

Conatus - Journal of Philosophy

Vol 10, No 1 (2025)

Conatus - Journal of Philosophy



To Be Human is to Be Better: A Discussion with Julian Savulescu

Julian Savulescu, Phaedra Giannopoulou

doi: [10.12681/cjp.39904](https://doi.org/10.12681/cjp.39904)

Copyright © 2025, Phaedra Giannopoulou, Julian Savulescu



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/).

To cite this article:

Savulescu, J., & Giannopoulou, P. (2025). To Be Human is to Be Better: A Discussion with Julian Savulescu. *Conatus - Journal of Philosophy*, 10(1), 299–309. <https://doi.org/10.12681/cjp.39904>

To Be Human is to Be Better: A Discussion with Julian Savulescu

Julian Savulescu

National University of Singapore, Singapore

E-mail address: jsavules@nus.edu.sg

ORCID iD: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1691-6403>

Phaedra Giannopoulou

National and Kapodistrian University Athens, Greece

E-mail address: faidrao2@gmail.com

ORCID iD: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4689-8720>

Abstract

In this paper, Julian Savulescu discusses humanity's trajectory – past, present, and future. As the world undergoes relentless transformation driven by technological advancements, some pressing questions arise: Is it time to provide modern solutions to old problems such as discrimination, inequality, and crime? Should people retain absolute autonomy over their decisions, even in the case that their judgment may falter? What role is Artificial Intelligence going to play in our day-to-day lives, and how far could it go? This dialogue unveils a visionary blueprint for humanity, regarding how much could really be achieved with the help of technology, what are some of the difficult decisions we would have to make, and ultimately what would it look like if we tried to use the tools we have to actually create a society that values justice and equality above individual freedom.

Keywords: moral enhancement; discrimination; autonomy; artificial intelligence; technological enhancement; freedom; inequality

Phaedra Giannopoulou: The topic of this year's World Bioethics Day was combating discrimination and stigmatisation. Why do you think discrimination is still such a big issue in 2024?¹ Is it just a societal problem, or do we naturally tend to have an aversion to what we consider different or strange?²

¹ Uros Prokic, "Contemporary Epistemology of Nationalism: Faltering Foundationalism Contrasted with Holistic Coherentism," *Conatus – Journal of Philosophy* 8, no. 1 (2023): 297-298.

² Darija Rupčić Kelam and Ivica Kelam, "Care and Empathy as a Crucial Quality for Social Change," *Conatus – Journal of Philosophy* 7, no. 2 (2022): 168.

If that's the case, will people ever be able to overcome that natural urge on their own without the help of moral enhancement?

Julian Savulescu: The problem of discrimination arises because of human nature and human moral limitations. We are essentially animals that form groups and affiliations; people are nepotistic, xenophobic and distrustful of strangers. We typically, through the course of human history, have existed in groups of 150;³ we still haven't lost that group orientation towards our group, whether it's our football team, our sex, our race or our nation. Our political and social institutions will just be an expression of our national identity, of our nature and our ideals. While they do have some effect on how those things are expressed, we have never got to the root cause of the disease of discrimination. Despite our best efforts and rhetoric, people are still very concerned about the threat of other groups, and their concerns around immigration in Europe and the United States are expressions of these basic human tendencies.

Therefore, I think that we can try to educate people, we can create laws against discrimination, but we also need to look at the basic underlying psychology and our own psychological limitations that we all share. Potentially, in the future, there may be biological interventions or neurotechnological interventions that can augment education, but the idea that we can just tell people to be better and that "it's wrong to discriminate" is just really not tackling the problem, as you can see from around the world.

Phaedra Giannopoulou: Yes, and is it possible that if this approach was tackling the problem, then it would have to be solved by now, right? Because for so many years we've been learning about the dangers of discrimination, and we've seen throughout history where discrimination has led in the past, and yet the cycle keeps going.

