The Myth of the Moral Brain: The Limits of Moral Enhancement

by Harris Wiseman

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One of the most intriguing arenas of current bioethical debate concerns the prospect of enhancing human capabilities through genetic, pharmacological, surgical, cybernetic, or other means. These enhancements could potentially affect a person's physical, cognitive, and emotive characteristics. This raises the possibility of so-called moral enhancement, that is, altering human beings at either the individual or species level to be better disposed to act in ways that are conducive to individual and collective human flourishing. Some bioethicists have gone so far as to assert that moral enhancement is essential if we are to survive as a species, arguing that our technological ability to destroy ourselves through weapons of mass destruction and environmental degradation has surpassed our general capacity for moral reasoning and collective action in service of the common good. They thus contend that "there is a need for society-wide, compulsory moral enhancement as the cure and salvation for our future" (35).

Harris Wiseman does not deny that human beings need to improve morally, as has been the case throughout history. Nevertheless, he argues that current research has generated a myth of the moral brain, in which the potential for moral improvement has been reduced to mere neurobiological manipulation. Instead, Wiseman argues, we must acknowledge that such forms of moral enhancement are limited in scope, do not account for the complex nature of moral decision making, and will be successful only if the subject desires to be enhanced. In short, no form of neurobiological manipulation can make a saint out of an immoral person who joyfully or obliviously wallows in his immorality. Wiseman, however, is by no means a bio-Luddite. He foresees potentially beneficial remedial uses of certain moral enhancements for individuals who fundamentally cannot control their own behavior yet desire to do so in order to avoid incarceration or other negative effects of their self-destructive choices, such as an alcoholic who has a second-order desire to alter his first-order compulsive desire to drink (chapter 9). Such proposals, however, will be effective only if they are integrated with more traditional means of altering an agent's moral behavior, such as Christian moral formation (chapters 6 and 7). Yet Wiseman is skeptical of how well this integration may occur, given the current methodological approach underlying the research that has informed moral-enhancement proposals to date.

Wiseman's central thesis is that "presenting moral functioning in exclusively or even predominantly biological terms is to provide an impoverished account of the reality of moral functioning and its various influences" (16). He warns against the simple dyadic nature–nurture reductionism that dominates media reports on moral-enhancement breakthroughs and even infects the reasoning of neurobiologists who reinforce this reductionist view of the human person by how they interpret and report their experiments. On the contrary, Wiseman recognizes the complex interplay between a person's neurobiological structure, which is not fixed but open to manipulation, and the wider "psychological, social–environmental, political, economic, and religious/spiritual" context in which a person makes moral decisions (21). He criticizes current research that focuses on narrowly construed relationships between certain neurochemical reactions and strictly defined behaviors, for instance, purported causal links between oxytocin and moral traits like empathy, trustworthiness, and generosity (88–95). Instead, Wiseman contends, the results of such research must be "*retranslated* … as part of the massively

complex, interwoven mélange that moral functioning is" (21, original emphasis). His central claim is that "attempts to augment moral functioning by biological means must always be understood, even at their most optimal, as partial efforts, nudges, in the service of more traditional morally formative means, and certainly not as containing any kind of world-salvatory power" (29).

Psychological conditions that may be amenable to moral enhancement within the wider framework Wiseman recommends include personality disorders, sadism, cynicism, prejudices and xenophobia, impulsivity, and weakness of will (57–58). Yet, Wiseman cautions, neurobiological enhancement of such traits presupposes the same fundamental condition required for traditional forms of moral enhancement, namely, a predisposition of will on the part of the subject to be enhanced. It is crucial to remember that a potential subject of enhancement is also an agent who ultimately has a degree of control over his own moral dispositions and behaviors. Such control, moreover, should not be attenuated by neurobiological reprogramming insofar as autonomy in moral decision making and volition is a hallmark of human dignity from both classical, for example, Augustinian and Thomistic, and modern, for example, Kantian, perspectives.

