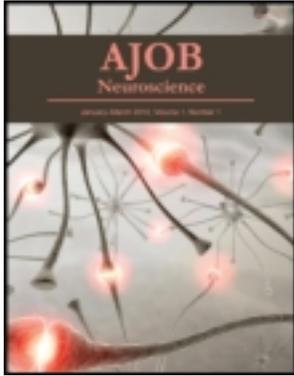


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AJOB Neuroscience

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:
<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/uabn20>

The Necessity of Objective Standards for Moral Enhancement

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To cite this article: Filippo Santoni de Sio, Hannah Maslen & Nadira Faulmüller (2012): The Necessity of Objective Standards for Moral Enhancement, AJOB Neuroscience, 3:4, 15-16

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/21507740.2012.721855>

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Open Peer Commentaries

The Necessity of Objective Standards for Moral Enhancement

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Addressing skeptical arguments from philosophy and neuroscience, John Shook (2012) claims that it is conceptually coherent to describe certain forms of mental intervention as “moral enhancement,” and that it is legitimate to imagine (and hope for) the development of such interventions in the near future. His conceptualization of moral enhancement, however, fails in our view because of his refusal to recognize any objectivity to values. Moreover, this foundational conceptual mistake adversely affects the clarity of his normative position toward future possible moral enhancements.

According to Shook, to establish whether a particular modification in the mind of an individual constitutes moral enhancement, we need to abandon “ethical objectivism.” Ethical objectivism involves the claim that “the moral norms to apply should be the justifiably correct moral standards regardless of what any culture or individual happens to endorse” (10). Instead, he argues, we need to adopt the approach of “minimal moral naturalism,” which proposes to “apply relevant sciences for studying *how humans manage to produce their moral valuations and perform whatever they take to be morality* without any nonexistent features involved” (4, emphasis added). This leads him to the claim that subjective, social, and intercultural ethical standards are sufficient to give meaning to efficacious moral enhancement.

Shook’s reason for refusing ethical objectivism is twofold. On the one hand, he wants to discuss moral enhancement without being involved in meta-ethical debates. On the other, he fears that absolutist views on morality could eventually lead to a “neuroethical dystopia,” in which “individuals thinking too hard about moral ambiguities and dilemmas are told that they simply need their enhancers adjusted” (8).

However, we argue that (1) at a conceptual level, by giving up reference to any objective ethical standard, the concept of moral *enhancement* becomes indistinguishable from the concept of mental *modification*, and (2) at a moral level, the significance of the distinction between a more “liberal” and a potentially “authoritarian” conception of

moral enhancement may be better defended by accepting the objectivity of *some* values, while consistently retaining Shook’s “acquiescence to a pluralistic reality” (4).

THE NECESSITY OF OBJECTIVE STANDARDS FOR THE CONCEPT OF MORAL ENHANCEMENT

Normative objective standards are required for something to be enhanced. When we talk of cognitive enhancement, for instance, as opposed to mere cognitive modification, we necessarily imply an *improvement* of certain abilities. In this case, the objective standards have reference to measures of capacity, speed, and span. It is understood that, for example, being faster in reasoning is cognitively better than being slower.

However, *pace* Shook, the need for objective standards is not confined to nonsocial concepts. For example, the concept of social *progress* refers to the improvement of a society in comparison with its prior state(s), and, hence requires reference to objective standards. Whether value-laden judgments about societal progress are appropriate is not relevant here. The point is that *if* we want to use the concept of progress in a coherent way, *then* we cannot avoid referring to objective standards. If we do not refer to objective standards, we cannot judge societies or human practices as anything other than *different* from each other.

