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LOVE IN THE POSTHUMAN WORLD
HOW NEUROINTERVENTIONS COULD IMPACT
ON OUR SOCIETAL VALUES

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Love in the Posthuman World: How Neurointerventions Could Impact on Our Societal Values

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Love and its effects touches all of us. So each of us must decide where we stand in this debate. The goal of this book is to arm you with the latest knowledge and a set of ethical tools you can use to decide for yourself whether love drugs –or anti-love drugs– should be part of our society. Or whether a chemical romance might be right for you (Earp and Savulescu 2020, 15).

Introduction

I completely agree with the first part of the quote from Brian Earp and Julian Savulescu’s book *Love Drugs. The Chemical Future of Relationships*, but I am not sure that the second part can be dismissed so easily as something up to each single individual in society. The pandemic drama we

lived this year (and are still living as I write this paper) has shown that relying too much in autonomous, individual choices might not be the best way to go for both individuals and society. However, aside from other compelling ethical arguments reinvigorated by the recent global lockdown resulted from the COVID-19 outbreak, one that might not have been considered as deeply is the strictly connected analysis brought to us by the author's work is the following: would it not have been useful to have an anti-love drug available during the many weeks forcibly apart from our lovers living in a different city for example? Or, on the contrary: would it not have been better to have some love drugs easing up living under the same roof for weeks instead of having couples physically and psychologically abuse each other? Perhaps. Yet, the intention of this contribution to the debate on love drugs is to highlight two contexts in which such option seems particularly troubling.

First, some of the egalitarian axioms of current liberal societies might be put at risk, as the suggested tool appears to create a context in which people – especially wealthy ones- might have a tendency to restrict their spectrum of possible love partners to only those at their socio-economic level or above. This probable outcome will exacerbate dynamics that are already in place, but with a huge increase in the “bargaining power” of those on top of the social ladder – putting more than one doubt over the actual level of increment in the individual freedom to choose who to love. Second, this idea of embracing love drugs that could help us choose to love anyone, combined with the possibility to use other advancements in medicine such as Preimplantation Genetics Diagnosis (PGD), could even “tempt” us to break one the most shared global taboos: incest. Having lost its structural threat related to the reproductive aspect of having sex with a close relative, why not allow people to “free” themselves fully in their own, individual, sexuality? After all, as the authors write, “love has a dual nature. It is *both* biological and psycho-social, and it can be modified along

either dimension.” So if we could redirect the biological, why not be ready to do the same also with the psycho-social? I will attempt to answer such questions in what follows.

I

Decomposing love

In line with the – very effective – technique used by the authors in their book, I will bring in an example to support my argument – albeit a borrowed one.

Julie and Mark are brother and sister. They are traveling together in France on summer vacation from college. One night they are staying alone in a cabin near the beach. They decide that it would be interesting and fun if they tried making **love**. At the very least it would be a new experience for each of them. Julie was already taking birth control pills, but Mark uses a condom too, just to be safe. They both enjoy making **love**, but they decide not to do it again. They keep that night as a special secret, which makes them feel even closer to each other. What do you think about that? Was it OK for them to make **love**? (Haidt 2001, my emphasis).

Attempting to define love is something that poets, literate and cultures have tried since the beginning of civilization -and it is certainly something beyond the scope of this paper, but, as Jonathan Haidt openly stated in his famous article, most people would find it hard to see the scene quoted above as an untroubling version of love. It would be deeply disturbing if we were to see it as a version of brotherly love (where the sexual component is defined in most traditions as immoral between siblings), but we should see it as problematic also if we were to think of it as a

version of romantic love (as they enter and depart from the sexual intercourse with the -apparently successful- intention of not “getting involved”). In line with what brought forward by the authors in their book (Earp and Savulescu 2020, 21-22), when I refer to romantic love, I mean the definition used in the literature in recent years, put forward by Helen Fisher¹ and expanded by Earp, Savulescu and colleagues in a vast collection of works,² that sees love as a combination of attraction, lust and attachment. Though aware of the limits of such a definition, the authors want to stress the importance that substances such as dopamine, testosterone, serotonin, oxytocin and more play in the various phases of our love life -tackling from close the sensitive issue that, due to the rapid developments in neuroscientific research, we might soon be able to “direct” love once understood the exact dose of each component of the equation. This categorization of love has helped researchers conceptualize ways in which to quantify our emotions and I have discussed elsewhere why that categorization might be problematic.³

