

# EGALITARIANISM AND MORAL BIOENHANCEMENT

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## **Abstract:**

A number of philosophers working in applied ethics and bioethics are now earnestly debating the ethics of what they term “moral bioenhancement”, by which they mean the deliberate modification of individuals’ behaviour and dispositions in order to make them “more moral”. I will suggest that anyone who is committed to an egalitarian politics should be extremely suspicious of this project. The society-wide program of biological manipulations required to achieve the purported goals of moral bioenhancement would necessarily implicate the state in a controversial moral perfectionism. Moreover, the prospect of being able to reliably identify some people as, by biological constitution, significantly and consistently more moral than others would seem to pose a profound challenge to egalitarian social and political ideals. The morally enhanced are, *ex hypothesi*, better people; while they might not thereby gain improved moral status, they would appear to have a *prima facie* claim to be over-represented in political decision making. Even if moral bioenhancement should ultimately prove to be impossible, there is a significant chance that a bogus science of bioenhancement would lead to arbitrary inequalities in access to political power or facilitate the unjust rule of authoritarians; in the meantime, the debate about the ethics of moral bioenhancement risks reinvigorating dangerous ideas about the extent of natural inequality in the possession of the moral faculties.

**Keywords:** moral enhancement; moral bioenhancement; enhancement; ethics; egalitarianism.

## EGALITARIANISM AND MORAL BIOENHANCEMENT

A number of philosophers working in applied ethics and bioethics are now earnestly debating the ethics of what they term “moral enhancement”, by which they mean that the deliberate modification of individuals’ behaviour and dispositions in order to make them “more moral” (key texts in the debate to date include: Agar 2010; Douglas 2008; Douglas 2013; Harris 2011; Persson and Savulescu 2008; Persson and Savulescu 2012; Persson and Savulescu 2013a; Walker 2009).<sup>1</sup> While key figures in this literature were careful to allow at its outset that moral enhancement might be achieved via the traditional means of moral education (Persson and Savulescu 2008; Persson and Savulescu 2012), the subsequent debate has focused almost entirely on the possibility of moral enhancement by biomedical means — what I shall call, following Persson and Savulescu (2013a) moral *bio*enhancement. Extrapolating from a small number of studies that show that drugs, such as oxytocin, propranolol and serotonin, can influence behaviour and dispositions in ways that we are inclined to evaluate positively, they suggest that in the future it may be possible to safely engineer finely-tuned and long-lasting changes to individuals’ moral capacities via drug therapies, neural implants, or (perhaps) genetic engineering (Douglas 2008; Persson and Savulescu 2008; Walker 2009). Ingmar Persson and Julian Savulescu (2008; 2011; 2012; 2013a) have even argued that there is an urgent imperative to pursue the possibility of moral bioenhancement in order to avoid devastating global climate change and to reduce the risk of other disastrous consequences of the misuse of modern science, including, especially, the use of weapons of mass destruction.

It is hard to know where to start in critically assessing this literature. Elsewhere I have argued that the science of moral bioenhancement does not currently support the grand claims made for its potential (Sparrow 2013a; 2014). Yes, some drugs and other biomedical interventions can alter people’s behaviour and their emotional responses to different sorts of circumstances. Yet this fact alone is nothing to get excited about: it has been true since human beings discovered psychedelic mushrooms and fermentation. Modern psychopharmaceuticals may have more subtle effects but we have little data on whether their long-term use would be free of side effects such that it would be reasonable to use them for non-therapeutic ends. Similarly, any new drugs developed for the purposes of moral enhancement would struggle to establish that long-term use would be safe and ethically justifiable without medical benefit. Perhaps more importantly, there is a significant gap between the effects that using such drugs may achieve and the claim that people are thereby made more moral. Encouraging empathy and a sense of justice in

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<sup>1</sup> A version of this paper was presented at a conference on “Enhancement: Cognitive, Moral and Mood,” which took place in Belgrade from 14th to 16 May 2013. My thanks are due to Julian Savulescu and Vojin Rakic for the invitation to attend, and to other participants at the event, especially Tom Douglas and Julian Savulescu, for comments on my presentation. Thanks are also due to Nick Agar, Toby Handfield, and Robert Simpson for reading drafts of the paper.

individuals may usually be a good thing but enhancing either of these faculties may make individuals more likely to behave unethically in various situations, as when, for instance, a judge declares a person “not guilty” as a result of empathic concern for them, despite the presence of overwhelming evidence that they are in fact guilty of the crime with which they are charged, or when a parent neglects their child out of an excessive concern for duties of justice towards strangers. At best, discussion of “moral bioenhancement”, then, means only that we might be able to influence behaviour and dispositions in certain ways, and not that we can ensure that people are more likely to do the right thing in any given situation.

