

Harris Wiseman

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

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While thinking over moral enhancement (or any enhancement going beyond the restitution of a lost or worsened normal capacity), we embrace a few very important premises:

1. something has gone wrong with our behaviour and we are not satisfied any more with what the Nature has left us with;
2. we do not think „natural“ is the only „normal,“ but we think we can recreate the notion of and redefine the norm;
3. we think we know what is better for humans and how to achieve it in a shortened procedure rather than by (living) experience.

Those statements are quite brave: they also imply that there has not been our own guilt in producing a human being with such a scarce empathy and so sharpened an egoistic drive. Because, if it would be our fault, it would be quite unusual to be solved by ourselves. Obviously, to think of any kind and procedure of moral „enhancement,“ means to have very clear ideas on the absolute superiority of humans (both human knowledge and human logic) over Nature.

In his recent book *The Myth of the Moral Brain: The Limits of Moral Enhancement*, Harris Wiseman, schooled at the University of Cambridge Faculty of Divinity and now researcher at the Institute of Education and University College London, challenges the nowadays quite spread and simplified seeking for moral enhancement, particularly the idea that such „bioenhancement“ be successfully reached by technological and/or pharmaceutical means. Wiseman correctly stresses the complexity of human moral functioning and questions the very notion of the „moral brain.“

This Wiseman's claim fits quite well into the major conclusions of the series of studies published in *The Moral Brain: Essays on the Evolutionary and Neuroscientific Aspects of Morality* (edited by Jan Verplaetse et al.),¹ which, pitifully, does not appear on Wiseman's list of references at all (like does not the historical study by Verplaetse on „localizing“ the moral sense, 1800-1930),² that there is no single „moral center:“ several cortical and subcortical structures, like the cingulate cortex, medial and ventromedial prefrontal cortex, hippocampus, amygdala, insula, etc., play certain roles in preparing and executing moral behaviour, and each moral task (processing personal vs. impersonal moral dilemmas; empathy; etc.) seems to be associated to its own neural network.³ In his book, divided in four major chapters (Philosophy, Science, Faith, and Praxis), Wiseman covers the sub-topics like „The Philosophy of Moral Enhancement,“ „Conceptual Issues and Practical Realities in Moral Enhancement,“ „The Biochemical Bases for Moral Enhancement“ (oxytocin, serotonin, and dopamine), „Moral Education and Faith,“ „Treating Addiction: Moral Enhancement in Practice,“ etc. Having had analysed both theoretical and empirical data and proved the highest complexity of development and functioning of morality, Wiseman wisely suggests an integrated bio-psycho-social approach, not necessarily to moral enhancement, but to any consideration of this problem. In this way, Wiseman acts in the best „bioethical“ way, providing interdisciplinary approach and perspectives from various scientific and non-scientific angles, as well as a general caveat, now much better understood and documented.

Of course, one might go so far to claim the humans have not only right to be morally enhanced, but also duty to improve the society if such a procedure is available. But, on the other hand, even if such an „enhancement“ would be possible, how would it affect the position of the enhanced among the non-enhanced ones? In order to really improve the society, a certain critical mass, if not all, should be enhanced and certainly not only a minority. Than, would not the extinction of the „bad“ cause difficulties with understanding, defining, and discerning the „good“? Finally, we should never forget that a lot of various kinds of „enhancer“ substances have already been used for a long time: the result has sometimes been quite the opposite, unveiling „too brave“ men with cocaine in their blood, dead in the street fights, or those trying to „fly“ from the tops of the buildings, under the influence of phencyclidine. Let us hope the moral enhancers would morally enhance also those proscribing and selling them.

Amir Muzur

1 Jan Verplaetse, Jelle De Schrijver, Sven Vanneste, and Johan Braeckman, eds., *The Moral Brain: Essays on the Evolutionary and Neuroscientific Aspects of Morality* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2009).

2 Jan Verplaetse, *Localizing the Moral Sense: Neuroscience and the Search for the Cerebral Seat of Morality, 1800-1930* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2009).

3 Cf. Amir Muzur, „The Moral Brain“ (book review), *Synthesis philosophica* 24, No. 2 (2009): 377.