

# Bioenhancement of morality

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In the last 10 years the idea of enhancing morality with medical means has been the subject matter of some academic debate. This technological approach to moral improvement is predicated on a number of suppositions. We are mentioning just four suppositions without any ambition of being exhaustive. The first hypothesis is that morality has a biological substrate. The second is that the relationship between morality and its biological substrate can be known in sufficient detail to suggest potential pathways whereby the latter could be changed in order to improve the former. The third supposition holds that technological interventions can be developed to achieve the desired biological change as well as the concomitant moral improvement effectively without too much side effects. The last assumption mentioned here is that there are real world contexts, within which the medical moral enhancers could actually be applied to positive effect. More analysis is needed in relation to these assumptions in order to explore whether the prospect of moral bioenhancement should be taken seriously.

## Biological substrate

The idea that morality has a biological substrate hinges on a particular view of the relationship between body and mind, a topic with a long history within philosophy. On a very basic level the biological substrate view holds that biology is a *sine qua non* of morality. It goes without saying

that this claim is not very challenging: without biological organisms there is nothing that could be moral. The idea of disembodied morality floating around, unconnected to biological life seems problematic indeed. However, a more informative version of the substrate view would need more specifications than this. Would it, for example, only allow unidirectional causation from the biological to the moral level of an individual organism? Or would it tolerate bidirectional causal relations between the biology and morality of an individual? On the latter view morality would be regarded as emerging at a certain developmental stage of an organism as a result of ‘bottom up’ causality, and then gaining some momentum of its own whereby it could cause ‘top down’ changes of a biological nature. On this notion morality would still be bound by basic biological perimeters. However, it would not be steered by biology in all its particulars.

## Relationship between morality and its biological substrate

Assuming that morality has an organic substrate, the next question would be whether we can advance our knowledge of the way in which morality is hardwired in biology to the extent that we uncover pathways, whereby morality could be improved through medical interventions. Obviously much would depend on the precise target of moral improvement. Would the improvement pertain to character traits, intentions, moral deliberation, practical wisdom, behaviour, willpower, sense of responsibility or some other element of individual morality? In addition, it would be important to know whether the improvement is transitory or permanent.

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## Technological interventions

Even if we had discovered a biological pathway of moral enhancement that does not mean automatically that effective technological means could be developed to accomplish the biological change and the attendant moral improvement effectively. It would be important to compare proposed moral bioenhancements with more traditional means of moral enhancement such as education, social pressure, legal sanctions and the like. It would also be critical to study any side effects that might occur as a result of bioenhancement of morality so as to guarantee proportionality of benefits and harms. The development of these interventions seems hard to imagine without systematic clinical trials. However, would the pharmaceutical industry be inclined to invest in this undertaking without solid indications of a viable market? Would research ethics committees accept protocols for experiments required for the development of these interventions? Would anybody sign up as participant in these experiments?

## Real world contexts

Last but not least, in order for moral bioenhancement to be taken seriously as a potential future technology, it is required that moral bioenhancement could actually be applied within the real world in addition to solely figuring

as a philosophical gadget in thought experiments. So in what kind of factual scenarios would bioenhancement of morality be likely to occur? Should we imagine moral enhancement on a voluntary basis, or would mandatory schemes be more appropriate? Should the state pay for the costs of moral enhancement or would private citizens have to account for it?

## The debate

In order for the debate to gain maturity it might be useful to critically address the above-mentioned four suppositions and their attendant questions. In this issue some of those issues are being tackled. Rakić (2017) argues that the compulsory administration of oxytocin would be ineffective. Subsequently, Swazo (2017) analyses the debate on moral enhancement through the lens of theories from philosophers such as Nietzsche, Foucault, Derrida and MacIntyre.

## References

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