My contention here is that the case of Julie and Mark shows us that one (or a couple rather) could be expected to engage in a sexual/relational activity for the sake of it -for fun as it were- under the right conditions. In the scenario put forward by Haidt, it would appear as if those conditions are *not putting at risk* anything: not the social order, not the potential offspring’s genetic make-up, not falling in love with the “wrong” person. In fact, going back to the description we have been using when talking about love, we see that, at best, only the first two conditions were present (attraction and lust) as they want to engage in a “no strings attached”

¹ Fisher, Aron and Brown 2006.

² Earp, Sandberg, Savulescu 2014b; Earp, Sandberg, Savulescu 2015; Earp 2012; Earp, Sandberg, Savulescu 2012.

³ Garasic 2019 and 2013.

experience, so we are *not* talking about romantic love in the fullest sense but sex between two free, competent individuals. Following on from the premise of rational, competent adults engaging in sexual activity, this paper wants to pay attention to the importance of those recent studies for the way they could lead us to accept one of the most globally accepted taboos in human history -incest- and why that is troubling. As the findings of these studies have been given ample space in Earp and Savulescu's book (as well as many previous publications), here I will not dwell into them, but I will assume that the readers will be already familiar with those -and that there is agreement on the scientific evidence of some recent developments in understanding how love drugs do (e. g. synthetic oxytocin), or could, work.

II

Royal love

We have been talking about romantic love till here, but different types of love have also been – and are – present in human relationships. One version of these alternative ways of experiencing and expressing one's love is when an individual puts the country of origin -or choice- at its center. One's action are shaped by this love for an ideal. As a result, the love for the country, or family, or power itself made the “romantic relationship” secondary -and (as highlighted by the authors as well: “until very recently, marriage was not primarily based on love”⁴) marriages were often compromises aimed at satisfying the first level of love (for the nation or family) with very sporadic instances where the second level of love (that for the spouse) was fulfilled as well. When the world was still waiting for the French Revolution

⁴ Earp and Savulescu 2020, 107.

to take place, royal families across Europe kept on marrying each other so to 1) increase their wealth 2) ensure not to decrease it 3) avoid war 4) expand the prestige of the Kingdom.

As we know, the practice of royal inbreeding produced a number of typical deformations in more than a generation (perhaps the most know example is the so-called Habsburg Jaw), as the resulting children came from a rather limited genetic pool. In time, evidence of this kind of risk discouraged incest among the general population even more than it already did religion and pushed the European nobility to reconsider inbreeding. Yet, an approach that we consider outdated might well find again its place in modern society if neurointerventions related to our inclination towards other romantic partners prove to be as effective as data seem to be increasingly suggest.

III

Instating the inbreeding of the wealthy

Though with some differences from the past – relevance is now given to the bank account rather than the degree of blue blood in the family – the rational choice of an individual (very much alike the siblings Julie and Mark) from a wealthy family could be that of deciding to engage in romantic relationships – marriages even – only with partners belonging to their same, exclusive, segment of society. In fact, if all things could be equal in terms of romance (love drugs could help guaranteeing that as we have gathered from the book), why should a rich risk to lose his or her competitive advantage in society? From a certain point of view, the preservation and increase of power (as with royal families in the past) should be understood as a rational choice made by individuals to increase the chances of a higher quality of life for the offspring. This rationale could push us to think that such a choice – even if

far from being romantic – should be accepted as a free, autonomous choice of a competent agent. Hence, a liberal society such as ours should tolerate it. In relation to this, Earp and Savulescu write:

If we want a society where everyone, or even just most people, can really flourish in their romantic lives, we should push for a dominant social script that recognizes and allows for a range of relationship norms, so long as these are based on mutual consent and *respect for others*. That way, people can figure out what works for them, and be socially supported in their decision (Earp and Savulescu 2020, 43).