However, in this paper I want to take the possibility of moral bioenhancement at face value in order to explore a different set of intuitions about this project. That is, I will allow the possibility that a society might undertake to alter the moral character of its citizens in order to reduce rates of unethical behaviour.

I want to suggest that anyone who is committed to an egalitarian politics should be extremely suspicious of the project of moral bioenhancement.<sup>2</sup> Tensions between egalitarianism and moral bioenhancement arise at four different points in thinking about the latter. Two of these tensions occur at the theoretical level and presume that the project of moral bioenhancement is actually feasible. However, there are another two points at which one might be concerned about the impact of moral bioenhancement on egalitarian social and political relations, which, I will argue, should count as significant arguments against embarking on the project of moral bioenhancement even if one is cynical — as I am — that it would ultimately be effective.<sup>3</sup>

A key assumption in the argument that follows is that in order for moral bioenhancement to work as advertised it would need to be applied society wide. To see why, consider the case made for moral enhancement by its most enthusiastic advocates, Ingmar Persson and Julian Savulescu. In *Unfit for the Future*, Persson and Savulescu (2012) argue that moral enhancement will be required to avoid climate change and other disastrous consequences of the misuse of modern science. In a number of earlier papers (Persson and Savulescu 2008; 2010; 2011; 2013a<sup>4</sup>) they argue that moral enhancement is necessary to

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<sup>2</sup> The arguments of the paper will therefore have less force for those who do not believe that relations of fundamental political equality are a good in themselves, although I hope they might still be of interest by virtue of explicating some hitherto unnoticed implications of the debate about moral bioenhancement. The larger question of the plausibility of egalitarianism is beyond the scope of this paper.

<sup>3</sup> This may appear to be a strange form of argument because presumably if a project is not going to realise its goals, that is itself a strong reason not to embark upon it. However, the implications of a project that one believes is unlikely to succeed may be relevant in at least two circumstances. First, they are relevant to the question of how much one should resist or be concerned about a project embarked on by others who do have more faith in it. If others wish to embark on a doomed but harmless project there may be little reason to stop them. Yet if the mere fact of their embarking on the project would implicate all citizens in a morally flawed endeavour or would bring about other significant negative social consequences, one might have reason to try to stop them. Second, the costs of a project’s failing are relevant to our assessment of the overall desirability of project that does have a slim chance of succeeding. Thus the argument that follows should raise significant issues for those people who *do* believe that moral bioenhancement is possible

<sup>4</sup> This paper was published “online first” in 2011 and therefore appeared before *Unfit for the Future*.

reduce the risk that terrorists will carry out acts of violence using weapons of mass destruction. The first goal requires, they suggest, greatly reducing rates of “free riding” on the environmentally responsible activities of others by increasing individuals’ sense of social solidarity, altruism and justice (Persson and Savulescu 2012, pp. 105-109). Similarly, in order to reduce the risks of “terrorists” causing mass casualties with nuclear, chemical, or biological weapons, they suggest, we need to ensure that people are morally enhanced (2008; 2010; 2011; 2013a). However, the second of these goals at least is unlikely to be achieved by relying upon people to enhance themselves. Presumably those who are already suspicious of government or hostile to the majority culture are amongst the least likely category of people to undertake voluntary moral enhancement!<sup>5</sup> In order to reduce the risk of terrorism, moral enhancement would have to be universal. Similarly, it seems unlikely that enough people — and the right people — would voluntarily undergo moral bioenhancement that this would be sufficient to reduce the risk of climate change. Undergoing moral bioenhancement and doing one’s bit to save the planet will involve costs after all: if not enough other people do it there is no point in my doing it; if enough other people do it, it’s not in my interests to do it — I might as well free ride on the moral enhancement of others. Thus, the project of voluntary moral bioenhancement to prevent climate change presupposes the sense of social solidarity that it is supposed to bring about. If we want to ensure that everyone has the social solidarity and altruism required to ensure that they do their bit to prevent climate change we will need to make moral bioenhancement compulsory.<sup>6</sup> In practice, then, moral bioenhancement would need to involve something like putting drugs in the drinking water, aerial spraying of population centres with oxytocin, or perhaps a universal eugenic programme of genetic modification of the next generation.

Despite my reservations about the likelihood that these sort of measures will ever be adopted in any remotely democratic society, in what follows, I will assume that societies that embark upon moral bioenhancement will in fact do so through these sorts of society-wide measures. In the first half of the discussion I will also assume that moral bioenhancement is possible and that most of those people who take the relevant drugs or undergo the appropriate therapies will thereby in fact become more moral. In the second part of the paper I will discuss the implications of the pursuit of moral bioenhancement even if that project ultimately fails.

