



## Moral Enhancement: A Reality Check

By [Nayef Al-Rodhan](#)

SEPTEMBER 9, 2016

Our neurochemicals are now allegedly the players driving the narrative arcs of our lives, responsible for how we make decisions, including moral ones. Neuro-wisdom suggests that, if we want to address social ills or intervene in blighted lives, then we ought to go straight to the brain to enhance its neurochemical constituents. In *The Myth of the Moral Brain: The Limits of Moral Enhancement*, Harris Wiseman cautions us against seeing the brain as the “key” to “altering our natures” in order to transform us, at long last, “into altruistic and peaceable creatures.”

The science of morality is a burgeoning area of inquiry these days. Proponents of the moral brain ardently believe neuroscience will crack the “code” underwriting how our brains “do morality.” Needless to say, the stakes are sky high. The military is already on the neuro-bandwagon, funding projects to embed a moral code in robots — a highly contentious endeavor which I’ve discussed at length in an [article](#) I published with *Foreign Affairs* in 2015.

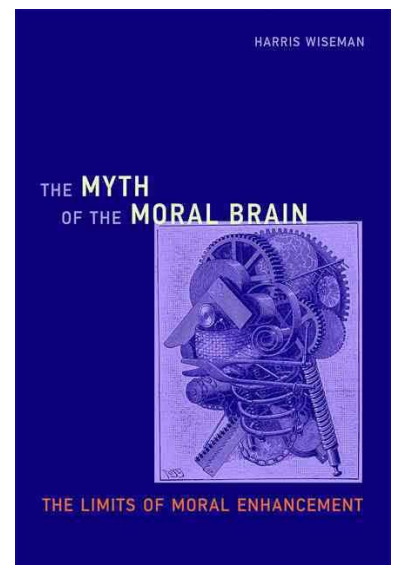
Wiseman, who holds a PhD from the Faculty of Divinity, Cambridge University, has long been preoccupied with philosophical questions surrounding biology and morality. In this book, he advocates for nuanced clarity and a holistic understanding of the subject, launching a frontal critique of the neuroscientific paradigm. To paraphrase a scholar he references, his aim is to show that we cannot think of our moral stances as determined by what we have for breakfast — which is another way of saying that we should not accept the view that we are as moral as the dose of the “right” neurochemical in our system.

The Myth of the Moral Brain

The Limits of Moral Enhancement

By [Harris Wiseman](#)

Published 02.12.2016  
The MIT Press  
352 Pages



Nor should we imagine that neurostimulation is a solution to moral failings. Transcranial magnetic stimulation over the right temporoparietal junction has been shown to alter how people judge harm inflicted on others, and may therefore appear to be an exciting intervention in helping to treat disorders like psychopathy. But in fact it can lead to controversial responses, or culturally inappropriate solutions. Let us consider, for instance, the possibility of isolating or suppressing behavior tied to “lack of empathy” — even though, to be sure, lack of empathy does not necessarily make somebody evil or a serial killer. Excising psychopaths from populations, as Wiseman points out, might in fact leave humanity worse off. The fact is, psychopathy — which is associated with low inhibition and boldness, robust stress immunity, and an appetite for risk — has distinct upsides. As bioethicist David Wasserman writes in [“When bad people do good things,”](#) we have every reason to believe that a lot of good work can be done by people who otherwise possess “moral defects”; they can remove tumors in the surgical arena without a nervous slip of the scalpel, coolly negotiate important treaties, and serve as highly effective business leaders. Additionally, in some societies, uncompromising strength — verging on brutality — may provide the only means of securing survival. Wiseman reminds us, in other words, that questions of “normalcy” and “health” are to some degree socially constructed.

Furthermore, the neurochemical paradigm promises quick fixes it cannot deliver, at least for the time being. For one thing, expectations are insufficiently grounded in actual practice. For another, the development of any new pharmaceutical agent requires billions of dollars and subsequent authorization from competent agencies. But these constitute just a fraction of the roadblocks bedeviling implementation.

