In defense of the Genetic Virtue Program
A rejoinder

Mark Walker
Richard L. Hedden Chair of Advanced Philosophical Studies
Department of Philosophy
New Mexico State University
Las Cruces, NM 88003
mwalker@nmsu.edu

The target paper of this invited forum has a vaulting ambition: to convince readers that we ought to attempt to reduce evil in our world by constructing an interdisciplinary program, which I call the Genetic Virtue Program (GVP), to enhance the biological aspects of virtue. Most of the contributors to this forum are not sympathetic to the project—to put it mildly. Yet, one of the surprising things, at least to this author, is that comparatively little is said about the paper’s overall ambition. Jamie Bronstein offers the idea that better socialization may be key: “No one would argue that there have not also been great evils; but the historical record doesn’t support the level of improbability for further moral improvement through socialization that Walker would like to assign.” However, nowhere do I claim that there is no prospect for further moral improvement through socialization. Indeed, in recently published work I specifically recommend that we improve socialization efforts to enhance virtue by tracking prosocialization efforts.\(^1\)

Social reforms, however helpful, are likely to eliminate evil only so far. Think of improvements in children’s health since the nineteenth century. Cultural changes, combined with new health and hygiene practices, helped to substantially lower rates of serious disease and death. Yet it is folly to think that social measures alone will eliminate the need for biological interventions, such as antibiotics and immunization programs. The social reforms Bronstein mentions—“successful civil rights movements for racial equality, and reforms in capital punishment and the treatment of prisoners”—are to be welcomed, of course, and we should hope that one day they will be fully realized. But these reforms have not immunized humanity against genocide in Cambodia, Rwanda, or Yugoslavia to name but a few examples in the panoply of recent human tragedies. Nor does Bronstein explain how the improved socialization practices cited—scholastic improvements in Harlem—apply to moral improvement.\(^2\)

Of course, we can hope all we want—hope, after all, requires no evidence—but it goes against all reasonable probability to extrapolate from reformed educational practices in Harlem to think that such evil acts as murder, rape, or genocide will disappear any time soon. Two other respondents take another tact. Larry Arnhart规格ulates that evil may be an ineliminable feature of the human condition, while Robert Sprinkle says, in reference to the hope expressed in the paper for the elimination of evil, “I, for one, never held such a hope.” Yet talk about evil in the abstract should not blind us to the fact we are talking about real victims. I don’t claim to know that we can eliminate evil, but likewise, it unduly privileges our epistemic position to say that improvements in biology (coupled with improvements in socialization) will never eliminate evil.

Overall, I am indebted to the contributors to this forum for raising many important issues and specific challenges to the arguments of my paper. My further replies are grouped below under three headings: science, ethics, and eugenics.

Science

Several respondents found my characterization of the scientific issues associated with the GVP to be unduly