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This superb book consists of a sustained, logically constructed and convincing argument in favor of the modest claim that “moral bioenhancement” geared toward expanding and refining our moral sense “must be investigated and ... perhaps deployed” (pp. 2 and 9). Further circumscribing their own conclusion, the authors limit the means of bioenhancement they discuss to the pharmaceutical (rather than, e.g., the genetic). And even there the argument is not that the specific drugs they identify as having certain salutary effects on our moral character (pp. 118–121)—including oxytocin and serotonin—are ones the liberal democratic state should promptly (somehow) incentivize people to ingest. The relevance of those discussions, rather, is simply to provide evidence that more focused pharmaceutical exploration may be fruitful.

The argument for thinking we are in urgent need of moral enhancement has two elements. Much of our current thinking about morality is deficient, and the moral challenges we now confront are greater in both scope and complexity than anything we have faced before. “[H]uman beings are not by nature equipped with a moral psychology that empowers them to cope with the moral problems that ... new conditions of life create” (p. 1). Absent enhancement, it is hard to see how a liberal democracy—or a majority of people therein—could be convinced “to make the cutbacks that are necessary to attain sustainability” in view of the fact that that choice that would leave them not at a “new all-time high” but rather mark “an unpleasant step down from the unrestrained consumerism of the past” (p. 77).

Thus, we come to the table with a certain sense of morality, a morality that may well be part of our evolutionary design and then galvanized within ancient, tightly-knit communities. This the authors describe as common-sense morality (*csm*). Elements include (i) mistaken notions regarding the connection between causation and responsibility (one may think one is exempt from responsibility if all one does is fail to confer a benefit, or if one just makes a miniscule contribution to some vast harm, or if one’s doing what we might consider the “right” thing would fail to reduce harm by even the least amount given the lack of cooperation from others) (pp. 2, 6–7, 22–27, 60–65, 66–72), (ii) a mistaken understanding of just who matters morally (we might focus on our “near and dear” to the exclusion of many others, including distant future people as well as non-human animals) (pp. 27–30), and (iii) a false “tit for tat” model of morality (pp. 35 and 108).
That we are operating under a partially false morality would be reason enough for revision. Here, however, the need for revision is made urgent by the fact that in its present form CSM is completely overwhelmed by the moral challenges that we now face. It is easier, according to the authors, to harm than to benefit (e.g. pp. 12, 46 and 130), and advances in technology have given us more power to harm than we have ever had before. Witness, specifically, the phenomena of anthropomorphic climate change and environmental degradation (p. 84). If we stand by and do nothing, processes relating to climate change and the environment that have already been let loose can be expected eventually to result in a very deep level of harm that cannot be undone, what the authors call “Ultimate Harm” (pp. 46 and 99). Yet no one of us can effectively do anything to avert that harm. A large and cooperative group effort is required. The problem is that our incentives for working cooperatively to do what we together can do to avert harm—the sorts of incentives that may well have functioned nicely in closer-knit communities in times past—fade in the context of the vast and disconnected population that now inhabits the Earth and given that the most obvious victims of the harms that we cannot prevent without significant cost to ourselves and our own “near and dear” will be vast numbers of future people whom we and our children and our children’s children will never know at all.

A revised CSM would (presumably) not be vulnerable to those concerns. But the tenets of any revised CSM would almost certainly go beyond “our spontaneous moral attitudes” (p. 103). Indeed, the endorsement of them within the liberal democratic state may be politically “suicidal” (p. 80). “The only possible remedy would seem to be ... that the voters be morally enhanced” (p. 98). Hence, the desirability of a pharmaceutical push toward altruism: a drug that will “widen the horizons of our moral consciousness” (p. 103) and enable us to do a better job of both imaginatively standing in the shoes of others and actually sacrificing something to improve their plights (p. 109).

The authors’ critique of CSM is clear, concise and important. But it’s also interestingly provocative. For example, the authors find the common-sense connection between responsibility and causation defective. To make their point, they cite problems of causal overdetermination and collective action (pp. 22–26) and the weakness of the act-omission distinction (pp. 26–27; 60–65). But there remains plenty to discuss, including whether the authors have effectively established that causation should be entirely dispensed with when it comes to analyzing responsibility (Can’t the individual who does as the group does still properly be said to cause a particular harm even in the case where it’s also true that, had the individual done otherwise, the harm still