I assume that “respect for others” cannot imply sticking to the old fashion (often religious based) norms in the sexual sphere of one’s own private life – otherwise the all argument in support of a liberating and liberal approach to sexuality (be it heterosexual, homosexual, polyamorous or else) would not have been put forward by the authors. If that is the case then, we could also say that incest among consenting adults could not be discriminated either. Yet, caution should abound and here I share some of the concerns of Sean Aas and Candice Delmas (2016) – though from a different angle- highlighted by the authors, namely that “what is rational for the individual within a group can still be socially harmful if it promotes greater intolerance or injustice toward the group at large” (Earp and Savulescu 2020, 165-166).

If on the one hand, we could wave the flag of liberal eugenics (Agar 2004) as something different from eugenic programs of the past for its individualistic nature that does not impose anything on anyone, on the other hand it would become very difficult for the supporters of this view to defend that the implementation of this approach does not, structurally, mark and reinforce the gap

between *have* and *have nots* – as this would be the very essence of the choice made by the rich. That seems to suggest that the risk for a neater categorization of individuals into predefined classes will be very high – not sounding very liberal at all. If nothing else, for not truly giving a fair shot at everyone to, not only to love who they want, but also, in the case of *have nots*, to have a shot at entering the “circle of the rich” also through the door of marriage. The suggestion here, is not that poor people should marry rich to improve their lives, but – as subtle as this difference might be – that structurally depriving society of this possibility is problematic and needs to be addressed, because pretending that this would not represent a drawback could only lead us to a very dysfunctional (or extremely classist) society. Surely, these considerations are strictly connected to the possibility of rendering ineffective the biological reasons that have led us to consider incest a taboo of the worst kind. So, how far are we from this incest neutral future?

IV

Assisted reproductive technology and incest

An opening towards a wider acceptance of incest in our society (even if less direct than the versions pictured here) is far from being a trivial speculation. It is a reality that has already entered the public debate in bioethical contexts. For example, the American Society for Reproductive Medicine has warned us⁵ against the use of assisted reproductive technology (ART) programs aimed at creating the conditions for incestuous offspring resulting from the use of such technologies. In the specific, in the report it is written

⁵ Ethics Committee of the American Society for Reproductive Medicine. *Consideration of the gestational carrier: a committee opinion*, *Fertil Steril* 2013; 99:1838-41.

that “the use of adult intrafamilial gamete donors and gestational surrogates is generally ethically acceptable except when such arrangements are consanguineous or simulate incestuous unions.”⁶

Part of the reticence of the Ethics Committee to accept the possibility of incestuous offspring was based on the doubts over the efficiency of the very technology involved. However, this is a standard worry for any technology we consider in relation to human beings coming to the world in the last decades – beginning with the first IVF girl Louise Brown back in 1978. More relevant for our discussion here, is the fact that the resistance against this potential way of using ART is based on medical evidence such as the high percentage of risks to have malformation in children resulting from first degree cousins’ relationships. Although true, focusing only on this kind of medical data could open the door to a situation in which – once able to readdress these risks through genetically editing babies with clustered regularly interspaced short palindromic repeats (CRISPR) or other techniques – we will not have any good arguments to affirm that the taboo has medical reasons to remain such, and that is possibly why the relevance of the impact that such a cultural change would have on society is even more important.

V

Incestuous children 4.0

In a provocative paper Andrew March (2009) addresses delicate issues related to sex and marriage, namely that of incest, polygamy and reproductive freedom. Specifically concerning incest, he convincingly lists three main reasons for banning and abhorring incest: 1) child abuse; 2) the unfair burdening of society; and 3) the

⁶ *Ibid.*, 1838.