There is another feature of my approach that I should flag before I proceed further. The debate about moral enhancement began with explicit reference to the issues raised by the prospect of cognitive

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<sup>5</sup> Persson and Savulescu (2012) actually concede this at p. 125. Earlier papers by the same authors on the topic do not include this acknowledgement.

<sup>6</sup> Persson and Savulescu (2008) acknowledge this (at p. 174) and defend the claim in Persson and Savulescu (2013b). See also Rakić (2013).

enhancement (Savulescu and Persson 2008). Indeed, according to many accounts of the nature of morality, cognitive enhancements and moral enhancements will be closely related — or even overlapping — categories. To the extent that doing the right thing involves means-ends reasoning, cognitive enhancements may be moral enhancements by virtue of facilitating agents' following a chain of reasoning to its conclusion. For that matter, on some accounts of the nature of morality, according to which acting morally requires responding to the appropriate moral principles, moral enhancement *must* be cognitive enhancement. As a number of other authors have noted, the prospect of cognitive enhancement seems to threaten key assumptions underpinning egalitarian ideals. For instance, Jeff McMahan (2009), Nicholas Agar (2010; 2012), and Allen Buchanan (2011) have all considered the possibility that human — and primarily, cognitive — enhancement might establish a class of “post-persons” who would have superior moral status to ordinary human persons.<sup>7</sup> Some of the arguments I discuss below will be familiar to some readers from this debate. However, as much as is possible, in what follows I wish to distinguish between the threat to egalitarianism posed by moral enhancement and by cognitive enhancement, for two reasons. First, as I've just observed, the implications of cognitive enhancement have already been discussed extensively. Second, as I will argue further below, the idea that, in the future, a certain class of citizens might be, as a matter of biological constitution, morally better than another class of citizens seems to involve a distinct threat to egalitarian political ideals which have not to my knowledge been much discussed and which are deserving of attention. Having said that, I also want to leave open the extent to which the arguments I develop below may also have application to the case of cognitive enhancement.

Finally, note that nothing I say here is intended to represent an all-things-considered conclusion regarding the permissibility or desirability of moral bioenhancement. I do think that the various ways in which (I shall argue) the project of moral bioenhancement both implies and contributes to an anti-egalitarian politics should weigh — and weigh heavily — in this calculation. However, any final assessment of the wisdom of embarking on the project of moral bioenhancement must consider, at least: (1) the prospects for moral bioenhancement, including how likely we are to achieve it and how large its effects might be; (2) the costs and benefits of moral bioenhancement, for both individuals and societies; and, (3) the costs of refraining from moral bioenhancement, including the prospects for the future of humanity and other species. The argument I make here for the most part concerns the second of these matters and leaves the larger question of whether we should ultimately be pursuing moral bioenhancement open.

## IF MORAL BIOENHANCEMENT SHOULD PROVE POSSIBLE...

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<sup>7</sup> See also the contributions by Sparrow (2013b), Douglas (2013), Persson (2013), Hauskeller (2013), and Wasserman (2013).

Should moral bioenhancement prove to be possible, and societies embark upon the project of moral enhancement through population-level policies, as I've suggested would be necessary in order to achieve Persson and Savulescu's goals, then two worries arise about the implications of moral bioenhancement for egalitarian political ideals. How do we know what being more moral consists in (and who gets to choose)? And, if some people have been made "more moral" than others wouldn't it be appropriate that the morally enhanced should have more say in social decision making than other citizens? I will discuss each of these in turn.

## DETERMINING THE "MORAL" IN MORAL BIOENHANCEMENT

The first and most obvious reason why there might appear to be a tension between moral bioenhancement and egalitarianism is the implication by its advocates that they know what being "moral" consists in. Moral questions are some of the most controversial matters in contemporary society and are fiercely disputed by different social groups. If we are going to start giving people drugs to make them more moral, we had better know what it is for someone to be more moral. But then who are advocates of moral enhancement to say that they know the answer to this question?

At one level, I'm inclined to believe that this concern is exaggerated. Advocates of moral enhancement have, for the most part, been careful to make only minimal and conservative claims about what moral bioenhancement would consist in and confined themselves either to advocating enhancement of individuals' dispositions to altruism and to their sense of justice (Persson and Savulescu 2008; Persson and Savulescu 2012) or mitigating strong emotions such as anger, or problematic dispositions, such as racism, which often act to reduce the probability of our behaving morally (Douglas 2008). Even if such transformations of dispositions do not correspond precisely with becoming more moral, as I suggested above, it is plausible to think that in most cases such changes would generate more of the sorts of behaviour of which we typically approve. Furthermore, at least in some central cases, there would appear to be less controversy about what morality requires than advocates of cultural relativism or moral pluralism sometimes insist. Murder is wrong, rape is wrong, torture is wrong — and these truths are (almost) universally acknowledged. Thus, as Tom Douglas (2008) has argued, it should be possible to identify some sorts of enhancements — for instance those which make participation in murder, rape, and torture, less likely — as moral enhancements without needing to commit to anything too controversial about the nature of morality.