Julian Savulescu: Yeah, another example is that human beings are sort of programmed to identify facial beauty as symmetry, the so-called "golden triangle of the face," that's what plastic surgeons make money from.⁴ Even small babies are able to pick out an attractive face from an ugly face. So, while there might be some ideas of beauty that are cultural and temporally dependent, say, body shape to a degree, there are certain characteristics that are very hardwired and have tracked our genetic fitness and our ability to survive and reproduce. So, you can say that people should not be lookist, but

³ Ingmar Persson and Julian Savulescu, "Unfit for the Future? Human Nature, Scientific Progress and the Need for Moral Enhancement," in *Enhancing Human Capacities*, eds. Julian Savulescu, Ruud ter Meulen, and Guy Kahane (Blackwell Publishing, 2011), 487.

⁴ Julian Savulescu, "Genetic Interventions and the Ethics of Enhancement of Human Beings," *Gazeta de Antropologia* 32, no. 2 (2016): 07.

the reality is that attractive people are more likely to have highly paid jobs, more access to romantic partners and are less likely to be found guilty of crimes. And so, this is not something that can easily be countered simply by education and social institutions, because it's very deeply ingrained.

Phaedra Giannopoulou: On the topic of moral enhancement, you have extensively discussed the thought experiment of the God machine,⁵ which poses the question if it would be desirable to prevent people from acting on or even having immoral thoughts using technology. With recent developments in microchip technology, do you think scientists should be looking into whether the God machine could become a real possibility? Would that mean that morality is a more important value than freedom?

Julian Savulescu: Well, just to sort of backtrack, the argument that I proposed going back to 2008 is that, in principle, we could not only use education and social institutions to make people behave more morally, but also improve their moral dispositions and reduce their moral limitations.⁶ So, for example, it's possible we could make people less xenophobic or racist, or we could make people more willing to make positive social decisions and small altruistic sacrifices with large benefits to other people. Now there is an obvious difference in moral behavior between men and women. I'm talking about genetic males and females here. There is evidence that these groups have different moral dispositions, and in general, women are more empathetic, more cooperative and so on.⁷ So, what we said is that you could make men more like women, and that would be to some degree moral improvement. And one of the objections to this kind of proposition is that it would not actually be a moral enhancement because people wouldn't be free to choose to do the right thing, they would be programmed. Now I think that objection fails for many reasons. If men became more empathetic, they would be more willing to do the right thing, but it wouldn't make them less free. We don't say women are less free because they're more empathetic. If people were to achieve that goal by reading Tolstoy, nobody would object.

But when it comes to moral enhancement, the objection is that now we're restricting people's freedom. So, I have said that in general, moral enhancement wouldn't threaten freedom, but in some extreme cases it might. So, for example, if we were able to deliberately intervene in people's brains and make them stop murdering innocent people, then yes, that would remove their freedom. But still, it might be a worthwhile thing to do if we were

⁵ Ingmar Persson and Julian Savulescu, "Moral Enhancement, Freedom and the God Machine," *Monist* 95, no. 3 (2012): 399-421.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

talking about, say, the murder of an innocent child or the rape of an innocent child. And my argument was that, if the stakes were high enough, we might prioritize the lives of people over the freedom of people. So, to go back to the question, should we begin to explore this? I think that in a way we've already started to explore this; pedophiles in many countries are offered the possibility of what's called hormonal castration, which is the use of drugs to reduce their libido.⁸

Now, let's just say we were able to put a device that was able to detect whether an adult was about to engage in a sexual relationship with a minor. Let's say it was an ankle bracelet that would be able to detect that and then immobilize the individual until the police could be called or until the child could be protected. That seems to me to be a technology we should embrace, or at the very least, explore and test. It would remove the freedom to abuse children, but it would be isolated to only that particularly obviously immoral behavior. People wouldn't be immobilized for going to a protest about immigration, for example, I don't think we should be controlling that level of behavior. But the sexual abuse of children is something that we should be controlling one way or another; and if we had a God machine, we should consider employing it.

Phaedra Giannopoulou: Yes, and just in general for criminal behavior of that nature. Behavior that is forbidden by law, even now, without any restrictions on our brains and our thoughts. A lot of people feel concerned about our freedom being taken away when they hear about something like the God machine, but they ignore the fact that we are not actually free to murder or to molest children, nor should we want to be, in my opinion.

