

HCB 524
Special Topic in Bioethics

Fall Semester, 2019.

Tuesdays 6-8:30pm.

Instructor of Record: Adam Sepe, MA, MLS(ASCP)^{cm} adam.sepe@stonybrookmedicine.edu

Course Description: Transhumanism and [Human?] Dignity.

Throughout human history — and prehistory for that matter — technological advancement has drastically altered every aspect of human life. Most of us will say that many advents — such as cooking and the wheel — have been largely, if not entirely, beneficial. Would we say the same of *all* technology? Surely each of us can list technologies that have, in the very least, some considerable downsides. So while history and experience can tell us that some technologies are beneficial and that some other technologies are harmful, how can we know what kind of impact future technology will have? For now we can't, and so all we can do is try, to the best of our ability, to imagine such futures and develop our technology with these considerations in mind.

'Transhumanism' refers a diverse collection of ideas that have one at least thing in common: through future technology, humanity will be fundamentally altered to an unprecedented degree. Some even believe there will come a time when, through our own action, the word 'human' will be obsolete; that we will be succeeded by entities (or an entity) for which 'human' does not apply. Most people who identify as transhumanists are, to varying degrees, proponents of such technology. They are in favor of such alterations and they argue that these will be beneficial.

In this course, we will take a critical look at transhumanist claims. We will analyze the pros and cons of two of the more popular and plausible modes of transhumanist progress: biological and virtual. The former mode of progress assumes that advances in biotechnology will offer us unprecedented power over our own biology. The latter assumes that advances in digital (or perhaps heretofore unknown) technology will offer a virtual world, one that is perhaps devoid of suffering and replete with happiness. It is important to note that the primary focus of this course is not to assess the present-day feasibility of speculative technologies, but instead to consider their possible future effects. Therefore, we will reasonably grant such assumptions of futuristic technology so as to foster a fruitful discourse.

Course Objectives:

By the end of this course, students will have:

- 1) a nuanced understanding of the concepts as well as the debate surrounding transhuman ideas, and
- 2) experience in writing and discussion on the subject of transhumanism.

Required Texts:

There are two required texts for this reading, both of which cover their respective subject matter well.

Better than Human: The Promise and Perils of Enhancing Ourselves — Allen Buchanan

Syllabus Shorthand: '*Better than Human*'.

The Singularity is Near: When Humans Transcend Biology — Ray Kurzweil

Syllabus Shorthand: '*The Singularity*'.

Assignments:

There will be **two** 10-page papers assigned. These are intended to follow the content delivery of the course.

Midterm paper — Due October 22. One 10-page paper on a topic related to biological transhumanism. The paper does not necessarily have to stay within this realm, but it should at least be a central theme. The paper should, however, function primarily to deliver an argument, thesis, or exploration of a big question. Please do approach me with any ideas that may not fit within this topic.

-Students will present a short, oral summary of their paper to rest of the class.

Final paper — Due December 17. One 10-page paper on a topic related to digital or virtual transhumanism. Again, the paper does not necessarily have to stay within this realm, but it should at least be a central theme. And again the paper should function primarily to deliver an argument, thesis, or exploration of a big question. Please do approach me with any ideas that may not fit within this topic.

-Students will present a short, oral summary of their paper to rest of the class.

Grading:

20% Attendance and Participation,

40% Midterm Paper,

40% Final Paper.

Course Schedule:

August 27 – Introduction, and Course Outline.

Part 1: Introduction to Transhumanism.

September 3 – What is transhumanism?

Readings:

Chundi, Kishore. (2017). “Becoming Post-Human: An Introduction to Transhumanism: The Movement, the Theory, the Dangers.” *The Politic*, 3 Nov. 2017. thepolitic.org/becoming-post-human/

Bostrom, Nick. (2008) “Why I want to be a Posthuman When I Grow Up.” *Medical Enhancement and Posthumanity*, 107-13

Christopher Hook, “Transhumanism and Posthumanism,” in *The Encyclopedia of Bioethics*, 3rd edition, ed. SG Post (New York: Macmillan Reference, 2004), Vol. 5, pp. 2517-20. (pdf)
Max More, “The Philosophy of Transhumanism (pdf)

The Transhumanist Declaration (pdf)

Stephen G. Post, “Humanism, Posthumanism, and Compassionate Love,” *Technology in Society*, Vol. 31, No. 1, 2010, pp. 35-39.

