

Lewes Topical Seminar – Transhumanism

Instructions

For the seminar, please explore the materials and links below, and then write a response of at least 200 words. There are some discussion questions at the end that you may use as writing prompts, but feel free to respond as you wish. Email your written response to lewesseminar@gmail.com no later than [Date TBD] Please read all the posted responses prior to the seminar meeting.

Introduction

The World Transhumanists Association was founded in 1998. Since then, it has changed its name to [Humanity+](#), and offers the following overview of its viewpoint and purposes:

Transhumanism is a philosophy that focuses on the scientific and technological advances changing our lives and their potential effects to transform humanity's future for the better. It promotes an interdisciplinary approach evaluating both the opportunities these technologies offer and their potential dangers. Over the past three decades, transhumanism has developed into a world movement seeking to improve the human condition: reducing or eliminating suffering, disease, mortality, ignorance, and aggression.

Transhumanist leaders such as Oxford philosopher [Nick Bostrom](#) envision a transformation of the human condition driven by AI, biotechnology, and robotics. Moreover, there is burgeoning literature on so-called [biohacking](#), [human enhancement](#), [neurotechnology](#), and [human/AI merger](#).

In contrast to the optimistic Humanity+ vision, serious questions have been raised about transhumanism. A leading voice in this critical perspective, [Francis Fukuyama](#) warns, in a recent *Foreign Policy* article, "But it is very possible that we will nibble at biotechnology's tempting offerings without realizing that they come at a frightful moral cost." Not surprisingly, conservative observers fret about transhumanism's implications for our understanding moral order. Andrew Klaven, for example, writes in *City Journal*,

There is, of course, nothing wrong with using medicine and technology to improve the health and effectiveness of the flesh in the service of our humanity. But after a slow, centuries-long tumble from truth to materialism, we have dropped with the setting sun of faith into an increasingly visible darkness of self-ignorance. We no longer know who we are or what we are or what we were made for.

Even if we set aside the more alarmist takes, the prospect of a transhumanist future raises a number of challenging ethical and philosophical questions. It evokes, in a sense, age old questions of knowledge, science, and the nature of humanity posed by the Aeschylus' *Prometheus Bound*, Goethe's poem, "The Sorcerer's Apprentice," ('immortalized' by Mickey Mouse in *Fantasia*), and Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*.

Resources

To orient your consideration of Transhumanism, please take a look at the following two videos:

1. A more philosophical presentation by Nick Bostrom that explores the reasoning and rationale behind the Transhumanism movement.
https://www.ted.com/talks/nick_bostrom_a_philosophical_quest_for_our_biggest_problems?language=am
2. An upbeat and more empirical discussion of Transhumanism by Robert Anderson
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XbTZ910l0hs>

In addition, the following posted readings should be helpful:

1. "Transhumanism, medical technology, and slippery slopes," McNamee, et.al., *Journal of Medical Ethics*, 2006: 513-18.
2. *The Transhumanist Bill of Rights*, Version 3.0.
3. "Transhumanist Values" (12 pp.), Nick Bostrom, *Ethical Issues for the Twenty-First Century*, 2005.
4. *From Transgenderism to Transhumanism: A Manifesto on the Freedom of Form*, Preface to the 2nd Edition, self-published ms., by Martine Rothblatt, 2011.

Here are some prompt questions to begin your exploration of Transhumanism:

1. Article IV of the Transhumanist Bill of Rights states, "Sentient entities are entitled to universal rights of ending involuntary suffering, making personhood improvements, and achieving an indefinite lifespan via science and technology. The right of ending involuntary suffering does not refer to euthanasia but rather to the application of technology to eliminate involuntary suffering in still-living beings, while enabling their lives to continue with improved quality and length." What might the social, economic, and political implications of this right be?
2. Transhumanists often refer to "posthumans," humans with sufficient medical and technological enhancements to be a fundamentally different kind of being. What are the moral implications of such a new class? How might our self-understanding be affected by posthumans? Bostrom claims, for example, "In order to prepare for a time when the

human species may start branching out in various directions, we need to start now to strongly encourage the development of moral sentiments that are broad enough to encompass within the sphere of moral concern sentiences that are constituted differently from ourselves.”

3. Transhumanists identify a range of interventions, including nanotechnology implants, genetic modification, and AI enhancements. Are these all equally cause for caution/enthusiasm?
4. Is the Transhumanist goal of extending lifespan and health significantly (or even infinitely) desirable? Does Transhumanism boil down to an extension of libertarian philosophy with morality determined by freedom of choice, a criticism raised in the *Journal of Medical Ethics* article? Or, is Bostrom correct that Transhumanism could enhance or collective knowledge and experience?