Julian Savulescu: Yes, I mean, people in jail are not free to abuse children or murder innocent people, so we do employ extreme coercion to prevent crime, because punishment is partly consequentialist as well as retributivist. It's consequentialist to protect people from being harmed in the future. So, this is just a non-biological means of prevention. Now, people's objection is that that's different because we're not intervening in people's thoughts. But in my view, if our intervention is circumscribed and appropriate, then we have to examine whether the value of the intervention is appropriate. We might find that even if we don't have complete freedom of action, it's worth it.

Phaedra Giannopoulou: If we believe that the God machine is desirable, but we don't see it being a possibility shortly, would we also support something that could produce the same results without intervening in the human brain?

⁸ John McMillan, "The Kindest Cut? Surgical Castration, Sex Offenders and Coercive Offers," *Journal of Medical Ethics* 40, no. 9 (2014): 587-588.

For example, extreme surveillance, making sure that people act ethically in every circumstance.

Julian Savulescu: Yeah, so the God Machine is a philosophical thought experiment meant to test the idea that we must always prioritize freedom. In practice, the problem with God Machines is that they aren't perfect, just like our court system is far from perfect, and many innocent people are jailed or executed. The infringements on people's freedom could be enormous if we started to misapply this sort of technology. So, extremely heavy surveillance is an example where, if it were used just to prevent the abuse or murder of children and the murder of innocent people, and it was perfectly effective at that, then I think we should embrace that. Personally, I enjoy living in Singapore, which has a huge amount of surveillance, resultingly crime is very low, and it doesn't restrict my life. I don't have surveillance within my home, I don't feel that it excessively burdens me. But if that were multiplied to people being under constant surveillance and even for minor misdemeanors like driving through a red light when there was no traffic coming or crossing a road illegally, I think that would be very burdensome. So, while I support the principle, I think in practice, we have to be very cautious about radically enhanced surveillance. Now, there is always a balance of proportionality between infringement of freedom and benefit. In my view, countries like Singapore have that reasonable balance, but it could easily swing the wrong way.

Phaedra Giannopoulou: Is it unethical to vote for political candidates who express and support racist, homophobic, misogynistic or anti-environmentalist views and policies,⁹ and if so, does that mean that moral enhancement could also affect the way people make political decisions?

Julian Savulescu: Well, my memory is that Adolf Hitler was elected, so yes, it's true that you play a part in responsibility if you vote in a leader that causes great harm, and you facilitated those crimes, in a sense, you are morally responsible. However, in modern day, political leaders have a mixture of virtues and vices; they're not uniformly evil. They may have undesirable traits, but then they also have policies that are legitimately attractive to their electorate. That's something that I think is a function of democracy; people are not perfect, and our leaders are not perfect. People ought to be free to vote for imperfect leaders. When you get all the way to Hitler, we can say that it clearly is wrong, but to extend that argument to every vote for a political leader who has some unethical views, I think is too extreme. Now, it's true that moral enhancement will affect people's political choices because it

⁹ German Bula Caraballo et al., "Authoritarian Leaders as Successful Psychopaths: Towards an Understanding of the Role of Emotions in Political Decision-Making," *Conatus – Journal of Philosophy* 9, no. 2 (2024): 54.

would affect people's overall assessment of our leaders and their potential actions. I think that's a good thing, and that's what we would hope moral education would do. A part of the problem of discrimination and these kinds of vices that many international leaders display is that there's a lack of education, and in particular moral education, of the public that puts them in those positions. So, it goes back to the most basic level, we need the capacities to be able to think and in particular to morally deliberate, and we need the education to mature those capacities, both of which are important. Right now, we live in a world that is just the product of the limitations and the natural distribution of moral talents and biases and the imperfections of our educational system.

Phaedra Giannopoulou: You have claimed that for someone to make an autonomous decision, they should be fully informed and acting within reason.¹⁰ However, different cultures often deem different things as reasonable. Would it be possible to create a universal ethical code without disregarding people's autonomy and cultural differences?