September 10 – The Question of Happiness.

Readings:

Superhappiness.

Robert Nozick. (1974). “The Experience Machine”. *Anarchy State and Utopia*. (New York: Basic Books, 1974) pp. 42-45.

Part 2: Biological Transhumanism

September 17 – Biological Enhancement 1 – Regulatory Views and Realities.

Readings:

Better than Human chapters 1 and 2.

Human Genome Editing Science, Ethics, and Governance.” (Report Summary 2017). The National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine. Washington, D. C. 1 — Summary. pp. 1-14.

Ibid. 2 — Oversight of Human Genome Editing and Overarching Principles for Governance. pp. 29-60.

Ibid. 6 — Enhancement. pp. 137-162.

September 24 — Biological Enhancement 2 — Genetic Modification.

Readings:

Better than Human chapters 3 and 4.

Stephen L. Baird. (2007). “Designer Babies: Eugenics Repackaged or Consumer Options,” *The Technology Teacher*, 66(7), 12-16.

Nick Bostrom. (2003). “Human Genetic Enhancements: A Transhumanist Perspective,” *The Journal of Value Inquiry*, 3(7), 493-506.

Murray, T. H. (2014). “Stirring the Simmering “Designer Baby” Pot,” *Science*, 343, 1208-1210.

Reardon, S. (2017). “Baby’s DNA Mix Revealed.” *Nature*, 544, (17), 17-18. https://www.nature.com/polopoly_fs/1.21761!/menu/main/topColumns/topLeftColumn/pdf/nature.2017.21761.pdf

Newson, A. J., Wilkinson, S., & Wrigley, A. (2016). “Ethical and Legal Issues in Mitochondrial Transfer,” *EMBO Molecular Medicine*, 8, (6), 589-591. <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/epdf/10.15252/emmm.201606281>

October 1 — Biological Enhancement 3 — Procreative Beneficence?

Readings:

Better than Human chapters 5 and 6.

Savulescu, J. (2001). Procreative beneficence: Why we should select the best children. *Bioethics* 15(5): 413–426.

Savulescu, J. (2005). New breeds of humans: The moral obligation to enhance. *Ethics, Law and Moral Philosophy of Reproductive Biomedicine* 1(1): 36–39.

Sparrow, R. (2007). Procreative beneficence, obligation, and eugenics. *Genomics, Society and Policy* 3(3): 43–59.

Sparrow, R. (2010). Should Human Beings Have Sex? Sexual Dimorphism and Human Enhancement, *The American Journal of Bioethics*, 10:7, 3-12.

October 8 – Biological Enhancement 4 – Aging and Mortality.

Readings:

Better than Human chapter 7.

Juengst, E. T., Binstock, R. H., Mehlman, M., Post, S. G., & Whitehouse, P. (2003). "Biogerontology, Anti-Aging Medicine, and the Challenges of Human Enhancement," *Hastings Center Report*, Vol. 33(4), July-August, 21-30.

Adams, M. B. (2004). "The Quest for Immortality: Visions and Presentiments in Science and Literature." from SG Post & RH Binstock, eds., *The Fountain of Youth: Cultural, Scientific, and Ethical Perspectives on a Biomedical Goal*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Faragher, R. G. (2015). "Should We Treat Aging as a Disease? The Consequences and Dangers of Miscategorisation." *Frontiers in Genetics*, 6, 171. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4500987/>

Gladyshev, T. V., & Gladyshev, V. N. (2017). "A Disease or Not a Disease? Aging as A Pathology." *Trends in Molecular Medicine*, 22(12), 995-996. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5540438/>

Tal, D. (2016). "Moving from Extreme Life Extension to Immortality: Future of Human Population, P6." *Quantumrun.com*.

October 15 – No Class (October Break)

October 22 – Midterm Papers Due. Discussion of Papers.

Part 3: Digital/Virtual Transhumanism

October 29 – Digital/Virtual Enhancement 1, Artificial Intelligence.

Readings:

The Singularity chapters 1 and 2.

Bostrom, Nick. (2014). "7: The superintelligent will". *Superintelligence: Paths, Dangers, Strategies*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press) pp. 105-113.

ibid. "8: Is the default outcome doom?" pp. 115-125.

ibid. "9: The control problem". pp. 127-143.

November 5 – Digital/Virtual Enhancement 2

Readings:

The Singularity chapters 3 and 4.

