

Are “Morality Pills” Really Moral Enhancement?

Defending the Importance of Moral Responsibility

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Aim

Some examples of *Moral Bioenhancement* (MBE) are not moral enhancement because they compromise *moral responsibility*. I defend the concept of *moral responsibility* as being necessary to moral enhancement, then begin to sketch how some examples of MBE might compromise *moral responsibility*.

What is Moral Bioenhancement (MBE)?

- MBE describes the hypothetical use of **biomedical interventions** (particularly pharmacological agents) to **make people morally better**.
- Two proposals:
 1. Reducing immoral or interfering emotions (e.g. racism, aggression)¹
 2. Increasing core moral emotions (i.e. altruism and sense of justice)²

The Science Suggesting MBE

- **Oxytocin** increases in-group trust and co-operation.³
- Agents that alter **serotonin** levels affect preferences for harm aversion and reciprocity.⁴
- Chemical castration (**anti-androgen agents**) reduce re-offending in certain sexual offenders.⁵
- **Neuro-feedback** potentially allows self-regulation of emotion, aggression and impulsivity.⁶
- Effective **medical treatment of ADHD** reduces rates of criminal offending, possibly through effects on impulsivity.⁷
- **Propranolol** may reduce racial bias.⁸

Selected Conceptual Objections to MBE

John Harris

1. **Bypassing reason** - MBE compromises moral reasoning, and hence cannot be considered moral enhancement.⁹
2. **Bypassing freedom** - MBE will threaten our ‘freedom to fall’ and ability to make moral choices, and is thus impermissible.¹⁰

Rob Sparrow

1. **Doping up isn’t enough** – modifying behavior is, by itself, insufficient to constitute moral enhancement; intentions are also important.¹¹

Common theme – even if MBE results in ‘improved’ behavior, it still should not be considered moral enhancement.

Moral Enhancement – Desirability or Worth?

Moral enhancement can refer an increase in either of two related concepts of *moral goodness*:

