



BRILL

Book Review



John Harris, *How to be Good: The Possibility of Moral Enhancement*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016, 195 pp.

Advances in neuroscience have raised the prospect of cognitive improvement beyond mere physical enhancement in an effort to augment one's intellectual abilities and performance. Experiments on the human brain to influence a person's behavior as well as underlying intentions and motivations open the door for exploring the possibility of moral enhancement. Although the achievement of this goal through biomedical intervention remains uncertain, if unlikely at least in the foreseeable future, the idea is quite intriguing. In the age of biomedical revolution, moral (bio)enhancement can be seen as the most effective method to offset the untold dangers of scientific ambitions, especially ones associated with abuse of scientific research. However, the idea of moral bioenhancement raises important ethical concerns over its potential impact on fundamental human freedom to choose one's own actions and to bear responsibility for them.

In *How to be Good: The Possibility of Moral Enhancement* John Harris argues that moral bioenhancement would conflict with the essence of moral action, which is inextricably tied to human freedom. The book is divided into twelve chapters. The first two introductory chapters open the discussion by highlighting the importance of morality and its myriad practical implications for contemporary neuroscience, social policy, and criminal justice. The first chapter poses the question of how to be good and focuses on the limitations of technical biomedical means to engendering moral enhancement. For Harris, one of the main reasons why moral enhancement is problematic has to do with the difficulty to predict the exact impact of modern technology on human nature or even on the future of mankind on earth. Harris predicts that humans in the future will have either disappeared (due to scientific miscalculations or natural forces) or undergone further degrees of evolution: "In the future there will be no more 'men' in Plato's sense, no more human beings therefore, and

no more planet earth" (p. 2, 50). If the continuity of humanity (as we now know it) is in question, what then is the point of investigating the future of morality? The answer that Harris gives focuses on the difference that can be made in the meantime, either at the individual (being good) or collective level (doing good). Morality is conducive to the achievement of maximum levels of benefits as well as safety of as many people as possible. The importance of morality is implicit in all social norms underscoring the value of human life. Morality cannot therefore be overemphasized and moral enhancement, in the sense of enabling as many people as possible to make good/better moral choices, seems to be a worthwhile pursuit. What is debatable, however, is whether such enhancement can be better achieved by traditional methods such as education or through biomedical intervention. The second chapter explores some of the main features that Harris associates with morality and moral deliberation such as generality, objectivity, rationality, as well as their importance for human welfare and flourishing. The account that Harris gives is mainly philosophical but he also draws attention to its relevance to religiously-grounded theories of morality: "it is our ability to reason about the nature of the good independently ... that partially accounts for theology and indeed enables us to say non-vacuously that God is, or that the gods are, good" (p. 31). This argument echoes extensive debates within the Islamic theological tradition, particularly among the rationalist Mu'tazilis and traditionalist Ash'aris over both the nature and sources of morality. Harris concludes the chapter by highlighting a major distinction in moral philosophy between judging characters (virtue ethics) and judging actions as well as their outcomes (consequentialism or deontology). He suggests that one of the main limitations of moral bioenhancement would be, that if it materializes, it would apply more to virtue ethics. Evaluating actions and their consequences, on the other hand, would require rational deliberation. In the absence of free and independent rational deliberation, the morality of the action in question would be suspect.

If Harris opposes the idea of moral bioenhancement due to its impact on human freedom, this does not mean that he is against the notion of enhancement per se. By contrast, as his previous works make sufficiently clear, Harris celebrates scientific advances promising to improve human abilities. He welcomes the prospect that future generations (successors) will be able to enjoy such enhanced capacities and capabilities. The third chapter builds on this prospect and anticipates that successors to the current human species may not be entirely human. Therefore, he suggests major modifications to current formulations of the concept of human rights to include partially human or even non-human rational persons/machines. For those who think that this is a far-fetched possibility, Harris argues that biomedical technology has already