

# Is It Our Duty to Have Designer Babies? A Critique of the New Eugenics

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ABSTRACT: This paper examines the following philosophical problems with Julian Savulescu's project of moral enhancement: (1) The genetic determinism on which it is based is shaky scientifically and philosophically. (2) The term "moral enhancement" implies a moral goal that is fundamentally in conflict with Savulescu's view that morality is the product of mindless evolutionary processes. (3) Savulescu has no objective grounds for choosing which specific behaviors to favor. (4) If humans are so morally deficient that they need moral enhancement, how can these morally deficient individuals make wise choices that will foster moral enhancement? (5) The method that Savulescu proposes for bringing about genetic moral enhancement – embryo or fetus selection, i.e., killing those embryos and fetuses not considered up to snuff – is itself ethically problematic.<sup>1</sup>

JULIAN SAVULESCU, professor of philosophy at Oxford University and editor of the *Journal of Medical Ethics*, provocatively argues in a popular article in *Reader's Digest* that "It's Our Duty to Have Designer Babies."<sup>2</sup> Interestingly, however, he is not a strong proponent of cognitive genetic enhancement, which many parents wanting a designer baby would probably favor. Indeed, Savulescu thinks cognitive

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<sup>1</sup> This essay is further developed in the last chapter of my recent book *The Death of Humanity and the Case for Life* (Washington DC: Regnery Faith, 2016). Therein I explore the ways that various secular ideologies since the Enlightenment have contributed to the decline of the Judeo-Christian sanctity-of-life ethic. I also defend the sanctity-of-life ethic and show the poverty of those secular ideologies. Among other themes I cover the "new eugenics" and transhumanism. Julian Savulescu is a prime example of this movement.

<sup>2</sup> Julian Savulescu, "It's Our Duty to Have Designer Babies," *Reader's Digest*, at <http://www.readersdigest.co.uk/magazine/readers-digest-main/the-maverick-its-our-duty-to-have-designer-babies>, accessed 8-22-2012.

enhancement might make us humans even more dangerous to each other, given our technological prowess at building weapons of mass destruction and our propensity to pollute our environment. He regularly invokes the fear of humans destroying themselves, as in the talk he gave entitled “Unfit for Life: Genetically Enhance Humanity or Face Extinction.”<sup>3</sup> The solution that Savulescu proposes to keep us humans from killing each other off is what he calls moral enhancement, which comes in two forms: genetic engineering and hormone therapy, both designed to make us more cooperative and altruistic. Savulescu’s goal in advocating for designer babies, then, is to transform human nature, to rid us of our selfish tendencies, and to help us to love one another. Who could argue with such a noble goal?

As a historian, however, I am acutely aware that noble goals sometimes accompany dehumanizing ideologies. I have written an entire book on *Hitler’s Ethic* to demonstrate that Hitler hoped to elevate the human race morally by building a “People’s Community” among the allegedly more moral Aryans and getting rid of those deemed immoral (such as the allegedly greedy Jews). Other historical examples come to mind, such as Marxism, which also tried to transform human nature and make people less selfish and more cooperative. I am not implying that Savulescu is a Hitler, but I do find it interesting that his project of improving human morality has some similarities to Hitler’s in that both advocated biological selection of those deemed to have a greater biological propensity for altruism. Of course, there are many differences as well. Savulescu rejects Hitler’s insistence that some races have higher levels of morality than others.

In this paper I will examine the following philosophical problems with Savulescu’s project of moral enhancement.<sup>4</sup> (1) The genetic determinism on which it is based is shaky scientifically and

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<sup>3</sup> Julian Savulescu, “Unfit for Life: Genetically Enhance Humanity or Face Extinction,” keynote address at *Festival of Dangerous Ideas*, Sydney, Australia, 2009; at [www.themonthly.com.au/genetically-enhance-humanity-or-face-extinction-julian-savulescu-2065](http://www.themonthly.com.au/genetically-enhance-humanity-or-face-extinction-julian-savulescu-2065), accessed 9-26-12.