Davies, Paul. (2006). “When computers take over.” *Nature*. Vol 437,440, 23 March 2006.

Vinge, Vernor. (1993). “The coming technological singularity: How to survive in the post-human era.” NASA. Lewis Research Center, Vision 21: Interdisciplinary Science and Engineering in the Era of Cyberspace, 11-22. <https://ntrs.nasa.gov/search.jsp?R=19940022856>

November 12 – Digital/Virtual Enhancement 3

Readings:

The Singularity chapters 5 and 6.

Lanier, Jaron. (2000). “ONE HALF A MANIFESTO”. [edge.org](https://www.edge.org/conversation/jaron_lanier-one-half-a-manifesto). https://www.edge.org/conversation/jaron_lanier-one-half-a-manifesto.

November 19 – Digital/Virtual Enhancement 4

Readings:

The Singularity chapters 7 and 8.

Friedersdorf, Conor. (2015) “Immortal but Damned to Hell on Earth: The Danger of Uploading One's Consciousness to a Computer without a Suicide Switch.” *The Atlantic*, Atlantic Media Company, 28 May 2015 www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2015/05/immortal-but-damned-to-hell-on-earth/394160/

November 26 – Digital/Virtual Enhancement 5

Readings:

The Singularity chapter 9 and epilogue.

Trimper, J.B., Wolpe, P.R., Rommelfanger, K.S. (2014). “When “I” becomes “We”: ethical implications of emerging brain-to-brain interfacing technologies.” *Frontiers in Neuroengineering*, Vol. 7, No. 4, February 2014.

Part 4: Transhumanism and Dignity

December 3 – Transhumanism and Dignity?

Readings:

Shulman, Adam. "Chapter 1: Bioethics and the Question of Human Dignity." Human Dignity and Bioethics: Essays Commissioned by the Presidents Council on Bioethics. University of Notre Dame Press, 2008.

Gilbert Meilaender, "Human Dignity: Exploring and Explicating the Council's Vision," in Human Dignity and Bioethics: Essays Commissioned by the President's Council on Bioethics (Washington DC: www.bioethics.gov, pp.253-277).

Jotterand, Fabrice. "Human Dignity and Transhumanism: Do Anthro-Technological Devices Have Moral Status?" American Journal of Bioethics, Vol 10, No. 7, 45-52, July 2010.

Kass, Leon R. "Defending Human Dignity." Commentary, Vol. 124, No. 5, 53-61, December 2007

Bostrom, Nick. "In Defense of Posthuman Dignity." Bioethics, Vol. 19, No. 3, 202-214, June 2005

Pellegrino, Edmund D. "Chapter 20: The Lived Experience of Human Dignity." Human Dignity and Bioethics: Essays Commissioned by the Presidents Council on Bioethics. University of Notre Dame Press, 2008.

Charles Rubin, "Human Dignity and the Future of Man," in Human Dignity and Bioethics: Essays Commissioned by the President's Council on Bioethics (Washington DC: www.bioethics.gov), pp.157 – 172).

December 10 – No Class (Reading Day)

December 17 – Final Papers Due. Discussion of Papers.

From Official Stony Brook University Policy:

Statements required to appear in all syllabi on the Stony Brook campus:

Americans with Disabilities Act:

If you have a physical, psychological, medical or learning disability that may impact your course work, please contact Disability Support Services, ECC (Educational Communications Center) Building, room128, (631) 632-6748. They will determine with you what accommodations, if any, are necessary and appropriate.

Academic Integrity:

Each student must pursue his or her academic goals honestly and be personally accountable for all submitted work. Representing another person's work as your own is always wrong. Faculty are required to report and suspected instances of academic dishonesty to the Academic Judiciary. Faculty in the Health Sciences Center (Schools of Health Technology & Management, Nursing, Social Welfare, Dental Medicine) and School of Medicine are required to

follow their school-specific procedures. For more comprehensive information on academic integrity, including categories of academic dishonesty, please refer to the academic judiciary website at <http://www.stonybrook.edu/uaa/academicjudiciary/>

Critical Incident Management:

Stony Brook University expects students to respect the rights, privileges, and property of other people. Faculty are required to report to the Office of Judicial Affairs any disruptive behavior that interrupts their ability to teach, compromises the safety of the learning environment, or inhibits students' ability to learn. Faculty in the HSC Schools and School of Medicine are required to follow their school-specific procedures.