

## Book Review

# Unfit for the Future

by Persson & Savulescu, New York: Oxford University Press, 2012

*Laura Crompton*<sup>†</sup>  
laura.crompton@campus.lmu.de

In the book *Unfit for the Future* Persson and Savulescu portray the problems and challenges humanity will have to cope with in the near future. Problems technological progress and demographic growth have evoked can't be solved through common moral psychology, which was assimilated to small, non-technological societies many many years ago. There is a need of moral enhancement for humanity to be able to cope with present problems.

It is Persson and Savulescu's opinion that humanity is 'ill-equipped' (p. 12) through the so called 'common-sense morality'. Moral attitudes of various societies all over the world can be brought to one common denominator, which the authors call 'common-sense morality'. This 'common-sense morality' is not capable of giving us the moral psychology to cope with the problems modern societies have to face. Further in the book, Persson and Savulescu illustrate the components of this 'common-sense morality'. For example, it is said that we care more about what happens to the people who are close to us, than the ones further away. Also it is rather difficult for us to sympathize and emphasize with a larger group of people. Furthermore our causal contribution towards an action is proportional to the responsibility we carry for this action. Another point illustrating the 'common-sense morality' is that altruism, which exists as long as the members of a community are able to observe each other constantly. All these components forming this 'common-sense morality' can't be transferred to modern societies as they consist of millions of citizens in which anti-social individuals are bound to strive against the stream. In my opinion the theory of a 'common-sense morality' is very strong and needs to be looked at more precisely.

<sup>†</sup> Ludwigs-Maximilians-Universität München, Germany.

It is indeed true that the history of all societies goes back to one common point from which on these developed in various ways. But it's these various ways out of which norms, morality and the ethics of a culture sprouted and grew. We learn and adapt certain moral attitudes through the circumstances we grow up in, presented throughout our parents and the environment. This is the morality that influences our evaluation and the actual process of certain actions. Each culture has its own way of handling moral questions, dilemmas and problems. It may be true that moral attitudes at the very beginning of societies were strongly related and showed parallels in between each other, which explains why even now some features might be very similar if not even the same. But as I already mentioned, societies very quickly developed their own cultures and traditions influencing moral attitudes within each individual society. Taking all this into consideration, it seems reasonable that moral attitudes can't be taken under one common denominator, as these sprout of the societies' individual cultures and environments. 'Common-sense morality' can't exist, as moral attitudes are individually adjusted to separate societies. Another point, which needs to be taken into consideration is the fact that we have now have the possibility of sharing and communicating our moral attitude through the connected world we live in, made possible through globalisation. Through social networks such as Facebook or video platforms such as YouTube, we have the possibility of experiencing different moral attitudes from other cultures. In this sense it again is questionable whether there is such a thing as 'common-sense morality'. Or are moral attitudes starting to adjust one to another through our overly connected globalized world?

Further in the book, the authors outline the problems modern societies have to face in the future and how 'ill-equipped' humanity is through 'common-sense morality'. The first topic the authors assign to, are the problems which emerge through liberal democracies. Liberal democracies are defined through the fact that all citizens have the same rights and liberties. Therefore a liberal state has a market economy, freedom of speech and press and freedom of religion. The authors mainly concentrate on the threats and challenges these liberal democracies have to face. In general it's easier to harm an individual, a group or a functioning system than to heal or repair it. As our standards of living are now as high as they have never been before, it will be harder to increase the quality of our living, rather than do harm and therefore decrease it. Technology is an enhancement to humanity, making it easier to threaten or do damage. Consequently, liberal democracies display a great target for such

threats. Analogously to the growth and spread of technological and scientific knowledge, is the information and power that goes with it. As liberal democracies have vastly grown over the years, it gets more difficult to pay surveillance to this information and power, which displays a great danger. The main threats Persson and Savulescu concentrate on are weapons of mass destruction and the anthropogenic climate change. To resolve danger, the security within liberal democracies would have to be strengthened, but through this, one of the basic characteristics of liberal democracies is lost, namely the right for privacy.