<sup>4</sup> I should note that many of the articles and books that Savulescu has published have been co-authored with other scholars, especially Ingmar Persson, but for convenience sake I will use Savulescu’s name to describe the views put forward in his co-authored works.

philosophically. (2) The term “moral enhancement” implies a moral goal that is fundamentally in conflict with Savulescu’s view that morality is the product of mindless evolutionary processes. (3) Savulescu has no objective grounds for choosing which specific behaviors to favor. (4) If humans are so morally deficient that they need moral enhancement, how can these morally deficient individuals make wise choices that will foster moral enhancement? (5) The method that Savulescu proposes for bringing about genetic moral enhancement – embryo or fetus selection, i.e., killing those embryos and fetuses not considered up to snuff – is itself ethically problematic.

Savulescu is a devotee of evolutionary psychology. He argues forcefully that our behavior is shaped largely by our genetic constitution. In a 2009 lecture he stated, “Differences in behavior, even differences in ability to stay in a long-term relationship, have a biological basis. They differ between different individuals, and we will be able at some point to influence that biology to achieve whatever goal we choose to achieve.”<sup>5</sup> These genetic tendencies were allegedly produced through eons of natural selection operating on the human species. One example of genetic determinism that Savulescu likes to point out is the different mating behavior of two species of voles. The monogamous voles have more receptors for oxytocin and vasopressin than the polygamous voles. Scientists have genetically engineered the polygamous species to become monogamous, thereby demonstrating that oxytocin and vasopressin are involved in bonding. Human experiments using oxytocin demonstrate that it can induce more trusting behavior that could increase human cooperation. Interestingly, however, some studies suggest that it only helps increase bonding within groups, and in some scenarios it can actually increase out-group hostility.<sup>6</sup>

Building on his view of behavior as for the most part biologically induced, Savulescu is vigorously promoting moral enhancement to increase our ability to live together in harmony. In one specific case Savulescu suggests that we should genetically engineer humans to promote monogamy since many sociological studies have shown that

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<sup>5</sup> Savulescu, “Unfit for Life.”

<sup>6</sup> Ingmar Persson and Julian Savulescu, *Unfit for the Future: The Need for Moral Enhancement* (Oxford UK: Oxford Univ. Press, 2012), pp. 118-19.

monogamy is beneficial to children. He also recommends developing “love drugs,” such as oxytocin, that could be given to wedded couples to keep spouses faithful to each other.

But why is our genetic makeup deficient with respect to monogamy (or any other behavior)? Savulescu argues that our biological constitution is about 150,000 years behind our cultural developments. He claims that millennia ago a human’s average life span was so short that spouses would usually not be married for more than fifteen years or so. Thus, according to Savulescu, “it seems unlikely that natural selection equipped us to keep relationships lasting much more than a decade.”<sup>7</sup> Increased life-spans in the modern world have left us “unfit” for life-long monogamy, thus resulting in widespread divorce.

There are a number of problems with Savulescu’s biological account. First, comparing voles to humans is problematic. Monogamous voles are always monogamous, and polygamous ones are always polygamous. Humans, however, show much more plasticity in their mating behaviors. Some human societies are monogamous, some are polygamous, and in some – such as ours today – the institution of marriage is no longer as important as it once was. Even within societies that are dominantly monogamous, some individuals rebel against the prevailing sexual mores. Humans seem to have – dare I say it? – greater free will to alter their mating and marriage behavior.

The historical changes in divorce rates make Savulescu’s evolutionary account of divorce especially problematic. Explaining divorce as the consequence of evolved genetic traits ignores the fact that in many societies monogamy has been far more successful than it is today. Has Savulescu never heard about the Sexual Revolution of the 1960s? The divorce rate in the U.S. and Europe in the 1950s was considerably lower than it was two decades later. Marriages lasted much longer. So, how can we blame the high divorce rate in modern societies on a hard-wired psyche inherited from our Pleistocene ancestors when divorce was relatively rare in many intervening epochs? It seems clear that the institution of marriage has changed radically over the course of one or two generations, thus dramatically calling into question biological

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<sup>7</sup> Julian Savulescu and Anders Sandberg, “Engineering Love,” *New Scientist* 214 (May 12, 2012): 28-29.

determinist explanations for marriage behavior. Why resort to genetic manipulation and love potions to biologically engineer us to become more monogamous – neither of which is even technologically feasible at this time (and may never be) – when we could choose to be monogamous if we wanted to be (as many societies have).

