

A teacher sits with a pile of exams to grade. He has been looking at his phone for the past hour trying to muster the will to begin grading. He really wanted to finish early so that he could go to the park before nightfall. Wouldn't it be nice to be able to take a pill that induces the required motivation?

A neglected domain for research into bioenhancement is what I call agential enhancement. For this paper, I focus narrowly on enhancing desires, a foundational motivational state with respect to agency. My treatment is not tied to any ethical theory; I do not discuss how to improve desires to make them align with morality. Instead, I discuss how to enhance desires qua desires – how to make desires better as the springs of action.

While I cannot provide a full catalogue of strategies for biotechnological methods for enhancing desires, I offer some intriguing possibilities, relating in particular to dopamine, its role in reinforcement learning, and its connection to desire. Current neuroscience suggests that dopamine is transmitted to the pre-frontal cortex when one's actions produce an outcome better than expected. Thus, in the simplest cases the action tendency becomes more salient, and the agent is more likely to want to do it again in the future. It may be possible to pair a pill that increases dopamine transmission for healthy actions. Suppose the procrastinating teacher were to take a pill, wait an hour, and begin grading. Though he may continue to find grading unappealing, he might still get a strong motivation boost for the action tendency.

Alternatively, it might be possible to fight the onset of bad habits. Suppose that one could take a pill that, when ingested, would neutralize dopamine transmission for a short period. During that time, one could perform actions that one would not want to become a habit, and the action tendency will not be as likely to take hold. Possible applications might include addiction, social media use, or other activities that can stop people from achieving their goals.

In the paper, I discuss how desires are not always better when they are stronger. I compare four dimensions we might value when it comes to desires: generation, strength/weakness, harmony with other desires and values, and optionality (the ability to discontinue or at least resist the desire when one chooses). It is not yet clear how the biochemistry works with respect to these valued properties of desires, but I pursue some interesting lines of thought.

There is more to say here, including the limitations of pairing dopamine enhancement/neutralizing pills with action types. Such attempts at enhancement could be abused or lead to unintended consequences. But, surely there are limitations to current attempts of psychological interventions and words of encouragement or discouragement. It is worth exploring new avenues for enhancing agency.