The discussion clearly needs a full-blooded reality check, which Wiseman provides by invoking applied moral philosophy.

⌘

The underlying premise of *The Myth of the Moral Brain* is that biomedical interventions for moral enhancement are always *auxiliary* to the larger “psycho-social and environmental backgrounds in which any given intervention is to be embedded.” Biology plays an important role in this picture, but our morality is determined in more complex ways — by synergies that go beyond biological factors. Not only does Wiseman criticize the notion of “biological causality,” but he also rejects the fallacy — advanced by thinkers like Ingmar Persson and Julian Savulescu — that “the biological manipulation of the moral capacities of the human creature holds some world-salvatory potential.”

Instead, moral functioning is a reflection of many influences, a “hodgepodge” of factors that cannot be understood or appreciated in primarily biomedical terms. In his book, Wiseman takes an admirably balanced view: moral functioning *is* biologically mediated (that is, can be influenced by biology) but biological influences are not “the only elements that matter.” To achieve this balance, Wiseman draws a critical distinction between what he calls “soft” and “hard” moral enhancement. According to him, soft forms of moral enhancement, like “nudges,” have the best chance of success. In fact, we can already see them in play in therapies or treatments to manage such “undesirable behaviors” as compulsive gambling or tobacco addiction. Transhumanists, for their part, support hard moral enhancement — “explicit attempts to use the technology of pharmacology to develop the moral functioning of persons.” Wiseman argues that the claims made for hard moral enhancement are overstated, and so they generate unrealistic expectations.

The distinction is sensible enough, but how practical is it to assume that we will be able to resist the temptation of “hard” enhancement? We are, after all, rigged for gratification, conditioned to want to “feel good.” We seek pleasure, not pain; happiness, not misery; validation, not defeat. Our primary motivators are what I have previously called the “[Neuro P5](#)”: pleasure, pride, permanency, power, and profit — however these may be translated across socio-cultural contexts. Whenever technologies that enhance these motivators become available, we are likely to pursue them.

□

Wiseman underscores the “hypnotic effect” of brain research — of its attractive tools, like brain imagery, and of the many “findings” that amount to little more than pseudo-science. As imperfect as these tools are, however, Wiseman’s tone is unduly harsh, which may deter readers who would otherwise find the book provocative and useful. Wiseman comes close to expressing wholesale aversion toward neuroscience. This is prudent. The discipline has obvious merits, having provided groundbreaking treatments and remedial therapies for many serious conditions. In fact, even fields as contested as the genetics of morality can be defended on the grounds that they have provided early insights into the relationship between perceptions of harm, moral choices, and serotonin transmitter genes. We should acknowledge the worth of these findings, while also acknowledging that our understanding of the brain is not remotely close to complete.

Most importantly, Wiseman seems to ignore the fact that neuroscientists would be the first to admit that there is more to our morality than

biological conditioning alone.

I have myself expressed this position in my theory of [\*Neuro-rational Physicalism\*](#), showing how knowledge and our understanding of the world are contingent on several factors, including prior assumptions, cultural values, and temporal inputs. In my theory of human nature, [\*emotional amoral egoism\*](#), which is based on findings from neuroscience, I take into account the contextual contingencies that shape morality. Our neurochemistry is our lowest common denominator; we are egoistic insofar as we always pursue those actions that maximize our chances of survival (which constitutes a basic form of egoism). The [\*drive for survival\*](#) is encoded in our genes, but, beyond that, we are who we are because of the circumstances in which we find ourselves. We are therefore neither intrinsically good nor bad but rather amoral, meaning that our nature is malleable: our moral compass will shift depending on context and our perceived emotional self-interest.

Consequently, many of Wiseman's claims throughout the book are not so much provocative as they are cautionary and humanistic. Certainly, the human capacity for transcendence or for making deliberate choices should never be dismissed. We need to be reminded of this capacity in an era when we can so easily fall prey to promises of improving our lives by means of "simple" chemical manipulation. Wiseman aptly compares the biologization of moral functioning to quick fixes for depression: we administer chemicals that target the biological dimension of depression, but avoid examining, to say nothing of changing, our lives. Biomedical moral enhancement is not a "magic wand that can turn bad people into saints." Oversimplification can lead to diminished understanding of profound social problems.

