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Web Roundup: Moral enhancement

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By Jane Roberts

This month's web round up focuses on notions of treatment as enhancement...or vice versa? I've recently come off a stretch of spending quite a lot of time reading up on debates surrounding behavioral disorders in children. One issue that seems to crop up repeatedly is whether the use of medications in these young populations, particularly those living with ADHD, is merely [treatment for the problem, or increasing the normalization of enhancement](#) in an era where, for many, being 'enough' just isn't enough anymore .

A recent [article](#) proposed that the millennial generation is more concerned with self- improvement and holds higher self-expectations than any generation before. Academic and social pressures, especially in those who have spent more of their formative years on social media, play into a wider societal expectation that one should be the best that they can possibly be using whatever means are available. The use of medications like Adderall for treatment of ADHD has long been indicated, but in this era of striving for self- improvement, such medications have moved from the realm of treatment to that of performance enhancer. The rise of the [good grade pill](#) is how the New York Times characterized a trend in high school students taking Adderall to gain an academic edge, while a [growing percentage of doctors](#) are willing prescribe Adderall to help in school, especially to those kids who are at an economic disadvantage.

This idea of academic performance enhancement via pharmaceutical means has been with us for a while, but what seems to be having its moment now is the notion of moral enhancement- the very sci-fi sounding possibility that behavior can be changed to something more morally acceptable through the use of a pill. Think '[A Clockwork Orange](#)' style [aversion therapy](#) in a tablet. The scene in Kubrick's film is referenced in this [analysis of moral enhancement and moral freedom](#) in which the we are asked to imagine witnessing an instance of road rage in which an angry driver stuck in a traffic jam inflicts abuse on the driver behind him. Such behavior violates behavioral, and many would argue moral, norms. The question asked of moral enhancement is if there was a technology that could affect the brain in a way that would halt that behavior, should we use it? Is moral conformity something we should strive for?

Its true that there are already medications out there, such as Prozac and Oxytocin, that affect our behavior, through making us less anxious, or increasing feeling of love an empathy, but we don't necessarily view them as drugs designed to affect our moral thinking. As [this article](#) notes, scientists are increasingly targeting drugs that improve ethical behavior, but the question asked here is salient: does something desirable, such as altruism, empathy, or 'treatment' for racism, count as genuine moral behavior? Will there come a point, as the authors suggest, that morality drugs end up in the water supply, or as some sort of future substitute for prison? This [piece](#) on the CBC discusses the difficulties inherent in the idea of a 'morality pill' noting that moral intuition, and the decision made by a person to act on that intuition or not, is an essential part of being human. Anything that interferes with that is in a sense messing with what it means to be human.

On the flip side, this article in [Slate](#) questions whether humanity as a whole is equipped to deal with 21st century challenges. The article cites Oxford University academics [Julian Savulescu and Ingmar Persson](#) arguing that as humans, we possess a moral psychology evolved for life in smaller communities with much less basic technologies than what we now have access to. They believe a "morality pill" could make self-control, empathy, and altruism more commonplace while discouraging violence and racism making humanity better able to address the worlds biggest problems.

This [critique](#) of the whole idea of morality in pill form lies in the argument that moral conformity comes at the cost of moral freedom. If pharmaceutical interventions can tweak our brains so that we become incapable of wrongdoing, we lose what [John Danaher](#) refers to as the 'freedom to fall' in which the freedom to do the wrong thing is central to what it means to be human. The subject of the discussion, the philosopher [Michael Hauskeller](#) sees pro-enhancement arguments as failing to grasp fundamental aspects of the human condition, suggesting that these potential future technologies will not necessarily be improvements at all; rather will leave us as empty shells, bereft of any sense of an authentic self. Perhaps as Hauskeller and others suggest, in order to do good, we actually need to have the freedom to do bad. It becomes a choice that we make. Interesting food for thought to close out the month of March...

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