The second problem with Savulescu's project of moral enhancement is that he never defines its goal. Enhancement implies getting better, and indeed he often uses vague terminology implying moral progress such as "better" or "human welfare" or "human well-being" or "benefit," etc. He rarely, however, indicates what any of these terms might mean. In one article he states, "Yet from our human perspective, happiness and flourishing are primary goals." But what constitutes happiness and flourishing? What does human welfare or human well-being mean? In several venues he tries to deflect this objection by arguing that moral enhancement is congruent with a variety of ethical philosophies, including utilitarianism, desire fulfillment theories, and deontological ethics.<sup>8</sup>

I must admit that I am left scratching my head. According to his account, morality is the product of biological evolution, and he seems to agree with most biologists and evolutionary psychologists that these are mindless, purposeless processes.<sup>9</sup> If a non-teleological process produced human morality, then how can we find a measuring rod for morality outside of nature that allows us to prefer so-called moral behaviors to so-called immoral behaviors. Savulescu insists that we can "liberate ourselves from evolution," but it is unclear to me where we can acquire the moral fulcrum to do that.<sup>10</sup>

This problem of lacking a coherent goal leads to the third major problem: Savulescu has no objective grounds for choosing which specific behaviors to favor. Like many evolutionary psychologists, he discusses the evolutionary advantages of various altruistic behaviors, but

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<sup>8</sup> Julian Savulescu and Guy Kahane, "The Moral Obligation to Create Children with the Best Chance of the Best Life," *Bioethics* 23 (2009): 279.

<sup>9</sup> Russell Powell, Guy Kahane, and Julian Savulescu, "Evolution, Genetic Engineering, and Human Enhancement," *Philosophy and Technology* 25 (2012): 444.

<sup>10</sup> Julian Savulescu and Anders Sandberg, "Engineering Love," *New Scientist* 214 (May 12, 2012): 28-29.

he rarely mentions that selfish behavior, wars, racism, atrocities, rape, and many other kinds of immorality are also a natural part of human history. Indeed various evolutionists have provided evolutionary explanations for these kinds of behavior, too. If both selfishness and altruism have evolved simultaneously and if both have benefitted individuals in the struggle for existence, why should we think that one is superior to the other? Indeed, some biologists have insisted that selfishness is every bit as important as altruism in advancing the well-being of individuals or species.

What if these biologists are right, that selfishness contributes to human well-being and welfare, however defined? What if making our children more selfish would help them in the struggle for existence and thus assist them in flourishing, providing them a healthier, happier life? In that case, according to Savulescu's own teaching about designer babies, we would have strong moral reasons to use genetical engineering to make our children more selfish. This is not an outlandish scenario. Indeed one of the most famous geneticists of the twentieth century, James Watson, once advised students to be selfish in their pursuit of scientific glory. I for one am happy that Savulescu thinks that increased cooperation is preferable to selfishness, but I do not understand where he conjures up the rationale for it, since he seems committed to a naturalistic understanding of the origin of morality.

If we examine other moral characteristics, we run into the same problem: what grounds do we have for preferring one over the other? For instance, in one article Savulescu notes that compared to men, women have a lower tendency to harm other people. Because of this, he suggests that "we could make men more moral by biomedical methods by making them more like women."<sup>11</sup> Even if this sexist version of evolutionary psychology proves to be accurate, why should we prefer female empathy to male aggression? Why assume that empathy will lead to greater human thriving and welfare than aggression? I assume that here Savulescu will invoke the fear of weapons of mass destruction, as he frequently does. Some people like me, however, have an even greater fear of the *Brave New World* that Savulescu's bioengineering program

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<sup>11</sup> Julian Savulescu and Ingmar Persson, "Moral Enhancement, Freedom, and the God Machine," *The Monist* 95/3 (2012): 399-421.

could spawn.

The fourth problem is that if humans are so morally deficient that they need moral enhancement, how can these morally deficient individuals make wise choices that will foster moral enhancement? Savulescu recognizes this problem, but I am not sure that he takes it seriously enough. What would motivate people to use genetic engineering to make their children to be morally enhanced? Savulescu regularly appeals to the fear of humans annihilating each other with weapons of mass destruction or through environmental degradation. But what about other human motivations that could lead parents not to want to enhance their children morally? Based on their desire for their children to have the best possible life, some parents might want their children to be assertive and aggressive, so that they will rise to become leaders (especially if the rest of the population is becoming cooperative and docile through moral enhancement). Considering the importance of sports in our society, undoubtedly some parents will value athletic prowess and thus prefer a competitive spirit to a more cooperative ethos. Other parents of designer babies will undoubtedly value beauty, musical ability, intellectual acuity, or other traits, rather than empathy and cooperativeness.