In addition, when determining which or whose morality to enhance, it's important to keep in mind that we cannot "even agree on what defines 'the good.'" As Wiseman rightly states, moral enhancement is *always* contextual, and, therefore, individuals deciding to enhance themselves morally have to choose which and whose moral values to augment.

✧

Unlike many other scholars and philosophers interested in the subject, Wiseman ventures to account for the role of religion and teleological idiosyncrasies. The profound ways in which religions shape notions of the self, of virtue, and of duty are all largely absent from studies of the moral brain. Empirical work on the moral brain often makes no reference to how religiously inspired values and identities might modulate subjects' responses in certain "test" settings. Likewise, moral enhancement that seeks to make people more empathetic or honest, is often considered a

one-size-fits-all kind of intervention, which will impact everyone equally — irrespective of the differences that separate them. But differences do exist, at both the individual and societal levels. For instance, in the West some studies in social psychology have revealed that immorality is most frequently associated with harmful behavior, like stealing or killing. By contrast, in less individualistic societies — such as those influenced by Confucianism, which emphasizes “civility” as fundamental to moral excellence — obligation-bound relationships are more common and duty-based morality is the norm. The problem with considering morality as a universal value that can be enhanced in, or transferred to, individuals thus remains inescapably problematic.

Furthermore, one can make the argument that interventions for moral enhancement omit individual human agency. For example, higher levels of oxytocin are supposed to instill generosity, which is universally considered beneficial for society insofar as it leads to higher rates of charitable donations. However, individual motivations for generosity and gratitude are lost on proponents of moral enhancement.

Wiseman proceeds to examine specific case studies and applied scenarios where moral enhancement could be tested “on the ground.” In his book’s fourth section, “Praxis,” he explores the important distinction between enhancement and remediation: What are the moral limits of medicine? Is there such a thing as “moral sickness”? Is depression a sickness? What about psychopathy, or addiction? Addictions provide an especially fertile testing ground for exploring the dichotomy between treatment and enhancement. How should we view, for instance, the treatment of alcoholism? Is alcoholism a mental health problem or an occasion for moral enhancement? Is removing an addiction a matter of remediation? These are open questions the book asks us to consider. Biological, cultural, and religious factors have all been invoked, yet the treatments are often the same, irrespective of the alleged causes leading up to addiction (i.e., whether it’s regarded as a “disease,” a personal choice, or a learned behavior). Drawing a line between moral enhancement and mental health treatment is, in other words, just about impossible.

With these examples, Wiseman brings much-needed practical insight to a debate that is often too abstract. However, I feel the book would be even more convincing if it included still more case studies and more serious explorations of actual scenarios of moral enhancement in society. These would provide the most helpful reality checks, serving Wiseman’s central mission: critiquing reductionist strands in neuroscience.

In his conclusion, Wiseman blames our obsession with moral enhancement on our socio-cultural context. “We live in a culture where everything is replaceable,” he writes. We dispose of items because of the

smallest of blemishes. We must not forget, however, that we are as firmly defined by our vices as by our virtues. In moderation, certain vices — from occasional gluttonous indulgences to procrastination — actually enrich our lives. For instance, while we might be inclined to think of laziness as invariably counterproductive, in some cases, it can lead to creative outcomes. Consider Bill Gates’s famous quote that he would gladly hire lazy people to do difficult tasks for the simple reason that “a lazy person will find an easy way to do it.”

It may be that our pursuit of moral enhancement is a passing phase. Perhaps we will arrive at neuro-saturation, followed by neuro-fatigue. The alternative prospect — projects for moral enhancement continuing apace, without regulation or accountability — is a frightening one indeed.

☒

[Professor Nayef Al-Rodhan \(@SustainHistory\) is a neuroscientist, geostrategist, and philosopher.](#)