What needs to be taken into consideration here is that technology also illustrates a great possibility to humanity. The authors say that alongside the technical revolution came great moral change (p. 117). “when people undergo great moral development in the course of their lives, their moral competence will largely die with them” (p. 118), is what the authors say concerning moral change. Displaying this thesis to the example of the computer wave in the 90ies, this would imply that a part of our morality died. Nowadays thousands of people all around the world have computers. It is obviously true that through these, new possibilities and dimensions were born, there was and still is change within moral attitudes. But proposing that our ‘moral competence’ has ‘largely died’ through this is a very strong, and in my opinion wrong thesis. It is indeed true that our societies through technology had to overcome great change within the range of morality. But societies are under permanent change and have to face moral challenges. One could actually say that moral change comes alongside with the developing of a society. The change of woman’s rights and equality of man and woman constitutes a good example. Over hundreds of years it was commonly spread that female stood way underneath the male. Since 1850,<sup>1</sup> through many fights and demonstrations, societies experienced great moral change and development. In many parts of the world female are no longer less valuable than males, they have reached the same point of rights and liberties. This was a great change for society, but would one say that through this a large part of our moral competence died? Definitely not, it seems that through this revolutionary change our moral competence grew rather than decreased. In this sense, it is my opinion that great moral development doesn’t go hand in hand with our moral competence dying. Facing the moral changes

<sup>1</sup> Woman’s rights, 2011: <http://www.uni-bielefeld.de/gendertexte/chronik.html> (Accessed on 08 Januar 2014)

and challenges coming alongside technological progress, one needs to see it as an enhancement to humanity, proposing changes and new possibilities. Indeed we need to keep in mind that these changes could bring harm to our life, which is why we always need to question and be attentive towards moral changes coming through revolutionary innovations.

To strengthen their argument that the technological revolution poses a threat for liberal democracies, further in the text, the authors suggest dropping ‘common-sense morality’, as well as the act-omission-doctrine. According to this doctrine, one is for example not a murderer if he doesn’t commit the actual act of killing somebody. If the person dies because of circumstances in which one doesn’t intervene through an act, we omit helping or saving the other persons’ life, but are according to the act-omission doctrine not a murderer (see Howard-Synder, 2011, for a summary article). It is the authors’ point of view that both of these don’t work in a globalized world as ours. Through the technological progress, for example, our actions get more powerful. Analogously to the increase of the power of our actions, the range of what happens when we omit to use these powers grows. Concluding, our moral responsibility grows through the power our actions have. The authors suppose that we are just as responsible for occurred harm if we caused it, as if we had known about it, but omitted preventing it. Persson and Savulescu say that through the fact that societies nowadays are so big and individuals act amongst each other, our view and feeling of responsibility is strongly diluted. Thus, we for example don’t feel responsible for the misery in developing countries, primarily because there are many agents involved who could, as well as we set action against it. Again, the ‘common-sense morality’ is proofed of being too weak to cope with the present problems of modern societies. In the following chapter Persson and Savulescu outline the ‘Tragedy of the Commons’, the overly big societies outsourcing our resources leading to anthropocentrically caused environment and climate changes. The economic growth and increasing population numbers within the liberal democracies are a great contribution to the present condition of our planet. As the number of people involved in the ‘Tragedy of the Commons’ is big, the sacrifice of relinquishing something gets more distant for each individual. Within societies as big as they are nowadays, there are many free-riders and anti-social beings striving against the stream and thus causing distrust amongst each other. We are aware of their existence and know they would not sacrifice anything to them meaningful, through which it gets harder for us to do so. In order to avoid the ‘Tragedy of