creation of bad lives. Leaving aside the first condition as irrelevant for this paper is focused on competent adults, we should build on the other two conditions that tend to make us perceive incest as unacceptable -and that advancements in biomedicine might have changed in ways that are still not sufficiently considered. The creation of bad lives is a definition that needs clarification of course, as there is no intention to reinforce or re-propose eugenic tendencies of the past. “Bad” is not to be associated with skin color, ethnicity, religion or any discriminating variable but health. Of course, the definition of the bearable risks of health is something in itself open to criticisms⁷ (let us think for example of the anti-ableism movement that does not want the conceptualization of deafness or dwarfism as illnesses), but the focus here should be another: it is nowadays possible to foresee and avoid most threats to the health of the fetus through the screening and -most of all- the use of new techniques (from PGD to CRISPR) during pregnancy. This means, that if one *wants* to take advantage of this option, she can. In other words, she can increase the chances to have a “normal” baby, which could, in a way, solve the second and third conditions at once. In a way because, although the unfair burdening of society would not increase from having an incestuous child (in comparison to a non-incestuous one of comparable levels of “normality”), there is room to argue that the burden for society remains in an indirect form.

Going back to Haidt’s example, we could say that – differently from past examples where the choice of such inbreeding marriages had implications for a) the offspring b) the wide population as sometimes they were subject to suddenly change language or religion in the blink of an eye, – the potential use of neuromodulation to allow to sexually engage with rich family members should be tolerated by our society. However, that initial

⁷ Garasic 2014.

temptation should not go unchecked. For instance, some studies have been trying to argue that richness might be inversely related to our inclination to generosity and empathy.⁸ Considering that one of the authors⁹ (and so do others¹⁰) expressly suggest that we should improve our empathy through other forms of neuromodulation, so to reach moral enhancement, one is left to wonder: are we sure it would be an improvement -for individuals and society to promote an implementation of “artificial relationships” if we see them structurally in need to be redirected again in other spheres of human interaction and social life?

Conclusion

Developments in the understanding of how our brain works are gradually allowing us to read more and more our emotions and increase of our power to interfere with the biochemical reactions in our head can be seen as a tempting option in certain instances. It might have to be portrayed as an increase in our power to express our liberty or approach to life. In a not too distant future, we might have the possibility to switch on and off our predisposition to love a certain someone that we would rationally choose a priori. Though tempting and “fun”, a full-scale acceptance of breaking certain taboos will have repercussions on society through one specific version of “sexual liberation”: incest. Even if not suffering from dogmatic censorship or able to overcome historical and scientific limitations through the use of techniques such as PGD and CRISPR, incest should still be seen as condemnable for at least two reasons.

⁸ Osman, Jie-Yu and Proulx 2018; Watts, Duncan and Quan 2018.

⁹ Persson and Savulescu 2012.

¹⁰ Buchanan and Powell 2018; Douglas 2008.

On the one hand, embracing it would open the door to an even more segregated society, where rich people will go back to have sex (and marry) *only* rich people. On the other hand, it will push our society to conceptualize even more each individual as a single, distinct entity that needs to follow his or her desires blindly (no matter how ephemerals). We do not need to use the slipper slop argument (if we allow this “degree” of incest, why not other, even more problematic versions). Suffice to think that this approach to life not only will affect romantic relationships (I only fall in love with whom I want, when I want), but relationships more broadly – creating worries on how dysfunctional our society could become if led by individuals unable to empathize with others due to their lack of training in not experiencing one’s emotions, but rather choosing to live them only when safe and convenient. In their book Earp and Savulescu make a huge effort in stressing how the justification for the use of love drugs in certain instances derives from the willingness to help some individuals to suffer less. The intention is noble, but it has perhaps not taken into consideration some troubling aspects that I have tried to highlight here.

Choosing *not* to make a change is still a choice, so choose with care. The status quo cannot relieve you of this burden. Once we have the power to alter a situation, we are morally responsible for the decisions we make -including the decisions to leave things to chance, or to keep things as they are” (Earp and Savulescu 2020, 51).

Out of all the many interesting verses of the book, I would like to conclude with this quote because I think it represents perfectly the underlining tone of the book: a hymn that revolution is good and could be embraced. Even – or perhaps, evermore so – when it comes to emotions and love. Even if sympathetic to the idea in

theory, my concern is related to the reactionary impact that such drugs might have on our society. So, perhaps, choosing not to drug our love lives might be the most revolutionary thing to do after all.

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