Enharrisment: A Reply to John Harris about Moral Enhancement

Ingmar Persson & Julian Savulescu

In his reply to our response (both in this issue) to his book *How to be Good*, John Harris accuses us of saying 'two mutually contradictory things' (2016: 1) when in fact we talk about two different things. One thing is *moral enhancement*, ME, in particular by biomedical means (moral bioenhancement), of moral motivation, specifically altruism and a sense of justice. This is what most of our joint publications have been about, a series of papers and a book (Persson & Savulescu, 2012). The second thing is the God Machine, GM, which we discuss in one paper (Savulescu & Persson, 2012). As we stress in that paper GM is not moral (bio)enhancement: 'It is important to recognize that… the God Machine is not itself a moral enhancement' (2012: 414).

Harris' original complaint against moral bioenhancement was that it was wrong because it removed "the freedom to fall." (2011) In several writings, we have tried to put freedom in its place within moral judgement and action. We originally responded that moral bioenhancement did not necessarily reduce the freedom to fall. Enhancement of empathy, for example, would not undermine freedom. We claimed, " If it is right that women are more altruistic than men, it seems that we could make men in general more moral by making them more like women by biomedical methods, or rather, more like the men who are more like women in respect of empathy and aggression."

However, for the sake of argument, we introduced the thought experiment of the God Machine to illustrate an example of an intervention (the God Machine) which did indeed reduce the freedom to fall, as Harris so fears. Nonetheless, we argued such an intervention might be justified. It reduces the freedom to fall to the extent that it makes impossible falls to the greatest depths of grossly immoral behaviour. Note, however, that it does not remove the freedom to fall less deeply, by committing less wrongful act, still less the freedom to act morally. Moreover, we argued, the loss of freedom occasioned by GM is outweighed by the great gain in welfare overall. Freedom is indeed valuable, but it is not the only value; it has to be balanced against other value, in particular the welfare for all.

In spite of our explicit declaration that the God Machine was not moral enhancement, Harris seems to have taken us to have held the view that GM *is* ME, for he writes that we '*now* admit that the God Machine would not be moral enhancement (2016: 2, our emphasis)'. Since it has been our view all along that GM is not ME, we have been in a position to claim consistently that GM does things that ME does not do, e.g. restricts our freedom or autonomy by preventing us from engaging in grossly immoral behaviour.

GM would then *ensure* that we do not engage in such behaviour. Now we do believe that *in principle* ME could be so effective that it also ensures this, though we concede in a passage of our first publication on ME, from which Harris quotes, that ME of that magnitude 'is not scientifically possible at present and is not likely to be possible in the near future' (Persson & Savulescu, 2008: 174). But from the fact that both GM and effective ME could be sufficient to ensure the same effect it simply does not follow that GM *is* a form of effective ME. Nor does our quoted claim imply that a treatment *has* to be this effective in order to qualify as ME. We acknowledge the possibility of ME which is considerably less far-reaching than this. Let us repeat this claim to ensure that Harris gets it: although we believe that in principle ME *could* be so effective that it ensures that human beings do not commit acts that are gravely morally wrong, we have never thought that this effectiveness is a *necessary condition* for a treatment to qualify as ME, nor that the fact that GM possesses this effectiveness is a *sufficient condition* for it qualify as a form of ME.

Hopefully, this will ensure that in the future Harris does not juxtapose claims we make about GM and ME to create the misapprehension that we regard GM as a particularly effective form of ME (2016: 3). This misapprehension leads him to conclude triumphantly that where and to the extent that GM restricts our freedom it 'cannot count as a moral enhancement' (2016: 3) – which is precisely what we have maintained all along. GM should rather be seen as a fail-safe device which kicks in when our moral motivation has not been sufficiently enhanced to overpower grossly immoral motivation. It intervenes just as the latter motivation is about to prod us to make an immoral decision. Morally, we are then no better than those who do make those decision and act on them, but thanks to GM we cause less harm.

Consider an analogy. Laws in some parts of Europe forbidding the sale of automatic weapons may prevent some people from acting in grossly immoral ways by slaughtering tens of innocent people, as regularly occur in the US. Such laws are

universal in their jurisdiction and compulsory. But such laws are not moral enhancements of such evil individuals who desire to slaughter innocent people. And good people can still freely choose to behave morally in the presence of such laws, by not desiring to buy such weapons and slaughter innocent people. The God Machine is like an ultimately effective enfored law. Given our knowledge of our own moral limitations, we ought rationally to bind ourselves to the GM, just as we should form laws banning civilians purchasing automatic weapons.

Rather than discussing GM as we envisaged it, Harris assumes, for reasons that escape us, that the 'malign, malicious mechanism that the GM is' (2016: 4) is bound to run amok and engineer 'future children to be blind and incapable of sexual displeasure' (2016: 4) and cause other such mischief. Somehow these dystopic fantasies lead him on to attribute to us beliefs that are utterly implausible and confused. He writes that we 'seem to think that capacities like autonomy and liberty… are capacities only possessed when actually exercised and hence are only lost when we try and fail to exercise them' (2016: 5). But the views he attributes to us are utterly preposterous and illogical. How could we *lose* capacities 'when we try and fail to exercise them' if we possess them only when we successfully try to exercise them? How would a capacity differ from the activity which exercises it if the capacity is possessed when and only when the activity which is associated with it occurs? This would conflate a capacity with its exercise, but clearly capacities can go unexercised. More importantly, it goes without saying that we believe that people subjected to GM *never* have the capacity to engage in grossly immoral behaviour, but *always* have the capacity to engage in more benign kinds of behaviour, not that they lose the former capacity and gain the second capacity when they try to exercise them.

Harris also writes that we 'seem to believe that no harm would have been done and no threats to freedom would have been made so long' (2016: 4) as the capacities of which people are deprived are ones they would never exercise. In fact, we do not think that we have ever ventured a view on this matter. More to the point, we have acknowledged that people are likely to be harmed if they are deprived of capacities that they will or would try to exercise, for instance, that paedophiles are harmed by being deprived of their capacity to have sex with children. And their freedom is certainly restricted. Our point is simply that such a deprivation would still be justified because this harm and loss of freedom would be clearly outweighed by the benefits to the children. As we wrote in our reply to Harris about the capacities that GM curtails:

‘The possible goodness of the freedom their exercise might involve is vanishingly small in comparison to their harmfulness for the victims’ (2016: 9).

We also freely admit that the Frankfurt-style of reasoning on which GM is premised is controversial – what philosophically interesting claims aren’t? We just regard it as plausible enough for an interesting thought experiment to be based on it, and Harris has provided no reason to think otherwise. We are far from alone in regarding the Frankfurt cases as plausible. For instance, after surveying a number of objections to them, Randolph Clarke has recently concluded:

> we can fairly say that there’s a strong case to be made for rejecting a familiar kind of ability to do otherwise as a requirement for basic responsibility for action. And perhaps there’s no such requirement. (2014: 138)

Finally, with respect to the ‘radical feminization of men’, the point of our remark that Harris discusses this possibility in his new book without mentioning our earlier discussion of it is not to claim that we thought of it before him. We are happy to concede that it is the other way around. Our point is that he thinks that this treatment of men need not undercut their capacity for freedom and moral reasoning because women do not possess this capacity to a lesser degree; yet he criticizes moral bioenhancement in our sense for doing so, apparently oblivious to the fact we had used the feminization of men as an example of moral bioenhancement in our sense.

References

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