the Commons' many parties within modern societies would have to cooperate, which is rather unrealistic in such an overpopulated, impersonal and distrustful world as ours. Through this thesis Persson and Savulescu again show that liberal democracies display one of the main sources of problems modern societies have to face. Further in the book, the authors give solutions, which could help overcome the problems liberal democracies cause. Here politics would play a big role, as politicians would be the ones proposing and ordering restraints and sacrifices. But solutions such as for example cutting down birth-rates are very unlikely to be accepted especially by western democracies. It seems rather difficult to find a policy which would be accepted by the affluent countries, who are used to a very high standard of living, and simultaneously improving the condition of our planet. Consequently, as democracies seem to be unable to solve the problems displayed, the next step the authors introduce is a development to dictatorships. These would be able to accomplish political actions and vast changes within short periods. Persson and Savulescu say that the liberty existing in modern democracies nowadays will sooner or later endanger the persistence of humanity.

In the very last chapter of the book, the authors present a solution for the 'ill-equipped' humanity. They therefore present a strategy called moral enhancement. Up until now moral problems liberal democracies had to face were solved through international organizations like the United Nations. It is Persson and Savulescu's point of view that in order to achieve changes, the voters of liberal democracies need to undergo a moral enhancement. For this, the authors argue that the combination of moral bioenhancement, in which patients incorporate drugs in order to make them act morally, and traditional moral education presents a possible solution. Concerning the treatment with drugs, Persson and Savulescu concentrate on two active ingredients, oxytocin and serotonin, which manipulate biology in order to evoke moral effects on the human mind. This moral bioenhancement is seen as an enhancement to 'common-sense morality'. It is the authors' point of view that in order to use the largely progressed technology in a moral way, a moral enhancement seriously needs to be taken into consideration. The book ends with Persson and Savulescu's proposition of moral bioenhancement as a possible solution for future challenges and problems.

Concerning this moral bioenhancement, there are a few arguments underlining a negative outcome towards the authors' proposition. I would like to present these in the following.

The authors talk about functioning systems and say “in order to improve its function, we have to discover a condition which fits in so well with all these conditions that the function is enhanced” (p. 13-14). Again this underlines the point that it is easier to harm a well-functioning system rather than do good, heal or repair it. In this sense, as we don’t know how our system would react to a moral bioenhancement, it is just as likely we harm the system as it would be to repair, or even enhance it. Finding the puzzle piece improving our system is a rather difficult task and will take great effort. As it is harder to improve the condition of the harmed system, it would tremendously very difficult to find the fitting component in order to reset or even improve the status of a harmed system. It seems to be a matter of impossibility.

Another point I would like to discuss is the determination coming alongside with the moral bioenhancement. Concerning this point, the authors say that the moral bioenhancement made possible through a drug people would have to incorporate, extends these peoples’ freedom. Their thesis is that “when we influence the motivational states of people, this could be liberating rather than constraining” (p. 114). Indeed, if people choose to undergo the moral bioenhancement and incorporate the drug through their own and free will, this leads to the assumption they are not determined within their freedom. Still the drug constitutes a chemical substance influencing our system from outside of our body and system. This, in my opinion is indeed a kind of determination, especially when this has an influence on evaluating, choosing and performing our actions. To go further at this point, through this moral bioenhancement, liberty, not only within us, but also within the liberal democracies would be diluted. This is because the citizens of these liberal democracies are no longer liberal, if their actions are under chemical influence from the outside. They are determined within their choices and activities, making a completely honest living amongst each other near to impossible. Through this, again liberal democracies would fail to hold their main concept, namely granting liberty and freedom for all citizens.

Overall one needs to keep in mind that, as the authors say “in order to improve its function, we have to discover a condition which fits in so well with all these condition that the function is enhanced”(p. 13–14). Thus, taking away something of a system is always way worse than enhancing it through something. In this sense, Persson and Savulescus idea of enhancing morality and through this our society, is a good approach to solve problems future generations will have to face. It at this point is questionable whether a

bioenhancement is the right way, but the general proposition of an enhancement in my opinion leads towards the right direction.

## REFERENCES

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