

SYMPOSIUM  
ENHANCING LOVE?



A PLEA FOR FOLLOW-THROUGH

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## A Plea for Follow-Through

Allen Buchanan

**W**ith the publication of *Love Drugs*, Brian Earp and Julian Savulescu (2020) have achieved the status of leading public intellectuals. They have done something quite rare: produced a book that is eminently readable and that will appeal to the broadest thinking audience, but which is sufficiently nuanced and rigorous in its argumentation to satisfy the most demanding moral philosophers.

I find myself in a difficult (and unaccustomed) position: I agree with almost everything in a book upon which I have been asked to comment. Nonetheless, I will advance two points, one somewhat critical, the other merely a plea for extending the central argument of the book. The upshot of my comments are this: Give us more!

The critical point is simple. Earp and Savulescu repeatedly echo the view, expressed by all of the researchers and practitioners whose work they cite, that they only advocate chemical interventions to facilitate changes in intimate relationships *if these*

*interventions are accompanied by more traditional therapies.* Yet so far as I can ascertain, nothing in the argumentation of *Love Drugs* warrants this blanket constraint.

It might be plausible to argue that in the case of chemical interventions whose efficacy and safety are not well-confirmed, there is a strong presumption that their use should be a last resort, to be undertaken only after various more traditional interventions have proved unsuccessful. But if a chemical intervention has been shown to be effective and safe and if a competent individual consents to its use under conditions of informed consent, using it without any accompanying nonchemical treatment will sometimes not only be permissible, but even morally mandatory.

As far as I can tell, the only potential ethical objection to stand-alone chemical interventions under such circumstances would be that without adjunct interventions that directly engage the individual's conscious reasoning and judgment, a chemical intervention would somehow undermine the person's autonomy or damage her identity. Such an objection clearly fails, however. People routinely authorize chemical interventions to cure or mitigate a broad range of undesirable physical or emotional or cognitive conditions and may do so without adjunct nonchemical treatments if the latter would be ineffective or too costly.

Further, even when chemical interventions are accompanied by more traditional treatments, the chemical intervention presumably has some independent effects; and if these when taken by themselves would undermine autonomy or identity it is unclear how adjunct nonchemical treatment reliably prevent that. Finally, there is no good reason to assume that chemical interventions are, per se, more of a threat to autonomy or identity than all other modes of treatment. When a competent individual freely chooses a stand-alone chemical intervention, under conditions of informed consent, this action can be an exercise of autonomy, not a violation

of it. Whether the treatment undermines identity depends upon its effects on the neurological foundations of identity, not upon whether it is a *chemical* intervention.

I suspect that Earp and Savulescu would in fact agree with me on this matter. Given their arguments in favor of chemical interventions (and their previous related work), it is hard to see how they could not. My hunch is that the mantra “never without adjunct nonchemical therapy” is a strategic concession—an attempt to allay reactionary, poorly-reasoned or knee-jerk rejections of their ultimate goal: to convince people that the potential benefits of chemical interventions in intimate relationships are sufficiently great as to warrant serious research. Whether or not they should have made this concession in a book intended to persuade an extremely broad audience is something on which reasonable people might disagree. Nevertheless, I think that in the end they are in fact committed to the less constrained view of the uses of chemical interventions in intimate relationships.

My second point is entirely constructive, not in the least critical. I believe that the case Earp and Savulescu have made for chemical interventions in intimate relationships should be extended to other psycho-social problems. More specifically, I urge them to make the case for a serious research effort to determine whether chemical interventions could mitigate the horribly destructive “tribalistic” mentality that is not only making democracy impossible in some countries—including perhaps preeminently the U.S.—but which also threatens to undermine a momentous development in our understanding of morality itself. By the tribalistic mentality I mean (roughly, and as a first approximation only) the following.

1. the tendency to regard politics broadly conceived as a winner take all, zero sum contest for the highest stakes (a rejection

of the presumption that compromise is possible and desirable and that power can be shared).

2. the tendency to operate with an essentialist metaphysics of the Other, proceeding on the assumption that They (in the U.S., “liberals” or “conservatives”) are all alike and that Their behavior is determined by a shared essence.

3. the tendency to treat social, cultural, and political issues as tightly knit bundles—package deals that one must take or leave *in toto*, rather than as potentially fissionable. (As with items 1. and 2., this tendency also renders compromise a non-option).

4. the tendency to denigrate the Other so severely as to deprive them of the status of beings with whom one can reason and as credible sources of testimony. One way in which this result is achieved is to regard all of Them as either incorrigibly stupid or uniformed or as irredeemably corrupt and insincere. In either case, the implication is that there is no point in listening to Them or trying to engage them in dialog. Instead of engaging with the substance of their views, one attacks their character or mental capacity.

5. The tendency to espouse an ideology, broadly conceived, that includes “belief immune system” functions, where this includes epistemically flawed cognitive dissonance resolution mechanisms that reduce or nullify the effect of evidence that conflicts with the beliefs that define Us in opposition to Them, ubiquitous confirmation bias, and systematic discounting of contrary beliefs simply because they are beliefs held by Them.

6. Partly as a result of tendency 4., the tendency to inhabit “echo chambers” – to interact primarily if not exclusively with

people who hold the same views on matters that distinguish Us from Them. Replicated research has shown when this occurs, one's political opinions become more extreme.

7. a tendency for “social signaling” to drive out truth-seeking.

In other words, what might first appear to be efforts to make true statements or judge the truth or justification of statements made by others is not in fact primarily a cognitive or epistemic activity, but rather a means of signaling one's membership, as affirming that you are on of Us (and not one of Them).<sup>1</sup>

Where these seven tendencies exist and reinforce one another, the conditions for democracy do not exist. Perhaps even more seriously, the tribalistic morality can be seen as a regression from what may be one of the most important milestones in moral progress: the transition from an understanding of morality that relegates out-group persons to an inferior moral status to one that views morality as centrally involving the sincere exchange of reasons among individuals who regard themselves as equals so far as the exchange of reasons is concerned, that is, who proceed on the assumption that they are all capable of reasoning together to determine what should be done and what is right.

The tribalistic mentality often includes racism. Recent research indicates that implicit racist responses can be reduced by chemical interventions.<sup>2</sup> One important question for research into the possibility of mitigating tribalism by chemical interventions is this: are there more basic psychological mechanisms, which sometimes

<sup>1</sup> Buchanan 2020.

<sup>2</sup> Terbeck, Kahane, McTavish, Savulescu, Cowen and Hewstone 2012.

get expressed as racial bias but in other cases in other forms of out-group animosity, that are subject to chemical alteration?

To the extent that tribalism is *in part* a phenomenon with a biological (more specifically neurological) basis, shaped by human evolution, it should be in principle possible to alter it by chemical means. Or, at the very least, given the grave threat that tribalism poses to democracy and to morality itself, that is a hypothesis worth exploring.

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## **References**

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