Julian Savulescu: Yeah, that's a very good question. Often people argue that ethics is relative, it's relative to culture or time or groups or individuals. I think that's a mistake because then there would be nothing to criticize about the Nazis, they just had different values to us. So, the whole movement to universal human rights has been a movement away from ethical relativism, but as you correctly point out, cultures differ in terms of their values and their reasonable values. One thing is that there isn't a very precise cardinal ordering of values that we can use to create some sort of list of human rights, how to rank them and how to apply them. How much weight you give to freedom versus security differs from China to America. It's not that one country has an answer to that. We can all agree that freedom, security, health, well-being and autonomy are all important values; but for how you instantiate those, there can be reasonable disagreement. Secondly, the circumstances of each country differ. For example, some countries are richer than others, and they can afford to have more freedom for their citizens because they can financially support those choices.

So, there will be universal values that are important to all human beings, but how they're balanced and how they manifest themselves in different cultures will vary. What we need is not a kind of 'one size fits all' set of values or rights, but a framework where those values or rights can be interpreted in a reasonable way by different countries or cultures according to the circumstances or the people. *Brothers Karamazov* is a famous Russian novel by

¹⁰ Julian Savulescu and Evangelos D. Protopapadakis, "'Ethical Minefields' and the Voice of Common Sense: A Discussion with Julian Savulescu," *Conatus – Journal of Philosophy* 4, no. 1 (2019): 129.

Fyodor Dostoevsky, and there's a famous conversation between one of the brothers, Ivan, and the Grand Inquisitor, who's sort of a manifestation of the devil. The Grand Inquisitor says to Ivan, "I can make humanity very happy; it will just require that they give themselves up to me."¹¹ So essentially, they sacrifice their freedom for happiness. Now, freedom and happiness are both important, and just having one without the other is probably worthless. So, the question is how to balance those. And that's a question where we can defer to the autonomy of individuals, but also the autonomy of nation states to find a reasonable balance. And again, that's not to say that anything goes, but it is to say that ethics is not just black and white; it's black, white and grey, and there's a grey area where different countries will have different practices.

Phaedra Giannopoulou: Regarding the topic of physical enhancement, do you think technological advancements in that area would be helpful to combat discrimination, or would they create an environment in which you have to undergo some kind of physical enhancement to not face discrimination? For example, if a large part of society decided to use technology to make themselves faster, anyone who didn't want to do that and kept their natural speed would be at a disadvantage.

Julian Savulescu: Well, when it comes to cognitive enhancements or moral enhancements or physical enhancements, it's true that one way to correct disadvantage is to modify someone's biology. Another way is to improve the situation of that person. People who are disability activists and adopt a social constructivist model of disability say that all the disadvantages associated with disabilities exist because society is arranged in a certain way. Now I think that's too strong. I think that some of the disadvantages are socially constructed, but some are also biological, therefore, both social interventions and biological interventions could be used to provide advantages to that individual. So, you can either provide extremely good wheelchairs and wheelchair ramps and elevators and other means by which people with paraplegia can mobilize effectively, I think that's a really good point, or you can cure their paraplegia. Both of those will reduce the disadvantage and, subsequently, also the discrimination against those individuals.

But it's true also that this could create pressure to utilize whatever enhancements there are in order to maximize productivity or competitiveness. So, there is an arms race of enhancement. I think that what we need to be careful of is that those enhancements don't have downsides. When it comes to taking drugs that would improve physical performance, for example, I'm 60, and as you get older, the level of testosterone reduces. So, one physical

¹¹ Roger L. Cox, "Dostoevsky's Grand Inquisitor," *CrossCurrents* 17, no. 4 (1967): 431.

enhancement to maintain muscle mass is to take testosterone replacements, it is basically an enhancement for the elderly. Now, I don't take those because I'm worried about it increasing my risk of prostate cancer, but if it didn't have a risk of prostate cancer, I would. That indeed would put pressure on a lot of people to maintain their physical abilities by taking physical enhancements like testosterone. So, I think that the critical question when it comes to the arms race or the pressure that people would experience for enhancement is to ensure the enhancements are reasonably safe and don't come with adverse effects.

Phaedra Giannopoulou: If we are approaching human enhancement from the standpoint of combating discrimination, wouldn't that mean that human enhancement should only be considered ethical if it is widely available to everyone, despite their economic status? Because if it was to only become available to people who belong in higher economic classes, it would produce more discrimination rather than eliminating it.