However, concerns about imposing a particular conception of morality upon the broader community have more force than this discussion implies once we start to consider the relationship between "conceptions of

the good” and ideas about character. Different cultures and religions have different ideas about what living a good human life consists in. For instance, some cultures promote ideals of rugged individualism and material success, whilst others encourage their members to cultivate compassion and generosity.

Changing the character of citizens through moral bioenhancement is likely to be controversial in pluralist societies, wherein people adhere to different conceptions of the good, for at least three reasons.

First, in some cases, conceptions of the good include within them ideas about what a virtuous person is like. Even if all cultures and religions agree that in general it is better to be more altruistic and have a stronger sense of justice, they may differ on the relative importance of these traits and so on the attractiveness of any particular realisation of the project of moral enhancement.

Second, conceptions of the good often promote particular obligations in relation to particular subsets of the broader community, for instance, to one’s family, one’s coreligionists, or to other members of a culture. It is at least conceivable that enhancing altruism and a sense of justice might make it harder for individuals to meet these particular obligations and so turn out to make it harder for individuals to lead morally admirable lives in some respects according to certain conceptions of the good.

Third, it is highly unlikely that increasing individuals’ capacity for altruism and sense of justice will not impact on their ability to achieve other goals that different conceptions of the good identify as valuable. Thus, for instance, morally enhanced people may find it harder to achieve material success in a competitive economy or to reconcile themselves to a life of monastic contemplation in a world characterised by systemic injustice. These effects may be regrettable even if the enhanced character traits are at, a more abstract level, generally acknowledged to be good within that particular community.

At the very least, then, if a state undertook the project of moral bioenhancement, the *effects* would not be neutral between different conceptions of the good. In so far as justifying the choice of which dispositions to enhance (and how much), which would inevitably be involved in any particular realisation of the project of moral bioenhancement, would require taking sides in debates about the relative merits of different sorts of character, the *justification* of the project would also not be neutral between different conceptions of the good.<sup>8</sup> That is to say, the state would thereby be involved in a form of “moral perfectionism.” One of the reasons why moral perfectionism is controversial, of course, is the intuition that it is elitist: in a pluralistic society who is to say what constitutes good character?

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<sup>8</sup> Indeed, Persson and Savulescu (2008, p. 168) admit as much.

There is something, then, in the thought that the project of moral bioenhancement is elitist because it presumes that those who embark upon it know what being more moral consists in. How *much* force there is in this objection, though, will depend upon our attitude towards moral perfectionism more generally. For instance, some philosophers (Raz 1986; Sandel 1982; Wall 1998) have argued that the state is *unavoidably* perfectionist, because the search for neutral justifications for policy is doomed — in which case accusations that some policy or other is perfectionist have no force at all. It will, of course, still matter whether the perfectionist policy has been decided upon democratically or imposed by undemocratic means. Because philosophers writing about moral bioenhancement are making a controversial argument to a broader audience, the ideas they are putting forward are inevitably their own rather than the majority views — and it is therefore tempting to interpret them as wanting to impose these ideas on society at large. However, advocating for moral enhancement is compatible with the idea that moral bioenhancement should only take place after being endorsed by democratic decision. On the other hand, philosophers who don't endorse perfectionism are likely to conclude that the project of moral bioenhancement is not one a liberal state should take up precisely because it privileges the ideas of one sector of society — even if it is the majority — about the nature of the good life over those of others.

Finally, it is worth observing that this line of argument concerns the politics of utopian social engineering in general and is not specific to moral *bio*enhancement. One might have the same criticisms, for instance, of a society-wide project of moral education intended to reduce free riding and criminal behaviour. Nevertheless, in so far as moral bioenhancement would constitute a project of utopian social engineering, it *is* a criticism of moral bioenhancement.

## ENHANCING INEQUALITY

Even if moral bioenhancement is attempted as a society-wide program, there is no guarantee that it would succeed universally. As a result of natural variation in the population generating variations in response to the technological intervention, some people might remain entirely unenhanced even when everyone else benefits substantially. Alternatively, people might become enhanced to different degrees. Either way, it is possible that the project of society-wide bioenhancement would exacerbate existing inequalities in possession of the capacities for moral behaviour. As long as *some* of those people who are currently the most moral amongst us receive the maximum benefit from the enhancement and *some* of those who are currently the least moral amongst us receive no benefit from the enhancement then the gap between the



most and the least moral will be increased.<sup>9</sup> How *much* a technology of moral bioenhancement would exacerbate inequality depends upon how powerful it is. Presuming also that any biomedical science sophisticated enough to enhance moral dispositions also requires the ability to detect whether the intervention has been successful, this means that we would be able to identify a particular subsection of the community that was the most “morally enhanced.”

