

Limits and Possibilities of Moral Enhancement

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Abstract: *How to be Good* is not a book against moral enhancement, but a book against a specific form of moral enhancement that is moral bio-enhancement. However, *How to be Good* is also a book in favour of another specific form: cognitive enhancement which is, or at least in certain cases can also be, a form of moral enhancement. This paper discuss the limits and possibilities of Moral Enhancement in Harris' perspective.

Keywords: Moral enhancement, Cognitive enhancement, Pluralism.

First of all I would like to stress that *How to be Good* is not a book against moral enhancement, but a book against a *specific* form of moral enhancement that is moral bio-enhancement. However, *How to be Good* is also a book in favour of another specific form: cognitive enhancement which is, or at least in certain cases can also be a form of moral enhancement¹.

Harris offers wide ranging criticism of moral bio-enhancement. I shall not dwell on every one but just list them: 1. It is ineffective (it's the case of aversion); 2. It destroys moral responsibility; and 3. It limits human liberty.

The main issue the book highlights is the relationship between the nature of morality and the *bios*. According to Harris, moral responsibility implies the freedom to act in one way or another, "to stand or to fall" using Milton's famous expression. Moral bio-enhancement does not destroy a moral experience by stopping reasoning, but by hindering the possibility of acting in different ways and thus turning freedom into an illusion. Moral bio-enhancement separates thoughts and actions, limiting the possibility of thoughts becoming actions. Harris wrote that "I am talking about freedom, not about the state of the soul of the agent". And again: "Moral responsibility is responsibility for the actions, the doings, the effects that are part of our moral decision making. Agents are quintessentially actors; to be an agent in to be capable of action. Without agency in this sense, decision making is [...] literally without issue"². This is why cognitive enhancement can partly be a form of moral enhancement, while bio-enhancement destroys moral experience.

Harris's thesis and his objections to the notion of moral bio-enhancement can be shared, however I do not believe them to be the most effective. In the pages that follow I will try and explain why.

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It is not clear whether Harris is defending an ideal of rationality or of reasonableness when he refers to the role of reason in moral life. I believe rationality implies the possibility of establishing a founded ideal of perfection which moral life has to adapt to. Furthermore, it implies the idea of the subject's perfect transparency of the self and of the world: this is the meaning which one might attribute to the expression "all things considered". In this perspective moral choices mean the elimination of the emotional and sentimental side of the subject itself, given that the said subject becomes ethically uninfluent, except as an obstacle to overcome in the achievement of good. Anyone favouring such an ideal of rationality and who believes, as Harris appears to, that there is an actual consensus on the nature of good and evil and that it is possible to identify the signs of an actual moral progress in the history of humanity, then fails to understand why one should try and stop evil people or groups of people from acting in the wrong manner. On the opposite, reasonableness implies the idea that feelings, emotions and beliefs are the raw nourishment of moral life and that reason is called to enlighten and rationalise in a reflexive manner, albeit being aware of not being able to eliminate them altogether. Reasonableness allows for perfecting as an aim, but not moral perfecting: they refuse all ideals of a metaphysical nature and is positioned at an inbetween level between chaotic multiformity of the empirical sphere and the aseptical transparency of the rational sphere. Anyone defending an ideal or moral reasonableness has to acknowledge that reasoning and moral actions are *always* biologically conditioned. This is why it would appear to be inappropriate to interpret bio-enhancement as a mechanism hindering choice rather than an additional conditioning, an addition to the ones we normally deal with when making a moral choice. As a result Harris's theses seem to be characterised by the same fallacy as Jürgen Habermas's, that is overestimating the conditioning that intentional and theological modifications of the *bios* would have on our freedom in making moral decisions³. A sort of biological, or even genetic determinism which goes against scientific evidence. According to Harris moral bio-enhancement would lead to the establishment of a world with people who are unable to make mistakes. More modestly I believe that the theoretical underpinnings of moral bio-enhancement is that of creating a society where it would be more difficult or even impossible to make socially dangerous choices.

This is why I believe Micahel Sandel more effective in this case⁴. Sandel writes about an anthropological dimension which is constitutive of human actions: these are contingency and finiteness which Sandel refers to as the dimension of gift. Personally I prefer to avoid the definition gift and have opted for the more neutral definition of contingency or limitedness from an axiological standpoint. The moral as well as the educational spheres presume a permanent un-eliminable tension between planning and being passive – a limited dimension which one has to rethink in a reflexive manner. Moral bio-enhancement would become a real threat only if and when techniques are so sophisticated as to destroy the constitutive dimension of human ethical and spiritual existence as we know it.

Personally I believe there are other, more radical objections to the theoretical positions of moral bio-enhancement.

I would like to draw attention to the possibility of clearly establishing an ideal of what is morally perfect (and what moral enhancement is). While it is possible to define

what cognitive improvement or enhancement is, I don't feel one can identify moral enhancement as accurately.

Secondly, my impression is that *akrasia* or *acrasia*, that is a weak will, is currently not the most urgent problem in our societies; the most pressing issue is the conflict between moral reasons and opposed visions of what is good. Such a conflict is based on different visions of what humans are and is more of an anthropological matter than a practical (political or juridical) one. I am specifically referring to positions such as Tr. Engelhardt jr's and his idea of the need to correctly acknowledge the pluralism of our present day societies. If one accepts such a notion, then one admits that the most urgent ethical disputes are not the ones arising in a culturally homogenous place where there are rules to solve moral controversies, an authority and laws to resolve conflict. The real moral controversies of our day and age refer to the moral dissent which divides moral strangers holding opposing anthropological, cultural and religious visions. The indiscriminate distribution of serotonin and oxytocin might possibly inhibit socially deviant behaviour, reduce crime and guarantee greater safety in society: however I wonder whether it would really impact on the choices – including the aggressive and violent ones – which are the result of actual diverging moral views.

The entire discussion bears the risk of equating moral dissent to common crime, since the effect of bio-enhancement would be that of inhibiting violent behaviour without necessarily changing the moral – or according to others the morally misguided – points of view which underpin and inform such behaviour. The opposition against bio-enhancement may not be a defence of morality as such, but rather the defence of pluralism which should led us to relinquish the idea of moral enhancement itself.

Notes

¹ Harris, 2016, p. 14: “This is one important reason why strategies which involve *engineering, compelling, programming* moral improvement, rather than strategies that simply educating, training or encouraging it may be missing an important point”, and also “The most obvious countermeasure to false beliefs and prejudices is a combination of rationality and education possibly assisted by various other forms of cognitive enhancement, in addition to education and logic”.

² Harris, 2016, p. 94.

³ Habermas, 2001.

⁴ Sandel, 2009.

References

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