

## **A Sketch on Moral Enhancement and the Value of Human Fragility**

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### **Abstract**

This brief report explores the concept of moral enhancement, particularly the critiques surrounding its feasibility and ethical implications. Moral enhancement refers to interventions aimed at improving individuals' moral functioning, often through biomedical means such as pharmacological or genetic interventions. The report examines major criticisms of this proposal, including concerns about the loss of human freedom, the oversimplification of moral complexity, and the potential dangers of moral perfectionism. It argues that the perspective of human fragility or vulnerability offers a crucial critique, highlighting how fragility is central to the layered nature of human existence. The report concludes that eliminating fragility in the pursuit of an "optimized" moral state could strip away the richness of human experience and lead to a mechanized, less meaningful existence.

*Keywords:* human enhancement, biotechnologies, bioethics, fragility

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## Introduction

Since the 2008 papers by Persson & Savulescu and Douglas, moral enhancement has become a central theme in applied ethics and bioethics. The term “moral enhancement” refers to the deliberate modification of individuals' behavior and dispositions in order to make them “more moral.” While Persson & Savulescu primarily consider the use of pharmacological means, they also suggest that, in the future, technologies such as neural implants and genetic engineering might enable more precise adjustments to an individual's moral capacities (Persson & Savulescu, 2008, p. 172). Moreover, Persson & Savulescu and Douglas agree that, although to varying degrees, moral enhancement should be applied to all people. The motivation behind this argument is a sense of urgency regarding the rapid development of cognitive enhancement in modern times. That is, many of our moral tendencies were imprinted in the brain during the evolutionary process when humans lived in small communities, which makes them inadequate for addressing today's global issues (Douglas, 2008, p. 230; Persson & Savulescu, 2012, p. 12). Therefore, enhancing the moral qualities of all humans is seen as an urgent task in order to avoid the “ultimate harm” that could arise from these global challenges.

The structure of this brief report is as follows: Section 2 briefly introduces the main criticisms to their proposal. In addition to the criticisms, Section 3 then proposes the importance of considering human fragility and its ethical value in the context of moral enhancement.

## Criticisms of Moral Enhancement

The proposal of engaging in moral enhancement has since generated a lot of controversy, resulting in a substantial literature debating the ethics of moral enhancement. The major criticisms of this proposal will be briefly outlined below.

### The Freedom to Fall

A consistent and harsh critic of Persson and Savulescu's position is John Harris (2011, 2013, 2014). Harris argues that moral enhancement could potentially remove human freedom. In this context, Harris draws on Milton's *Paradise Lost*, where the essence of freedom is captured in the words, “sufficient to have stood though free to fall” (Harris, 2011, p. 103).

The space between knowing the good and doing the good is a region entirely inhabited by freedom. Knowledge of the good is sufficiency to have stood, but freedom to fall is all. Without the freedom to fall, good cannot be a choice; and freedom disappears and along with it virtue. There is no virtue in doing what you must. (Harris, 2011, p. 104)

That is, when performing a moral act, the agent is given the choice between good and evil, and both choosing good and choosing evil, thus falling into corruption, are acts of freedom. The freedom of humanity lies in the fact that we are presented with both the option of good and the option of evil. However, if moral enhancement results in us always being inclined toward the good, then there is no freedom. Therefore, Harris critiques moral enhancement for removing the human freedom that allows for the choice between good and evil.

## **The Complexity of Moral Ability**

Harris Wiseman (2014, 2016) critiques the moral enhancement through biomedical interventions, arguing that such approaches fail to address the complexity of morality. Persson & Savulescu reduce morality to biological factors (Persson & Savulescu, 2008, pp. 169–171), but Wiseman believes this overlooks its complex character. According to Wiseman, moral behavior and judgment are not determined by a single factor but by the interaction of multiple factors—biological, psychological, and social. As a result, methods like pharmacological interventions, neurostimulation, and genetic interventions fail to capture the multi-dimensional nature of moral behavior and overly simplify moral issues (Wiseman, 2016, pp. 16–17). Wiseman's proposed solution is the “bio-psycho-socio model,” which integrates biological, psychological, and social dimensions to understand moral development and adjusts moral enhancement to specific contexts and individual needs (Wiseman, 2016, p. 245). Moreover, he emphasizes the importance of traditional religious and social frameworks in moral formation.