The prospect of being able to reliably identify some people as, by biological constitution, significantly and consistently more moral than others would seem to pose a profound challenge to egalitarian social and political ideals. In particular, it raises the question of whether the morally enhanced should have different rights to morally ordinary citizens and perhaps even be granted privileged access to positions of social and political power in order that social and political decisions are made more morally?

There are, admittedly, reasons to believe that moral enhancements might have at most a limited impact on the distribution of rights and privileges among citizens of democratic societies. Enhancement of dispositions seems much less likely than enhancement of intellectual capacities to generate “post-persons” in so far as it is unlikely to generate new basic interests in enhanced individuals. The (merely) morally enhanced will not have a higher moral status than (those whom we currently consider to be) normal persons. Nevertheless, basic moral equality is compatible with at least some inequality in access to social and political power.

Allen Buchanan (2011) has already outlined one way in which *cognitive* enhancement might lead to significant social and economic divisions emerging between the enhanced and the unenhanced, with enhanced persons perhaps even having political rights not possessed by the unenhanced. Buchanan points out that the forms of social cooperation that are possible and the benefits that flow from them are, in many important cases, determined by the capacities of those engaged in them. Just as individuals of average intelligence are capable of cooperating and collaborating with each other in ways that people with severe cognitive impairments are not, so too might enhanced persons of the future be capable of engaging in forms of collaboration and cooperation that even the most intelligent individuals today are not. Moreover, insofar as participation in these sorts of activities allows individuals to exercise their capacities in ways that are pleasurable to them and also to secure various important goods that can only be obtained through collective action, individuals have a significant interest in being able to engage in them. However, in order to realise these interests, participants must be able to exclude the involvement of those who do not have the capacities necessary to contribute effectively to the collective project and whose

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<sup>9</sup> Egalitarianism might speak in favour of a program of moral bioenhancement that ensured that everyone had the same capacity for moral behaviour. However, it is hard to imagine a science that would raise everyone only to the same level of capacities.

“participation” would serve only to frustrate the aims of the larger group. Yet if (what we currently consider to be) normal individuals are excluded from participating in forms of social cooperation that generate significant social benefits, this means that a society in which some individuals were significantly cognitive enhanced would effectively recognise two different classes of citizens with different rights to social, economic, and (possibly) political participation.

While Buchanan does not consider the possibility, moral bioenhancement would seem to be especially likely to generate such a scenario. How much we can trust those with whom we are cooperating is an important determination of the sorts of cooperation that are possible and the benefits they can produce — as is the willingness of participants to take on burdens for the sake of the collective good. Institutional mechanisms to detect, punish, and deter anti-social choices in the contexts of cooperative social activity are often cumbersome and generate significant costs to all involved. Indeed, many worthy social experiments have foundered on the rock of human moral frailty. Thus, collaborations (only) of the reliably virtuous would be capable of producing benefits that attempts at cooperation between the virtuous and the (occasionally) vicious are not.

Just as (Buchanan argues) the cognitively enhanced would have legitimate interests in cooperating amongst themselves, so too would the morally enhanced. In order to realise these interests, they would need to exclude the merely normally moral from participation in mutually beneficial collaborations amongst the morally enhanced. If these collaborations are widespread and produce significant benefits then exclusion from them would effectively represent exclusion from full social and political participation. The morally enhanced would have a more extensive set of rights than the merely normally moral.<sup>10</sup>

Of course, there is also a more direct argument to the conclusion that a society that consisted in some people who are morally enhanced and some people who were not might be justified in establishing a differentiated set of citizenship rights. Famously, in *The Republic*, Plato argued that the just society should be ruled by an elite group of Guardians, who would be most able to decide social and political questions in the public interest. Similarly, it might be argued that we should pay more attention to the views of the

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<sup>10</sup> It is worth observing in this context that a similar phenomenon already occurs today in jurisdictions in which convicted felons are excluded from various social benefits, including, in many places, the right to vote. In so far as this is justified, part of the justification may be that the prospect of such exclusion is intended to deter other wrongdoers, and part may be retributive. However, this exclusion may also be justified by the thought that it is unreasonable to expect law-abiding citizens to cooperate with those who have already shown themselves to be untrustworthy.

morally enhanced than those of other citizens when it comes to resolving social and political controversies

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The temper of the times today is, admittedly, more thoroughly democratic than it was when Plato was writing. How strong an argument there is for granting the morally enhanced privileged access to political power in a democratic society depends on our account of the moral foundations of democracy. As these are immensely controversial, I will not be able to settle the matter here. However, I will suggest that, at least on one influential account of the justification of democracy, the case for special political privileges for the morally enhanced seems very strong and that a case *might* be made for doing so on the basis of a number of other influential theories of democratic legitimacy.