1. Moral desirability

2. Moral worth

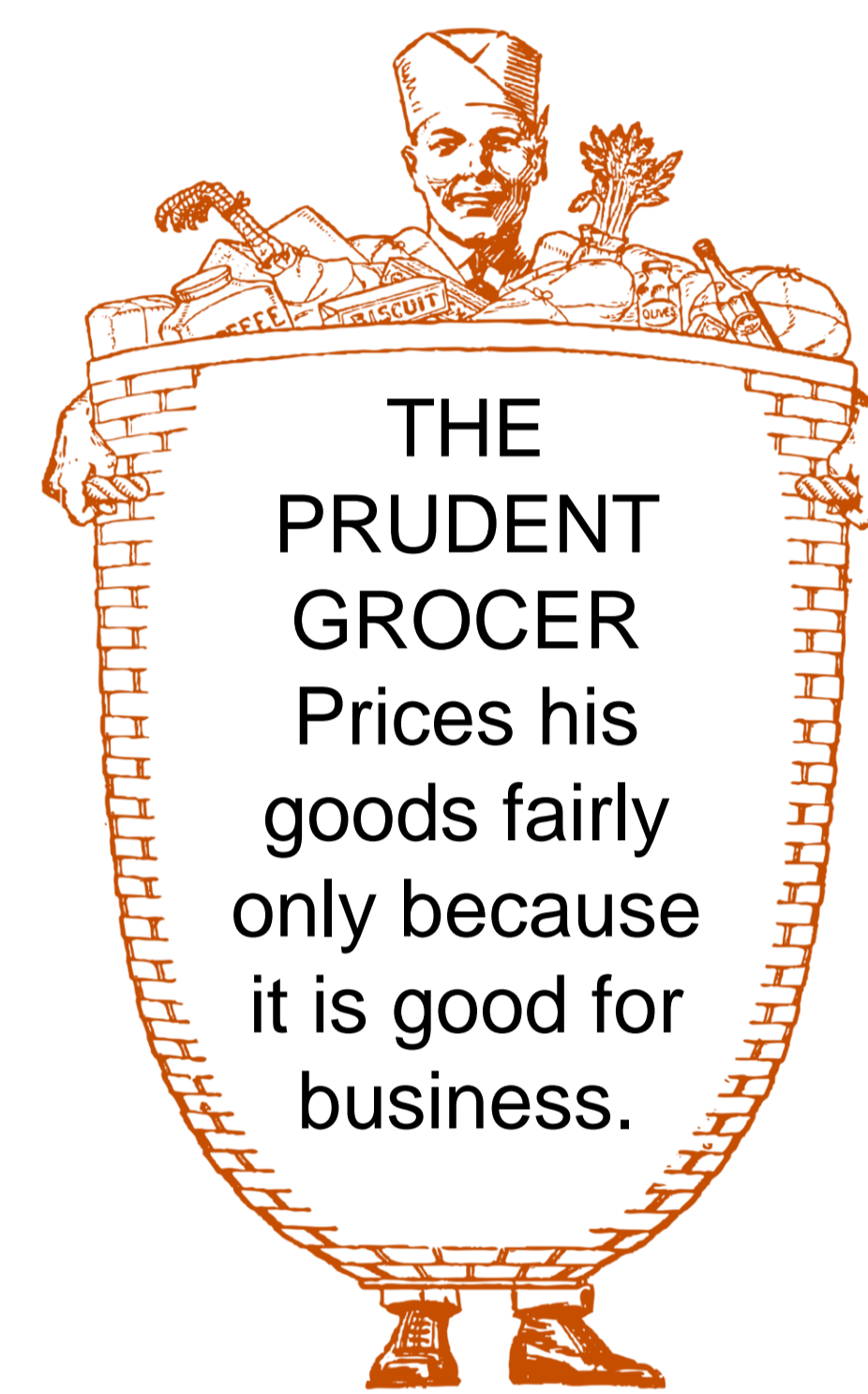


Fig. 1
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Both act in ways that are *morally desirable*, but **only** the *honest grocer* is *morally worthy*.¹²

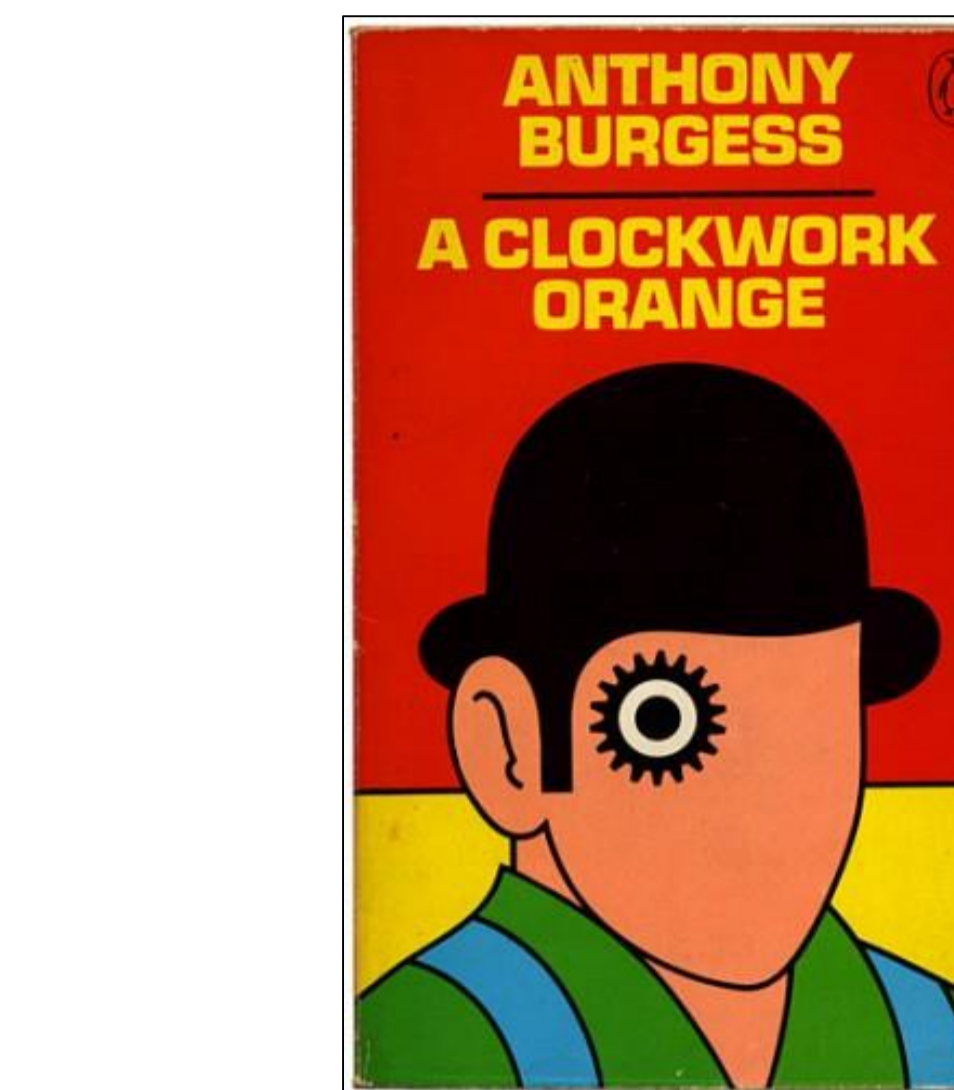


Fig. 2 Aversion therapy and soma doping: two examples of “moral desirability” enhancements which are intuitively troubling.

Involuntary MBE Threatens Moral Responsibility

Two sorts of involuntary interventions are intuitively problematic:

1. Interventions delivered to **unwilling** subjects, **with their knowledge**, which are nevertheless effective in altering behavior.
 - Suggests that these might threaten *autonomy*, which is often taken to be a necessary component of *moral responsibility*.
2. Interventions delivered to subjects **without their knowledge**, which are effective in altering behavior.
 - Suggests that these bypass *conscious cognition* and *reasoning*, which is often taken to be a necessary component of *moral responsibility*.

