HCB 524
Special Topic in Bioethics: Transhumanism

Fall 2023.
Wednesday 6:00pm-9:00pm. HSC 3-067.
Instructor of Record: Adam Sepe, MA, MLS(ASCP)cm adam.sepe@stonybrookmedicine.edu

Course Description:

Throughout human history — and prehistory for that matter — technological advancement has drastically altered every aspect of human life. Most of us will say that technological advents have been largely if not entirely beneficial, but would it not be a leap to say the same of *all* technology? Surely each of us can list technologies that have, in the very least, 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? How can we prevent undesirable harms? How can we guarantee the most just distribution of benefits? Since we cannot know the answers to these questions, 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: the belief that 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 self-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 transhumanism. We will analyze the pros and cons of two of the more popular modes of proposed transhumanist progress: biological and virtual. The former mode of progress presumes that advances in biotechnology will offer us unprecedented power over our own biology. The latter presumes 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, and most were written within the last 20 years. Further, as the philosophy of technology is an ever-emerging and ever-evolving field, new content 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 philosophical implications and possible future effects. Therefore, we must reasonably grant such technologies 'presumed 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 three required text. These cover their respective subject matter well.

> ***Better than Human: The Promise and Perils of Enhancing Ourselves*** — Allen Buchanan. 2011.
> Syllabus shorthand: '***Better than Human***'.
>
> ***Robot: Mere Machine to Transcendent Mind*** — Hans Moravec. 1999.
> Syllabus shorthand: '***Robot***'
>
> ***Superintelligence: Paths, Dangers, Strategies*** — Nick Bostrom. 2014.
> Syllabus shorthand: '***Superintelligence***'.

Assignments:

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

First assignment — **Due** <u>October 29</u>. 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, casual oral summary of their paper to rest of the class.

Second assignment — Due <u>December 21</u>**.** 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% First Assignment,
40% Second Assignment.

Course Schedule:

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

August 30 — Introductions and Course Outline.
No Assigned Readings

Part 1: Introduction to Transhumanism.

September 6 — What is Transhumanism?
Readings:

> 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)
>
> More, M. "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 13 — The Question of Happiness.
Readings:

> Superhappiness.
>
> Gregg, Susan. (2020) Brain stimulator makes West Coast debut in Seattle. *University of Washington Press*.
>
> Robert Nozick. (1974). "The Experience Machine". *Anarchy State and Utopia*. (New York: Basic Books, 1974) pp. 42-45.

Part 2: Biological Transhumanism

September 20 — Biological Enhancement 1— Regulatory Views and Realities.
Readings:

> *Better than Human* Chapters 1 and 2.
>
> Murray, T. H. (2014). "Stirring the Simmering "Designer Baby" Pot," Science, 343, 1208-1210.

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

Cohen, J. (2019). "Did CRISPR help—or harm—the first-ever gene-edited babies?". *Science.*

Cyranoski, D. (2020). "What CRISPR-baby prison sentences mean for research". *Nature.*

September 27 — Biological Enhancement 2 — Genetic Modification.
Readings:

Better than Human Chapters 3 and 4.

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

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 4— 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.

October 11 — 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 18 — Biological Enhancement 5 — Flourishing and Dignity.
Readings:

Parens, E. (2005). "Authenticity and Ambivalence, Toward Understand the Enhancement Debate". The Hastings Center Report , May - Jun., 2005, Vol. 35, No. 3, 34-41

October 25 — First Assignment Due.
No assigned readings.

Part 3: Digital/Virtual Transhumanism

November 1 — Digital/Virtual Enhancement I
Readings:
   Superintelligence - 1, 2, and 3.
   Robot - Preface and 1.

November 8 — Digital/Virtual Enhancement II
Readings:
   Superintelligence - 4, 5, and 6.
   Robot - 2 and 3.

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 15 — Digital/Virtual Enhancement III
Readings:
    Superintelligence - 7, 8, and 9.
    Robot - 4 and 5.

    Lanier, Jaron. (2000). "ONE HALF A MANIFESTO". <u>edge.org</u>.
    <u>https://www.edge.org/conversation/jaron_lanier-one-half-a-manifesto</u>.

November 22 — No Class, Thanksgiving Break.

November 29— Digital/Virtual Enhancement IV
Readings:
    Superintelligence - 10, 11, and 12
    Robot- 6 and 7

    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
    <u>www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2015/05/immortal-but-damned-to-hell-on-earth/394160/</u>

December 6— Digital/Virtual Enhancement V
Readings:
    Superintelligence - 13, 14, and 15 and Afterword.

Part 4: Transhumanism and [Human] Dignity.

December 13 — Final Discussion: Transhumanism and Human 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 21 — Second Assignment Due.

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