One argument that can be made for democracy is that it is the least worst system of government there is (Churchill 1947). According to this — essentially consequentialist — justification for democracy, the fact that politicians in democratic societies have to win elections to achieve (and retain) political power means that they are more likely to serve the interests of the majority of citizens and less likely to endorse disastrous policies. However, the regular conducting of democratic elections is compatible with political power being exercised between elections by elites. Indeed, according to “elite” theories of democracy it is unrealistic to expect that ordinary citizens will have the resources and skills required to participate directly in the processes of government (Dahl 1959 & 1961; Lipset 1960; Schumpeter 1956). The best we can hope for is that competing elites will allow the question of who should govern for a given period to be determined by an election involving the whole citizenry.

If this is all that democracy requires, then it is arguable that one might improve the quality of political decision making by restricting participation in government to the morally enhanced, who would presumably be more likely to serve the public interest rather than their own interests or the interests of some particular sector of society.<sup>12</sup> We might still allow the public at large to eject particular governments in favour of other coalitions of the morally enhanced through periodic elections in order to further safeguard the public interest. However, according to an elitist account of democracy, the fact that power would always be wielded by the morally enhanced would be no more a criticism of this form of

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<sup>11</sup> The case for government by a new biomedically enhanced elite would be most compelling if a community were pursuing both moral and cognitive enhancement. It might then be possible to identify a cohort of people who were both better able to understand how societies work and how they might solve the challenges facing them *and* who were more likely to govern in the public interest.

<sup>12</sup> To the extent that this is true, it might even constitute a reason why egalitarians should be in favour of rule by the morally enhanced.

government than the fact that power is already always wielded by a small class of politically educated and involved citizens.

The case for special political privileges for the morally enhanced is, I think, strongest if one is already committed to an elitist account of democracy. However, a case might be made for such privileges on the basis of at least two other influential accounts of democracy.

According to *epistemic* conceptions of democracy, democratic government is desirable because it increases the probability that political processes will reach the right conclusion (Estlund 1993). As long as each citizen has more than a 50% chance of intuiting the correct answer to a controversial political question, then the majority opinion of a democratic society is almost certain to be correct (Barry 1964, p. 13; Cohen 1986). However there are a number of well-rehearsed objections to epistemic justifications of democracy. In particular, the process of aggregating individual judgements only improves reliability if people make these judgments independently, which is clearly not the case when citizens in mass democracies rely upon a limited range of media sources for the information upon which they base their decisions.<sup>13</sup> If the aim of democratic decision making is to increase the probability of reaching the right answer, then we might do better to replace mass democracy with government by the morally enhanced, who would presumably have a *higher* probability of being right about the proper ends of policy in a democratic society than other citizens.

It is even possible that privileging the opinions of the morally enhanced would be justified by a concern for *deliberative* democracy. Deliberative democrats argue that democratic institutions are superior by virtue of facilitating government according to reasons that have survived a process of public deliberation and debate (Dryzek 1990; Elster 1998; Gutmann and Thompson 1996). Yet, again, in a mass society, it is not possible for all citizens to participate equally in this debate. Deliberation must therefore take place through a combination of participation in public fora, which will tend to advantage the views of privileged elites, and through “internal” processes involving critical reasoning and the vivid imagination of what other people might say on a particular topic (Goodin 2000; Goodin and Niemeyer 2003). Presuming that the morally enhanced are better able to distinguish good moral arguments from bad, and also to avoid the distorting influence of self-interest in their internal deliberations, then giving extra weight to the opinions

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<sup>13</sup> For an extended discussion, see Estlund (1994).

of the morally enhanced in any process of public deliberation would arguably improve the quality of the result.<sup>14</sup>

Thus, even on these more demanding theories of democracy, the prospect of being able to reliably identify some subset of the population as significantly more moral than other citizens, by virtue of their biological constitution, would appear to pose a significant challenge to egalitarian political ideals.

In response to any of these arguments for special privileges for the morally enhanced, it might be argued that the morally enhanced would be unwilling to accept positions of political power and responsibility except on the basis of a democratic election involving universal equal suffrage. However, if any of the arguments surveyed here are correct, then it is indeed the right thing to do for the morally enhanced to accept the responsibility of governing in the public interest. While they might do so with a certain reluctance, presumably the morally enhanced would be willing to take on this role. It is worth observing that this is precisely what Plato (1985, pp. 323-325) thought about the Guardians: that they would rule reluctantly out of a sense of moral duty.