As in the cases of cognitive enhancement and social progress, reference to some objective standards is also necessary to make the concept of moral enhancement coherent. Shook does recognize the challenges presented by an appeal to subjective, social and intercultural standards for moral enhancement. In his hypothesized near future, “Each society will inevitably demand and enforce a distinction between what it regards as ‘genuine’ moral *enhancement* and specialized moral *modifiers*, since specialized modifications won’t typically conform to what society generally expects of moral conduct from everyone” (11, emphasis added). However, he argues that intercultural

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ethical principles and social considerations will provide a sufficient standard against which we can distinguish modification from enhancement. But this is not the case. First, intercultural consensus does not always exist. And where it does not exist, a decision about what would count as moral enhancement has to be made on other grounds, as Shook himself concedes: “We still await some formula for deciding precisely which cultures shall count here, of course” (11). Second, intercultural moral consensus may—and actually did—exist on patently immoral principles like slavery or sexual discrimination. But a neurotechnology that could make slaves or women happily accept and perpetuate their conditions could not qualify as “moral enhancement,” whatever the intercultural consensus on the topic might be. Similarly, “social norms” cannot substitute moral standards. Shook provides the example of the reduction of antisocial behavior (particularly propensity toward violence) as an uncontroversial case of moral enhancement throughout his article. And rightly so, since the reduction of violence is a sound moral goal for any society. The problem is that Shook refuses this objective explanation and insists on the accordance with “prevailing social norms” instead. But, again, the prevalence of a norm cannot make that norm good, and a mental modification made in accordance with a prevailing social norm does not qualify *ipso facto* as a moral enhancement.

FREEDOM, PLURALISM, AND THE LIMITS OF MORAL ENHANCEMENT

Shook’s diffidence toward *any* form of ethical objectivism is not only detrimental to the quality of his argument, but is also unjustified. First, endorsing a weak form of moral objectivism, which posits the existence of *some* general valid standards for evaluating human action, doesn’t commit us to take a final position in the metaethical debate. One may refuse to make a *final choice* between, for example, a deontological, a consequentialist, or a virtue-ethics system while accepting the reasonableness of certain moral standards traditionally recommended by one or more of these systems: the promotion of well-being, respect for autonomy, development of basic capabilities.

Consequently, the concern for a possible “slippery slope” leading from “moral objectivism” to “moral absolutism” and from there to the justification of “authoritarian” political or social systems imposing “moral enhancement” on people against their will appears misplaced. Accepting the objectivity of some human values does not amount to fixing a final hierarchy among them to be rigidly applied for judging and evaluating human choices and actions across all possible circumstances. By accepting the values, for example, of well-being, autonomy, and education, one does not commit oneself to any theory about *which* of these values should be pursued *by a certain person in a cer-*

tain circumstance. In other words, the recognition of value-objectivity is compatible with the acceptance of the fact of value-incommensurability, and this commits us to leave a huge space for pluralism, and to recognize the value of freedom of choice among the indefinite number of legitimate possible ethical options.

Thus, accepting the objectivity of some basic moral values, far from hindering his steps, may even aid Shook in his attempt to offer a liberal answer to the questions about the coherence and viability of some forms of moral enhancement. It may, for example, help make sense of his interesting suggestion about the possibility of developing “specialized” moral enhancers. According to his examples, one day, “Couples may seek a neurological boost to their relationship through an attachment enhancer” and “A teacher might want to enhance his or her concern for, and strengthen intentions toward, helping the immature and uneducated.” (11). We agree that these should count as coherent forms of moral enhancement. The reason, in our view, is that the goals pursued by the individuals are clearly morally good, and not just that they are *desired* by those individuals (as would be sufficient on Shook’s subjective model).

On the other hand, as Shook himself admits, other cases may be more controversial. Should we see as morally enhanced the “politician who modif[ies] unwanted aspects of her or his moral conscience in order to reduce her or his sense of fairness and strengthen her or his intentions that wealthy supporters receive every possible assistance,” or the “person [who] wants a moral enhancer to intensify her or his devotion for her or his favorite sports team to the point of fanaticism”? To be sure, similar cases are necessarily controversial in a moral pluralistic perspective. Still, an important distinction has to be made. On an *objectivist* version of moral pluralism about value like the one that we propose, it is possible to understand *why* these cases, unlike the previous ones, are controversial—because they entail at the same time the pursuing of some good goals (e.g. political coherence) and the acceptance of bad ones (e.g. reduction of sense of fairness). But on a “subjective model of moral enhancement” (11) like that endorsed by Shook, such explanations are not available, and *all* cases are in the same way controversial, as they may be seen as good or bad according to what individuals or cultures desire or value. Within his subjective framework, individuals and societies can pursue many different kinds of mental modification but, we have argued, they cannot bring about any intelligible kind of moral enhancement.

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