Julian Savulescu: So, yes, one of the problems of all enhancements, not just biological enhancements, but technological enhancements, like computers or AI, is that typically they are available in capitalist societies according to the market and people's ability to afford them. So, the rich get the best computers, they get the best healthcare, and they might get the best biological enhancements. And that increases inequality, the rich get richer, the rich live longer, the rich get healthier, the rich get more and get happier. That is the way of the world in general. However, it's not determined, you could make enhancements available like we've already made enhancements available; general education is an enhancement, but we think it's so important that it's provided to everyone, and there's a basic level of education that everyone can access. My view is, if the enhancement is important enough, then we should make it available to everyone, or you could even use it to reduce inequality by only making it available to the people who are worst off. So, for example, you might make cognitive enhancements freely available or even only available to people with low to normal IQ, between say 70 and 85, who struggle to find jobs and to be productive in a technologically advanced society, which would reduce inequality. So, what impact enhancement has on inequality depends on whether it's driven by the market, driven by public funding, or targeted to correct inequality. That, of course, is up to us, given our moral limitations we probably will just make it available on the market, so I think it's likely that it will increase inequality, but it really is our choice.

Phaedra Giannopoulou: We're experiencing a meteoric evolution in AI technology. Since artificial intelligence is inherently more reasonable and more informed than a human being, does it fit the criteria that are required to make

an autonomous decision?¹² Would it be beneficial to use this technology to make decisions for humans in difficult situations?¹³

Julian Savulescu: Well, we will definitely use artificial intelligence to help us make difficult decisions in time-critical situations. The most obvious example is the programming of driverless cars, or even the programming of regular cars. People are often not able to make decisions quickly enough. Now, if we were to program a driverless vehicle to swerve off a road when a tree falls over, that could potentially kill an innocent pedestrian. In cases like these, the technology will be able to assess the situation within fractions of a second, and it will be able to make a decision. The way in which those decisions will be made will be by pre-programming our values into the AI. So, it's essentially like a Ulysses contract, this is a pre-commitment contract where you program in your values beforehand and at the time when a decision has to be made, those values then express themselves. So that will be a straightforward way in which AI will be used, in the use of technology like cars or possibly even in emergency medicine when decisions need to be made as fast as possible.

When it comes to more fundamental decisions, for example, deciding whether to have an operation or not on some area of your brain, I think side effects of AI technology could be very helpful. We've even explored the use of ethical avatars; large language models potentially trained on our own work – in my case my own academic papers – but it could be somebody's writings or their blogs to reflect that individual and also access to the body of human knowledge through the conventional large language model. So, I'll be able to talk to an enhanced version of myself or I may be able to talk to a large language model trained on Aristotle or even a large language model of Jesus, that kind of dialogue will be very enabling for making moral decisions. But I think where we can, we should make our own moral decisions because essentially, we have to take responsibility for our actions and our lives, not a machine. In situations like this there is a risk of machine paternalism, where the machine decides what's best for you. I think that would be deeply dehumanizing. What it is to be a human being, not an animal, is to make your own decisions for yourself. And AI can be used through large language models, even personalized large language models to enhance your deliberation, but it shouldn't be used to replace it. I think that would be something that would undermine our human dignity and essentially our humanity.

¹² Michael Anderson et al., "Towards Moral Machines: A Discussion with Michael Anderson and Susan Leigh Anderson," *Conatus – Journal of Philosophy* 6, no. 1 (2021): 192.

¹³ As par excellence are decisions during wartime. See Ioanna K. Lekea et al., "Exploring Enhanced Military Ethics and Legal Compliance through Automated Insights: An Experiment on Military Decision-making in Extremis," *Conatus – Journal of Philosophy* 8, no. 2 (2023): 366; also, Nigel Biggar, "An Ethic of Military Uses of Artificial Intelligence: Sustaining Virtue, Granting Autonomy, and Calibrating Risk," *Conatus – Journal of Philosophy* 8, no. 2 (2023): 66-76.

Phaedra Giannopoulou: What do you think should be the goal of human enhancement? Should it just be a way to eliminate pain and maximize pleasure in a utilitarian sense, or could it ultimately contribute to creating lasting equality and social justice?