There are many studies that question the effects of moral enhancement, in addition to Wiseman's. Daniels also argues that virtues are highly complex human traits, intricately intertwined and interdependent, and sensitive to context and circumstances (Daniels, 2009, p. 40).

## **Moral Perfectionism**

Robert Sparrow (2014) critiques the concept of moral enhancement, particularly from an egalitarian perspective. He argues that the societal implementation of such a program would involve the state in a controversial form of moral perfectionism, where individuals' behavior and dispositions are biologically altered to make them “more moral.” This raises significant concerns about equality, as the ability to reliably identify individuals as “morally enhanced” would create a distinction between them and others, challenging egalitarian ideals. The enhanced individuals, by virtue of being deemed more moral, could claim a superior status and greater representation in political decision-making. Even if moral enhancement proves impossible, the potential for misuse of a “bogus” science could lead to arbitrary political inequalities or even authoritarian rule. The debate itself risks reinforcing harmful ideas about inherent moral inequality among individuals, further deepening social divisions.

## **The Value of Human Fragility**

In addition to the criticisms mentioned above, I believe that the value of human fragility is important when considering the ethical issues surrounding moral enhancement. Fragility or vulnerability has gained significant attention in contemporary discussions, as highlighted by scholars like MacIntyre (1999) and Nussbaum (2006), due to its ethical implications in understanding human dependency and interdependence. According to their thought, vulnerability is considered an essential aspect of human nature, as it reflects our inherent fragility and dependence on others (Mackenzie et al., 2013, pp. 4–5). In this context, I would like to highlight two key points in considering the value of fragility or vulnerability.

First, human fragility is often viewed as a mere flaw or weakness, but it is actually an essential aspect of the layered nature of existence. Fragility allows us to experience a rich array of emotions and experiences, such as pain, fear, loss, and empathy for others. These complex, multi-dimensional feelings are vital to our humanity and enable us to fully engage

with the world. If moral enhancement seeks to eliminate these fragilities in pursuit of an “ideal” or “optimized” state, it risks oversimplifying the depth of human experience, stripping away the rich complexity that defines us.

Second, the layered nature of existence is intimately tied to what it means to be human. Humanity involves not only enduring fragility but also overcoming it, growing, and continuously evolving. Parens has suggested that we might make it so that no one had to experience the turmoil of adolescence as we know it—since it is painful to go through and painful to be around those who are going through it. However, he also notes that most of us place value on the process of working through such a time, and that effort is part of what makes us appreciate our adult lives (Parens, 1995, pp. 144–145). Similarly, the pursuit of a “perfect” or “optimized” moral state, as proposed in moral enhancement, may strip away the very essence of what it means to be human—our ability to grow through struggle, experience loss, and change over time. Fragility symbolizes the complexity and contradictions inherent in life, and eliminating it would mean denying the authenticity of human existence (Elliot, 1998). Instead of leading to moral progress, such enhancements may reduce us to mechanistic beings, devoid of the depth and richness that make human life truly meaningful.

### **Conclusion**

This brief report examined the issues arising from the enhancement of our moral judgments and actions, from the perspective of the value of human fragility. In addition to the complexity of moral ability and human freedom, I believe the value of human fragility is also important when considering the ethical issues surrounding moral enhancement. The elimination of fragility through moral enhancement carries the risk of disregarding the depth, complexity, and growth inherent in human life. The fragilities and limitations we experience are fundamental to our moral development, empathy, and relationships with others. If the implementation of moral enhancement strips away these layered aspects of our humanity, leading to simplified moral responses, it could undermine true moral development.

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