It is also possible that a concern for political stability might argue against any recognition of moral bioenhancement in the political processes of a democratic society. One of the virtues of democracy is that it affirms the moral equality of all citizens in granting them equal political rights. This contributes to the political stability of democratic societies, by reducing the probability that a disenfranchised minority will choose to pursue revolution rather than suffer the ignominy of being denied political recognition. Perhaps the costs to political stability of granting some citizens more extensive political rights than others would outweigh the benefits to be gained through encouraging rule by the morally enhanced. As this would essentially be an empirical matter, it is difficult to assess in the abstract, especially given the uncertainty surrounding the science of moral bioenhancement. However, at this stage we certainly can't rule out the possibility that this calculation will still speak in favour of more extensive political rights for the morally enhanced. Indeed, note that societies that gave special weight to the opinions of the morally enhanced might even be *more* stable than existing societies by virtue of having political processes that better served the public interest and avoided sectarianism.

Finally, it is worth mentioning that egalitarian democracy is by no means the only available account of legitimate political authority and that other such accounts — for instance, Confucianism — might be very willing indeed to reach the conclusion that political power should be wielded by the morally enhanced.

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<sup>14</sup> Thus, for instance, Peter Singer (1988) has argued that it would be better if ethics committees and ethics commissions were made up of "ethical experts" rather than a representative sample of the population.

Of course, given that my argument has proceeded by means of an investigation of what would be justified if we could in fact reliably identify some portion of the population as biologically more moral than other citizens, the mere fact that such politics would be anti-egalitarian in no way implies that it would be unjust. However, in so far as we are currently committed to egalitarianism, it might provide reasons to resist bringing it about that such an inegalitarian politics would be justified.

## IF MORAL BIOENHANCEMENT IS A FURPHY...

The issues that I have been discussing up until this point will arise if the project of moral bioenhancement works. However, as I mentioned above, egalitarian concerns about the implications of the project of moral bioenhancement may also arise even if it ultimately proves to be impossible. There are, in fact, two different scenarios in which moral bioenhancement might fail: it might fail in such a way that it would still be plausible to think that it had worked even though it had failed; or, it might fail obviously. Both of these scenarios turn out to be troubling, for different reasons.

## ENHANCING ELITES

I suggested above that if we could reliably identify some proportion of the population as morally enhanced this might justify an anti-egalitarian politics. An even more troubling prospect is the possibility that a bogus “science” of moral bioenhancement might lend support to political elites in circumstances when it is *not* justified. This might occur, for instance, if we are mistaken in our identification of those who (we believe) should have privileged access to social and political power by virtue of being morally enhanced. It would obviously be a bad result if we subjected ourselves to rule by an elite who were in fact no better than the rest of us.

I believe that there is a non-negligible chance of this outcome should moral bioenhancement fail. Wishful thinking plays a notoriously large role in scientific observation: astronomers saw the canals that they “knew” existed on Mars for many years where later observers did not (Lane 2011). The more people have invested in a project, both emotionally and financially, the less willing they are to admit that it has failed. Moreover, because of the controversy surrounding moral and political life it will be difficult to settle for certain the question as to whether or not some particular group of people are really more moral. That is to say, if a (bogus) scientific investigation produces the result that certain individuals are morally enhanced, this will be a difficult claim to falsify. Finally, there are social and political processes at play in contemporary societies, including media dynamics, that often function to surround the personalities, and the activities, of social and political elites with a rosy glow. For all these reasons, even if the scientific

manipulations intended to make people more moral do not, both the putatively morally enhanced and those around them may continue to believe that they have thereby become more moral and are consequently deserving of special privileges.

There is, however, a still more troubling possibility, which is that moral bioenhancement might come to serve as a rationalisation for rule by elites who were themselves well aware that they were no morally better than those over whom they ruled. The claim that they are morally superior and are the only people who can be trusted to rule in the interests of the nation is, after all, a familiar one coming from the mouths of authoritarian rulers. It would not surprise me at all if, in the future, political elites sought to mobilise the (pseudo) science of moral bioenhancement to buttress their claim to power.

There is, therefore, a significant risk that, if it should fail, the pursuit of moral bioenhancement would lead to the extension of special political privileges to persons who were not in fact morally enhanced or would provide a figleaf for the conscious abuse of power by authoritarians. For this reason, we would be wise to be cautious about embarking upon it.