Wiseman proceeds to discuss various experiments that utilize pharmacological manipulation, neurostimulation, and genetic engineering (66–78). He criticizes each of them insofar as their supportive experiments methodologically presuppose a reductionist view of moral decision making, primarily by disregarding the dispositional foundation of moral choices. In conclusion, Wiseman counsels against such hard moral enhancements, which specifically seek to directly modify moral behavior. Instead, he proposes that such means may be utilized to support soft moral enhancements, which acknowledge the multifactorial nature of moral decision making and humbly seek to alter merely one aspect of it. Even so humble a change, however, may have a significant effect on an agent's moral dispositions, helping him make and follow through on decisions in ways that are more in line with both personal—in the sense of aligning with one's second-order desires—and societal expectations.

Wiseman references Aristotelian virtue theory as a model for the complex nature of moral decision making, and it is worth noting that neo-Aristotelians like Alasdair MacIntyre and Martha Nussbaum have emphasized the inherently social context of human moral deliberation. Wiseman thus concludes that "if moral behavior is a situationally embedded, profoundly embodied, and often deeply social or relational affair … then, actually, study into 'the moral brain' will not be able to take a single step forward until it recognizes that this 'moral brain' is something which exists inside a moral person who lives in a moral world populated with other moral people" (114–115). One of the primary social contexts in which individuals make moral decisions is their religious adherence, if they have one, and the major religious traditions of both East and West have devised moral-formation programs to cultivate essential intellectual and moral virtues.

Wiseman focuses on the Christian tradition to show both the promise and the inherent difficulties of aligning current proposals for neurobiological moral enhancement with the socially embedded practices of moral education that constitute the overall project of forming a person as a disciple of Christ. Three foundational dimensions of Christian moral formation are the cognitive, or cultivating theoretical and practical wisdom as a form of worship and a distinctly moral good; the affective, or aligning one's emotive preferences with one's values; and the communal, or fostering one's identity as a member of the body of Christ (159). Wiseman concludes that there is a reasonable prospect for hard moral enhancement within a religious context so long as a proposed biomedical intervention is "envisaged only as a supplementary support mechanism for those already inclined to pursue a project of moral formation" (170). Moral enhancements are not insulated cure-alls but rather are embedded within a complex "moral scaffolding" as part of "an explicit, self-chosen, and temporally extended project of ongoing formation" (182).

Wiseman shares many scholars' concern over the ongoing medicalization of every aspect of human behavior. Inspired by Michel Foucault's *The Birth of the Clinic*, this trend is aptly described by Richard Dees as a diagnostic creep (199) that has led to the fabrication of the concept of moral disease (211). Wiseman does not deny that some neurobiological pathologies affect moral behavior and that there may be space for remedial forms of biomedical enhancement; yet contextual factors will still need to be taken into account in any successful moral-enhancement project (218). As such, we should avoid moving toward a model in which "moral doctors" decide what genetic or biological traits should be preserved, altered, or eliminated—sometimes by eliminating the human being who bears such traits. Rather, Wiseman concludes, effective moral enhancement should be "broad-scope, a partial intervention, to be understood as part of a larger person-centered approach, which does not neglect psycho-social dimensions of the person's life, but rather sees moral enhancement as needing to be subtly integrated within that complex web" (226).

Wiseman offers a sound argument against the continuing reductionist medicalization of human behavior and the advocacy of this methodological approach by proponents of moral enhancement. Nevertheless, certain forms of neurobiological manipulation might make a willing agent more receptive to traditional tried-and-true methods of moral education. After all, Wiseman cautions, we should "resist any spiritual forms of reductionism" (250), in which an agent suffering from addiction or some other pathological condition relies merely on his own willpower and divine grace to reorient his moral dispositions. While God's grace is certainly sufficiently efficacious on its own, St. Thomas Aquinas and other Christian theologians have affirmed that God sometimes elects to operate through secondary instrumental causes. When suitably contextualized and applied both cautiously and humbly, such causal media of grace may include certain forms of biomedical enhancement that assist a person's continual formation as a virtuous moral agent.

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