In some venues, Savulescu stresses that he does not want to use coercive measures to implement moral enhancement. If this is the case, I have no confidence that masses of parents will choose moral enhancement for their children (even if it were possible). At times Savulescu suggests that some forms of moral enhancement should be compulsory. In one article he states, "If safe moral enhancements are ever developed, there are strong reasons to believe that their use should be obligatory, like education or fluoride in the water, since those who should take them are least likely to be inclined to use them. That is, safe, effective moral enhancement would be compulsory."<sup>12</sup> This stress on compulsion is all the more troubling, for Savulescu is often critical of liberal democracies. While he is in some regards sympathetic to authoritarian regimes for their ability to rule in the best interests of the

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<sup>12</sup> I. Persson and J. Savulescu, "The Perils of Cognitive Enhancement and the Urgent Imperative to Enhance the Moral Character of Humanity," *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 25, 3 (2008): 162-77.

people (for instance, he praises China for its one-child policy), he also understands that ruling elites in authoritarian regimes usually rule in ways that benefit themselves, not all the people. Thus, Savulescu reluctantly favors liberal democracy, but only if we can overcome its problems by introducing moral enhancement.<sup>13</sup> Here we once again confront the circular problem: Why would a non-morally enhanced liberal democracy make the altruistic decision to introduce moral enhancement, especially since moral enhancement will likely be extremely expensive (a point Savulescu does not seem to consider).

Another problem with morally deficient humans being in charge of moral enhancement is that Savulescu regularly bases many of his moral arguments on various common-sense moral views. For example, when defending his view that human life has value, the only explanation he provides is this: “We shall, however, proceed on the assumption that human life is normally better than non-existence, since we believe that this is the view that most of us would take.”<sup>14</sup> This is not an isolated example. In one essay Savulescu states that “common sense morality seems committed to favouring selection of children who are more advantaged” and that “our moral intuitions about timing of conception recognize reasons to select future children.”<sup>15</sup> It is remarkable how often Savulescu appeals to our common moral intuitions to persuade us of his position (though in cases where most people’s moral intuitions collide with his own he calls on us to dispense with our allegedly irrational moral intuitions). The problem is this: How can he appeal to our present moral intuitions if we are so morally flawed that we need a drastic moral overhaul? This undermines the foundation of many of his arguments.

The fifth problem is that moral enhancement is not yet even technologically feasible, and some of the methods that Savulescu suggests as possible methods in the future are morally objectionable. Savulescu’s claim that we should promote designer babies with greater genetic propensities for altruism is still science fiction, even though he

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<sup>13</sup> Persson and Savulescu, *Unfit for the Future*, ch. 8.

<sup>14</sup> Ingmar Persson and Julian Savulescu, “Getting Moral Enhancement Right: The Desirability of Moral Bioenhancement,” *Bioethics* 27 (2013): 127.

<sup>15</sup> Julian Savulescu and Guy Kahane, “The Moral Obligation to Create Children with the Best Chance of the Best Life,” *Bioethics* 23 (2009): 276-77.

optimistically opines that in five years we might have the capability to screen for genes affecting every physical and mental trait.<sup>16</sup> Currently there are no genetic tests available to determine how cooperative or moral a person will be.

Even if we could screen for genetic moral traits, presently the primary ways to produce designer babies are embryo selection and selective abortion, both of which Savulescu favors. He argues that since we already allow embryo selection and selective abortions to eliminate embryos and fetuses having diseases, there should be nothing objectionable about using these methods to choose other genetic traits, such as intelligence or empathy. This is obviously not the place to launch a full-scale defense of the right to life for all humans, including embryos and fetuses, but for those like myself who embrace the pro-life view, Savulescu's suggestion that we should make the world more moral by killing off those who are allegedly less moral is grotesque.

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<sup>16</sup> Savelescu, "It's Our Duty to Have Designer Babies."