## ENHANCING ELITISM

The most likely outcome, I suspect, is that moral bioenhancement never becomes a practical prospect because researchers simply can't find drugs with effects of the required subtlety and/or interventions that can be proved safe in the long term. That is to say, the project of moral bioenhancement might fail and fail obviously. However, it doesn't follow from this pessimistic assessment that we should have no concerns about pursuing moral bioenhancement. Philosophical debates – even philosophical debates about science-fiction scenarios – are not without political consequences. The effects of philosophers engaging in sustained debate about moral bioenhancement include, I suspect, reinforcing ideas about some people being naturally better people than others.<sup>15</sup>

In order to establish the possibility that biomedical technologies might be capable of transforming moral behaviour, partisans of bioenhancement must argue for – or at least concede – the claim that whether an individual is a (morally) good person is a function of their neurochemistry and/or their genetics. Advocates of moral bioenhancement often draw upon arguments from evolutionary psychology to buttress the claim that our moral dispositions have a biological basis (Persson and Savulescu 2013a). Similarly, to suggest that

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<sup>15</sup> Another important reason to be concerned about the current debate is its opportunity cost, in particular with regards to confronting climate change. Philosophers are currently spending lots of time and effort debating the ethics of a technology which, as I have argued elsewhere (Sparrow 2014), holds out very little prospect of making a useful contribution to the task of preventing disastrous climate change, when they might have been discussing and arguing for the social, political, and economic changes required to move to a zero emissions economy which might (just) meet this challenge.

*differences* in moral capacities might be biologically embedded, writers are drawing upon arguments from sociobiology, especially relating to gender differences (Casal 2012; Persson and Savulescu 2012, 109-111). In this way, the debate about moral bioenhancement is facilitating a return of sociobiological arguments to the philosophical mainstream, from which they have long been marginalised due to their dubious pedigree and shonky theoretical foundations. The emphasis on biological differences in moral capacities also encourages the idea that those who are immoral are incorrigibly so, while those who are most moral are good by nature. Finally, enthusiasm for moral bioenhancement usually occurs at the expense of faith in moral enhancement by a more traditional means such as education. Of course, to the extent that moral education and biological manipulations may be thought of as different — perhaps even complimentary — means towards the same end, this need not necessarily be the case. Nevertheless, in so far as the debate about moral enhancement has focused on the possibility of moral *bio*enhancement, it encourages the impression that biological manipulations are likely to be more effective or more powerful than traditional moral education.

Put all these ideas together and what one gets is eerily reminiscent of a familiar conservative and elitist ideology. Importantly, it is not necessary for participants in the moral enhancement debate to consciously endorse such an elitist politics for the debate to contribute to it. When philosophers at some of the most prestigious universities in the world are pontificating about moral bioenhancement and drawing on arguments from sociobiology in doing so, it is little wonder if the public at large draws the conclusion that there must be an identifiable biological basis for differences in moral behaviour, that the population is divided up into the naturally virtuous and the naturally vicious, and that education and social reform will be of little use in reducing this divide or addressing the problems it creates.

Thus, ultimately the main reason I believe that egalitarian should be suspicious of moral bioenhancement concerns the extent to which debate about this hypothetical future project contributes to an anti-egalitarian politics today. This reason is especially compelling if one believes, as I do, that there is no realistic prospect any technology of moral bioenhancement achieving what has been claimed for it for the foreseeable future.

## CONCLUSION

The debate about moral bioenhancement is a strange affair by virtue of being so far ahead of the science that it presumes. Indeed, given just how unlikely it is that any democratic society would endorse the universal prescription of the genetic or pharmacological interventions required to achieve the purported goals of moral bioenhancement, it is tempting to conclude that the current debate is essentially an



interesting philosophical thought experiment. In that spirit, I have argued that should moral bioenhancement prove possible it would necessarily involve the state in a controversial moral perfectionism and might justify political privileges for the morally enhanced which egalitarians would deplore. To some extent, then, those already sufficiently committed to egalitarianism may have reason to resist the project of moral bioenhancement. However, even if the pursuit of moral bioenhancement should, as I believe is likely, ultimately prove futile, it involves significant political risks. There is a chance that it will lead to arbitrary inequalities in access to political power or facilitate the unjust rule of authoritarians. Perhaps more importantly, the contemporary debate about moral bioenhancement risks reinvigorating conservative ideas about natural inequality in possession of the moral faculties.

These arguments will have less force for those who are not already committed to an egalitarian politics. Moreover, they do not settle the larger debate about the all-things-considered wisdom of the project of moral bioenhancement, which will depend crucially on one's expectations about the likelihood and expected power of the technology required and the likely future of human societies if we choose not to go down this route. Nevertheless, especially for those who think that this project will most likely be a futile one, the considerations I have adduced here do, I believe, provide strong reasons for reservations about the contemporary philosophical enthusiasm for the pursuit of moral bioenhancement.

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