Implications and further work

- More attention should be paid to properly defining *moral enhancement* as a concept.
- *Moral enhancement* is, and should be acknowledged as more complex than simple *behavior modification*.
- Involuntary interventions may never be considered *moral enhancement*.
- A broader consideration of different conceptions of *moral responsibility* will strengthen these arguments.
- Further exploration should be carried out to consider the complexities of the effects that direct brain interventions are likely to have on *moral responsibility*.

References

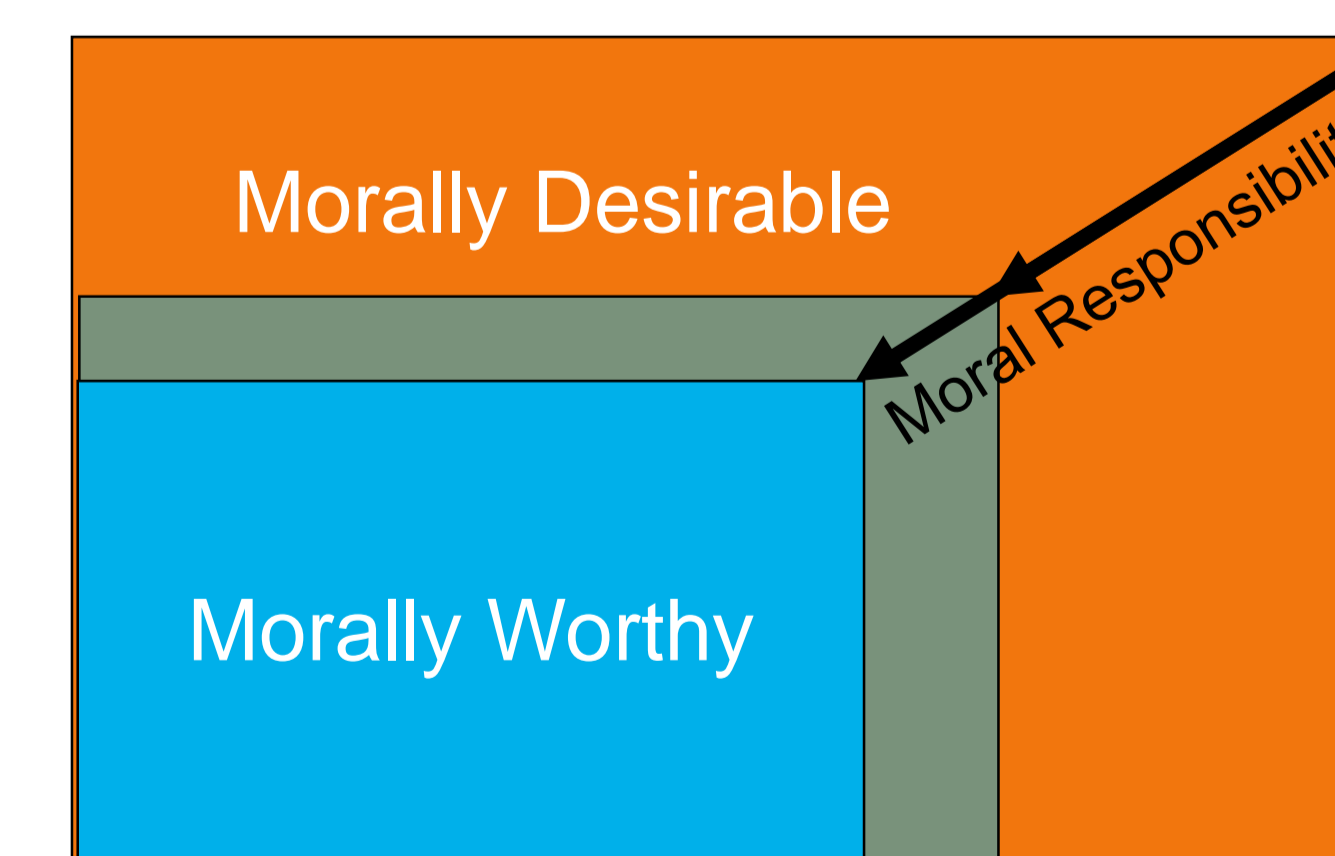
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The Role Of Moral Responsibility



Moral responsibility is the link between the *moral desirability* of action, and the *moral worth* of the person performing them. It can require conditions including *autonomy*, *reasoning* and *intentions*.

The overlap between desirability and worth is inversely related to the stringency of the conditions required for moral responsibility.



E.g. “A person is completely morally responsible for all their actions” (an implausibly weak condition) implies complete overlap.

Moral enhancement should focus on moral worth, not moral desirability.

- Ensures respect for individual persons, and avoids objectification by excessive focus on behavior.
- Excludes certain troubling (behavioral) interventions which compromise moral responsibility.