Julian Savulescu: To be human is to be better, we are always looking at ways of enhancing ourselves and that's a part of human nature. The deep philosophical question is what is human enhancement? What constitutes better humans? Is it humans who have better lives, more well-being? And then what is well-being? Is it just happiness in the absence of pain or is there some sort of Aristotelian account of human flourishing that we should be aiming at? Rather than just making humans who will have better lives, more well-being, should we be aiming for morally better human beings? What is that and what is the best way to do that? A challenge for ethics and human enhancement is to try to understand what is a good life and what does morality require. What I worry about is people applying very simplistic views both of well-being, for example economics just equates well-being with preference satisfaction, and also of morality, for example the current fad of wokeism that dominates the view of what a morally good outcome is.

So, I think that we need to be looking at sciences – such as psychology and neuroscience – that underpin our choices, our behavior, our talents and our abilities to achieve well-being for ourselves and to behave morally. But we also need a philosophical revolution that tries to outline what the reasonable conceptions of the good life are for human beings and for a morally better society, and we need that whether or not we're discussing bio-enhancements because our society in many cases appears to be on the verge of collapse. Collapse because of relativism, collapse because of our basic moral limitations and collapse probably because of postmodernism. You're in Greece which is short of the home and origin of much Western philosophical thought, in many ways we need to return to those origins of trying to understand what the great Greek philosophers like Plato and Aristotle were deliberating about and those issues are more urgent now than ever.

Author contribution statement

Phaedra Giannopoulou conceived and designed the study. Both authors contributed to the writing and critical revision of the manuscript to an extent clearly reflected in the content. Both authors approved the final version for submission.

References

Anderson, Michael, Susan Leigh Anderson, Alkis Gounaris, and George Kosteletos. "Towards Moral Machines: A Discussion with Michael Anderson and Susan Leigh Anderson." *Conatus – Journal of Philosophy* 6, no. 1 (2021): 177-202.

Biggar, Nigel. "An Ethic of Military Uses of Artificial Intelligence: Sustaining Virtue, Granting Autonomy, and Calibrating Risk." *Conatus – Journal of Philosophy* 8, no. 2 (2023): 66-76.

Caraballo, German Bula, Maria Clara Garavito, and Sebastián Alejandro González. "Authoritarian Leaders as Successful Psychopaths: Towards an Understanding of the Role of Emotions in Political Decision-making." *Conatus – Journal of Philosophy* 9, no. 2 (2024): 45-74.

Cox, Roger L. "Dostoevsky's Grand Inquisitor." *CrossCurrents* 17, no. 4 (1967): 427-444.

Lekea, Ioanna K., George K. Lekeas, and Pavlos Topalnakos. "Exploring Enhanced Military Ethics and Legal Compliance through Automated Insights: An Experiment on Military Decision-making in Extremis." *Conatus – Journal of Philosophy* 8, no. 2 (2023): 345-372.

McMillan, John. "The Kindest Cut? Surgical Castration, Sex Offenders and Coercive Offers." *Journal of Medical Ethics* 40, no. 9 (2014): 583-590.

Persson, Ingmar, and Julian Savulescu. "Moral Enhancement, Freedom and the God Machine." *Monist* 95, no. 3 (2012): 399-421.

Persson, Ingmar, and Julian Savulescu. "Unfit for the Future? Human Nature, Scientific Progress, and the Need for Moral Enhancement." In *Enhancing Human Capacities*, edited by Julian Savulescu, Ruud ter Meulen, and Guy Kahane, 486-500. Blackwell Publishing, 2011.

Prokic, Uros. "Contemporary Epistemology of Nationalism: Faltering Foundationalism Contrasted with Holistic Coherentism." *Conatus – Journal of Philosophy* 8, no. 1 (2023): 285-302.

Rupčić Kelam, Darija, and Ivica Kelam. "Care and Empathy as a Crucial Quality for Social Change." *Conatus – Journal of Philosophy* 7, no. 2 (2022): 157-172.

Savulescu, Julian, and Evangelos D. Protopapadakis. "'Ethical Minefields' and the Voice of Common Sense: A Discussion with Julian Savulescu." *Conatus – Journal of Philosophy* 4, no. 1 (2019): 125-133.

Savulescu, Julian. "Genetic Interventions and the Ethics of Enhancement of Human Beings." *Gazeta de Antropología* 32, no. 2 (2016): 07.

