took on it (e.g., Rakić 2013), although it should be noted that in their most recent writings Persson and Savulescu leave open the question of whether moral bioenhancement ought to be voluntary or compulsory (Persson and Savulescu 2012). Unfortunately, Sparrow does not note this development in Persson and Savulescu's position.

As Sparrow's concerns raised in his first argument apply to compulsory moral bioenhancement only, my solution to them is *voluntary* moral bioenhancement. One of its implications is that the state would not be implicated in a "controversial moral perfectionism." If the possibility of moral bioenhancement is something that is left to us to decide freely about, there is no moral perfectionism imposed on us by the state.

We have the following options: first, not to undergo moral bioenhancement at all; second, to opt for voluntar-

ily moral bioenhancement; third, to put the state in charge, making moral bioenhancement compulsory. The first possibility is the one favored by Sparrow. But if ultimate harm on the one hand, and moral bioenhancement on the other, are realistic prospects, it is reasonable to favor either the second or the third possibility. Sparrow neither argues that ultimate harm is unlikely, nor does he offer cogent evidence showing that moral bioenhancement is impossible, or even improbable. Hence, we are left with the second and third options: voluntary moral bioenhancement or compulsory moral bioenhancement. Sparrow shows why the third possibility implicates the state in an inappropriate manner. But the second he does not discuss, and it is precisely this alternative that can successfully address his concerns (Rakić 2013).

The concept of voluntary moral enhancement, however, raises a number of difficulties. Two of them are, I think, the most serious ones. One is highlighted by Persson and Savulescu themselves in their reply to my 2013 article to which Sparrow refers (see Persson and Savulescu 2013). The other is an argument I would like to raise myself here against voluntary moral enhancement. I briefly dispute both arguments, showing that voluntary moral enhancement appears to be the best choice when compared to its alternatives of compulsory moral bioenhancement or no bioenhancement at all.

Persson and Savulescu (2013) say that our power to act of our own free will is a matter of degree. Consequently, the voluntariness of moral enhancement is a matter of degree. Most of us don't dispute that some limitations on our freedom ought to be imposed, and that some things ought to be made mandatory by the state (e.g., that citizens should pay taxes). Moreover, not all limitations to our freedom are bad. A feeling of disgust that kicks in early in our lives protects us from certain diseases, preventing us, for instance, from freely putting excrement in our mouths (Persson and Savulescu 2013). Why then, argue Persson and Savulescu, should we be averse to making moral bioenhancement obligatory?

Another problem with voluntary moral enhancement is the following: If not state coercion, what else will motivate us to undergo moral bioenhancement? Would not the increased level of empathy associated with moral bioenhancement make us underdogs in the competitive societies we live in?

1. I concur with the definition of "ultimate harm" as an event or series of events that makes worthwhile life on Earth forever impossible (see Persson and Savulescu 2013).

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The following are my answers (1) to Persson and Savulescu's position that the voluntariness of moral enhancement is a matter of degree and (2) to my own question about what it is, other than coercion, that can motivate us to undergo moral bioenhancement.

(1) Is the possession or not of a free will a matter of degree? A free will is a precondition of us consciously behaving morally. It cannot be said that we have laudable moral dispositions if we act morally because someone or something else (e.g., the state) has imposed moral behavior on us. To make it compulsory for us to undergo moral enhancement would deprive us of a central condition of our humanness: to freely decide whether we will act morally or not, and whether to undergo moral enhancement by biotechnological intervention (see Rakić 2013). This requirement for free will is not something on the same footing as a legal or moral obligation to pay taxes, or having a feeling of disgust that protects us from freely doing things that might be hazardous to our health. Such restrictions on our freedom we can impose on ourselves to a certain extent. On the other hand, we cannot be deprived of our free will "to some degree."

(2) If not coercion, what is it that could motivate us to undergo moral bioenhancement? First is our fear of humanity's (self-)annihilation, or even a milder form of ultimate harm. If we believe, as do Persson and Savulescu, that moral bioenhancement will reduce the chances of such a scenario, we might agree to undergo moral bioenhancement in order to give an example to others of how to act. There is of course the danger that those who decide not to undergo moral bioenhancement will free-ride on the moral advances of others, but that is a situation that is already currently also common. Take the case of charity. The fact that a significant number of citizens of a country do not wish to set aside a part of their income for humanitarian aid does not mean that humanitarian aid that is being collected does not help those in need of it. Similarly, the possibility that most people might not wish to undergo moral bioenhancement does not mean that those who do undergo it will not play an important role in humanity avoiding ultimate harm.

Let it also be noted that traditional cognitive enhancement might be useful to moral bioenhancement in this respect. If we are sufficiently informed and educated, we might very well be better prepared to understand the dangers of ultimate harm and the need for moral bioenhancement to confront them.

Second, the state can do something other than making moral bioenhancement compulsory. It can provide advantages of opportunity to the morally bioenhanced: tax reductions, schooling allowances for their children, retirement benefits, affirmative action policies that favor them. It can offer the morally bioenhanced various positive incentives,

rather than merely guaranteeing equality of opportunity (for this argument, see Rakić 2012, 123).²

SUMMARY

Voluntary moral bioenhancement is a conception that contains certain difficulties, but it appears that their magnitude is less than those of the alternatives of compulsory moral bioenhancement or no bioenhancement at all. Sparrow's argument is a persuasive indictment of compulsory moral bioenhancement and its implication of the state in prescribing a certain type of moral behavior. On the other hand, if we opt against any type of moral bioenhancement, we will not reduce the danger of humanity's self-annihilation or milder forms of ultimate harm (e.g., catastrophic climate change). Hence, voluntary moral enhancement might very well be the best alternative of those available to us. ■

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2. A difficulty with this suggestion is that morally unenhanced citizens might not be inclined to vote for a government that is morally wise enough to provide them with these external stimuli to undergo moral bioenhancement. A discussion of possible solutions to this difficulty is beyond the scope of this commentary.