

"The transhumanist agenda - ambitions and critiques."

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Transhumanism is an intellectual and cultural movement that advocates the use of technology for such purposes as enhancement of human physical and cognitive capacities, alteration of moods or psychological predispositions, and radical extension of the human life span (possibly including a "cure" for the ageing process). Typically, the aim is to negotiate a transition from human-level capacities to capacities so much greater as to merit the label "posthuman" for those who possess them. Some transhumanist thinkers also advocate various other technologies that do not exactly meet this description, e.g. artificial intelligence of a very strong kind, molecular-level engineering and manufacturing, and technological methods for "uplifting" the cognitive capacities of non-human mammals to something approximating the human level. Finally, transhumanists analyse the possible risks, as well as potential benefits, of emerging or anticipated technologies, and formulate proposals that are intended to lessen risks without losing the claimed benefits.

An agenda such as this raises many questions for philosophical consideration. Some questions relate to the transhumanist agenda's practicality and coherence. For example, can a coherent definition be given of "enhanced", as opposed to merely "altered", capacities? If we were transformed into beings with vastly enhanced (or radically altered) capacities, would this be compatible with the preservation of our existing identities and/or with our survival of the transformation? Other questions relate more to how we should react, individually and collectively, to transhumanist proposals. For example, are the transformations advocated by transhumanists desirable for us as individual people? Are they socially manageable? Should they be viewed as morally obligatory, permissible, or forbidden - assuming there is some real prospect that they can be achieved? Can we be discriminating in accepting some parts of the transhumanist agenda, while rejecting others? On what grounds? What methodologies can be employed to assess such "big picture", and possibly high risk,

proposals? Can resistance to them sometimes be explained by invoking irrational features of human psychology?

All these questions and others straddle issues of interest to, at least, metaphysics, ethics, and political philosophy.

Reading List (a couple of items may be added):

World Transhumanist Association, "Transhumanist FAQ",
<http://www.transhumanism.org/index.php/WTA/faq21/46/>.

Nicholas Agar, "Liberal Eugenics," *Public Affairs Quarterly* 12, 2 (April 1998): 137-55.

Nicholas Agar, "Whereto Transhumanism? The Literature Reaches a Critical Mass," *Hastings Center Report* 37, No. 3 (2007): 12-17.

G. Annas, L. Andrews, and R. Isasi, "Protecting the Endangered Human: Toward an International Treaty Prohibiting Cloning and Inheritable Alternations," *American Journal of Law and Medicine* 28, nos. 2/3 (2002): 151-78.

Ronald Bailey "Transhumanism: The Most Dangerous Idea? Why striving to be more than human is human" *Reason Online*, August 25, 2004. <http://www.reason.com/news/show/34867.html>

F. Baylis and J. Robert. "The Inevitability of Genetic Enhancement Technologies." *Bioethics* 2004. 1-26.

Russell Blackford, "Who's Afraid of the Brave New World?" *Quadrant* 396 (May 2003): 9-15.

-. "Human Cloning and 'Posthuman' Society." *Monash Bioethics Review* 24 (2005): 10-26.

-. "Sinning against Nature: The Theory of Background Conditions." *Journal of Medical Ethics* 32 (2006): 629-34.

Nick Bostrom. "Human Genetic Enhancements: A Transhumanist Perspective," *Journal of Value Inquiry* 37 (2003): 493-506.

-. "In Defence of Posthuman Dignity." *Bioethics*. 2005: 202-14.

-. "A History of Transhumanist Thought." *Journal of Evolution and Technology*. 2005, 14: 1-25.

-"In Defense of Posthuman Dignity," *Bioethics* 19, No. 3 (2005), 202-214.

Dov Fox, "The Illiberality of 'Liberal Eugenics'", *Ratio* 20 (1) (2007), 1-25.

Francis Fukuyama, "Transhumanism: The World's Most Dangerous Idea," *Foreign Policy*, "September/October 2004.

Leon R Kass, "Preventing a Brave New World: Why We Should Ban Human Cloning Now," *The New Republic* 21 May 2001: 30-39.

Lindsay, Ronald A. "Enhancements and Justice: Problems in Determining the Requirements of Justice in a Genetically Transformed Society," *Kennedy Institute of Ethics Journal* - Volume 15, Number 1, March 2005, pp. 3-38.

M J McNamee and S D Edwards, "Transhumanism, Medical Technology and Slippery Slopes," *Journal of Medical Ethics*, 32 (2006): 513 - 518.

Michael J. Sandel, 'The Case Against Perfection: What's Wrong with Designer Children, Bionic Athletes, and Genetic Engineering,' *The Atlantic Monthly*, vol. 293, no. 4 (2004), pp. 51-62.

Anyone attending the seminars should first read the articles by Fukuyama and Bailey, the article on the history of transhumanism by Bostrom, and the WTA FAQ. Those are all available by googling. I think all the others are in journals that are available via the library catalogue.

Participants are also advised to consult James Hughes, *Citizen Cyborg: Why Democratic Societies Must Respond to the Redesigned Human of the Future* (Westview Press, 2004), which offers one comprehensive version of the transhumanist agenda.