

Unfit for the Future: The Need for Moral Enhancement
by Ingmar Persson and Julian Savulescu (Oxford University Press, 2012)

Reviewed by Richard Joyce for *Analysis* 73 (2013)

[penultimate draft]

Ingmar Persson and Julian Savulescu are concerned with a Big Problem for which they advocate a Bold Solution. The Big Problem is the threatened status of the human race, now at risk from such dangers as global warming and weapons of mass destruction in the hands of terrorists. Human psychology—designed by natural selection for living in small close-knit groups on the African savanna—is, they think, ill-suited to solve the problem by familiar means such as socio-political arrangements and moral education. Their Bold Solution is that humans might need to have their altruistic dispositions and sense of justice artificially enhanced via the biological manipulation of such things as oxytocin and selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs).

Persson and Savulescu are colleagues at the Oxford Uehiro Centre for Practical Ethics, and this book builds upon a background of individual and collaborative writings. Savulescu has written extensively in favor of the biological and pharmacological enhancement of humans and the eugenic selection of embryos. Persson has criticized the act-omission distinction and approached several issues in reproductive ethics from a consequentialist perspective. *Unfit for the Future* is, in fact, a thoroughly consequentialist text, though the authors do not state this explicitly. That practices and actions that might seem intuitively morally dubious may be justified for the sake of the greater good is accepted seemingly without much critical scrutiny within these pages.

Unfit for the Future is a short book (134 pages of text) with an unusual structure. Of the nine chapters that follow the brief introductory first chapter, Chapters 2 and 10 comprise about half the book. Obviously, then, the seven remaining chapters are much shorter—some as brief as four pages. Nearly everything that really matters to the central thesis of the book is contained in the two principal chapters. Chapter 2 outlines certain aspects of what is termed “commonsense morality,” placing it within an evolutionary framework. The evolutionary framework is used as a partial debunking device: explaining, for example, why humans morally differentiate between acts and omissions, even though (Persson and Savulescu think) there is no defensible ground for this differentiation. In this way they also explain away the intuitive appeal of negative rights, a bias toward the near future in decision-making, and a preference for the welfare of kith and kin over strangers. Chapter 10 urges the case for moral bioenhancement: explaining what it is and responding to possible criticisms that this proposal would deny humans freedom and responsibility. The seven short chapters between (chapters 3-9) cover a somewhat disjointed miscellanea of topics: describing the twin threats of climate change and weapons of mass destruction, summarizing the tragedy of the commons, exploring the responsibilities of affluent countries, and arguing that liberal democracies lack the resources to respond effectively to these threats.

The basic problem, as Persson and Savulescu see it, is that people don’t cooperate enough,

due to deficiencies in altruism and frailties in their sense of justice. Sometimes people want to cooperate more but suffer from weakness of will; sometimes they just don't want to. How do we get someone (let's make it a *he*) to cooperate when he doesn't want to? The solution of the authoritarian regime is to impose sanctions of sufficient nastiness that it becomes prudent for him to change his mind. The solution of the liberal democracy is to try to educate him about the desirability of cooperation in the hope that he will change his mind. Persson and Savulescu's solution is to tinker directly with his brain chemistry to dispose him to change his mind. They prefer the last solution because (a) the methods of the liberal democracy are unlikely to succeed, and (b) the methods of the authoritarian state, while effective in enforcing unpopular policies, have a tendency to go pear-shaped in other ways (usually involving an immoderate liking of military uniforms).

Only the liberal democracy allows the individual the right to persist in limiting his cooperative tendencies if he so chooses. The authoritarian regime need recognize no such right, and nor apparently do Persson and Savulescu. This is where their dyed-in-the-wool consequentialism is most apparent. The individual should have his desires interfered with neurologically, even (presumably) against his will, because this will be for the greater good of future humankind. Persson and Savulescu try to mitigate how appalling this sounds (even while countenancing doing this to "hundreds of millions" of people (121)) by saying that "the moral enhancement that we are recommending is largely a matter of motivating ourselves to do what we already believe to be right, or overcoming our moral weakness of will" (123). But, as just noted, this is only half the story, for there are plenty of individuals who simply lack the desires and values in favor of increasing the domain of their cooperative tendencies. Someone in the grip of the tragedy of the commons, for example, who judges that she should graze her livestock on the common land because everyone else is doing so—who, that is, desires to act *uncooperatively* in this respect—need not be suffering from weakness of will but may be making a perfectly rational decision in the circumstances. The prisoner who decides to rat on his fellow inmate in order to shorten his own sentence may also be making a rational choice to act uncooperatively. Persson and Savulescu count only the global consequences of such uncooperative decisions, and would, it seems, encourage cooperation by pharmacological means even when it is rational for the individual in the circumstances to choose otherwise.

They play their cards close to their chests as to precisely what form of utility they wish to promote (preference satisfaction?), but in any case the possibility of neurological manipulation opens new vistas for the serious consequentialist. Why not biologically boost the amount of satisfaction people feel? (Why should Socrates ever feel dissatisfied when he can puff an oxytocin nasal spray?) If global warming dooms our descendants to inhabit a sorry world, then perhaps the consequentialist will espouse an obligation for genetic manipulation that encourages a more stoical acceptance of the situation—perhaps even a kind of bloody-minded gratification at the outcome?

Persson and Savulescu have written a provocative book that is likely to prompt plenty of discussion. However, they fail to establish that institutional, political, and educational changes within the structure of a liberal democracy cannot address the global problems that humanity now faces. And when it comes down to it, they really have very little in the way of concrete suggestions concerning what form this bioenhancement will take. (The pages

discussing oxytocin and SSRIs number only three.) Perhaps the latter is an unfair criticism, since their ambition is “merely to put some proposals on the agenda” (11); they are not arguing that moral bioenhancement is necessary or sufficient to solve the Big Problem, only recommending that its profits and costs be carefully explored. Nevertheless, until we have a specific proposal of bioenhancement before us, assessing whether it is a reasonable idea, even by consequentialist standards, is next to impossible.