Course Description:

Throughout human history — and prehistory for that matter — technological advancement has drastically altered every aspect of human life. Though most of us will say that many advents have been largely if not entirely beneficial, would it not be a leap we say the same of all technology? Surely each of us can list technologies that have, in the very least, had some considerable downsides. While history and experience can tell us that some technologies have proved beneficial and some others harmful, how can we know the impact of future technologies? Since we cannot know, we must imagine to the best of our ability such possible futures and develop our technology with these considerations in mind.

‘Transhumanism’ refers a diverse collection of ideas that have at least one thing in common: through future technology, humanity will be fundamentally altered to an unprecedented degree. Some thinkers further 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. Though the ideas and aspirations behind transhumanism can be traced much farther back into philosophical history, the content presented in this course — though not necessarily the discussion — is relatively contemporary. All of the assigned readings have been written no more than a half-century ago, most were written within the last 20 years, and all of the assigned books were published within the last decade. Further, as the philosophy of technology is an ever-emerging and ever-evolving field, new contents not listed in this syllabus may be added as they become available.

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 must reasonably grant such technologies assumed feasibility 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 transhumanist ideas, and

2) experience in writing and discussion on the subject of transhumanism.

Required Texts:

There are four required texts for this reading which cover their respective subject matter well.


Human Flourishing in an Age of Gene Editing — Multiple authors; Erik Parens and Josephine Johnston, ed. 2019. Syllabus Shorthand: ‘Human Flourishing’


Assignments:

There will be two 10-page written assignments. These are intended to follow the content delivery of the course.

Midterm assignment — Due October 27. 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. Scholarly, reflective, or creative writing are all acceptable.

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

Final assignment — Due December 15. 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. Scholarly, reflective, or creative writing are all acceptable.

Grading:

20% Attendance and Participation,
40% Midterm Paper,
40% Final Paper.
Course Schedule:

Readings are intended have been read before the session under which they are listed.

August 25 — Introduction and Course Outline.

Part 1: Introduction to Transhumanism.

September 1 — What is transhumanism?

Readings:
More, M. “The Philosophy of Transhumanism (pdf)
The Transhumanist Declaration (pdf)

September 8 — The Question of Happiness.

Readings:
Superhappiness.
Part 2: Biological Transhumanism

September 15 — Biological Enhancement 1 — Regulatory Views and Realities.

Readings:

*Better than Human* Chapters 1 and 2.

*Human Flourishing* Part I (Chapters 1, 2, and 3).


Hersch, L. (2020) “Genetic Modification: the Ethical and Societal Implications of CRISPR technology”. *NYU School of Medicine*.


September 22 — Biological Enhancement 2 — Genetic Modification.

Readings:

*Better than Human* Chapters 3 and 4.

*Human Flourishing* Part II (Chapters 4, 5, and 6).


September 29 — Biological Enhancement 3 — Procreative Beneficence?

Readings:

*Better than Human* Chapters 5 and 6.

*Human Flourishing* Part III (Chapters 7, 8, and 9)


October 6 — Biological Enhancement 4 — Aging and Mortality.

Readings:

*Better than Human* Chapter 7.

*Human Flourishing* Part IV (Chapters 10, 11, 12, and 13)


October 13 — Biological Enhancement 5 — Flourishing and Dignity.

Readings:

Human Flourishing Part V (Chapters 14, 15, 16, and 17)


October 27 — Midterm Papers Due.

No assigned readings.

Part 3: Digital/Virtual Transhumanism

November 3 — Digital/Virtual Enhancement 1, Artificial Intelligence.

Readings:

Superintelligence - 1, 2, and 3.

Singularity - Preface, Introduction, 1.

November 10 — Digital/Virtual Enhancement 2

Readings:

Superintelligence - 4, 5, and 6.

Singularity - 2 and 3.


November 17 — Digital/Virtual Enhancement 3

Readings:

*Superintelligence* - 7, 8, and 9.

*Singularity* - 4 and 5.


November 24 — Digital/Virtual Enhancement 4

Readings:

*Superintelligence* - 10, 11, and 12

*Singularity* - 6 and 7


November 24 — No Class, Thanksgiving Break.

Part 4: Transhumanism and [Human] Dignity.

December 1 — Transhumanism and Human Dignity?

Readings:

*Superintelligence* - 13, 14, and 15 and Afterword.


December 8 — No Class, Reading Day.
December 15 — Final Papers Due.

Student Accessibility Support Center Statement
If you have a physical, psychological, medical, or learning disability that may impact your course work, please contact the Student Accessibility Support Center, 128 ECC Building, (631) 632-6748, or at sasc@stonybrook.edu. They will determine with you what accommodations are necessary and appropriate. All information and documentation is confidential. Students who require assistance during emergency evacuation are encouraged to discuss their needs with their professors and the Student Accessibility Support Center. For procedures and information go to the following website: https://ehs.stonybrook.edu/programs/fire-safety/emergency-evacuation/evacuation-guide-people-physical-disabilities and search Fire Safety and Evacuation and Disabilities.

Academic Integrity Statement
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 is required to report any suspected instances of academic dishonesty to the Academic Judiciary. Faculty in the Health Sciences Center (School 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/commcms/academic_integrity/index.html

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 University Community Standards 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 the School of Medicine are required to follow their school-specific procedures. Further information about most academic matters can be found in the Undergraduate Bulletin, the Undergraduate Class Schedule, and the Faculty-Employee Handbook.