Human Genetic Enhancement:
Arguments For and Against Transhumanism

A Dialogue in Philosophy of Biomedical Technology

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Introducing the dialogue

There are varied advices on human genetic enhancement. The transhumanist perspective professes that it is possible to enhance the human condition by overcoming biological as well as cultural constraints to the degree that we become post-humans. The following dialogue is based on Nick Bostrom's "Human Genetic Enhancements: A Transhumanist Perspective" (2003, *Journal of Value Inquiry*, Vol. 37, No. 4, pp. 493-506) and tries to address arguments for and against transhumanism. Note that the quoted statements in the dialogue are taken from Bostrom's article unless noted otherwise. This dialogue also draws on *From Chance to Choice: Genetics and Justice* (a book by Allen Buchanan, Dan W. Brock, Norman Daniels, and Daniel Wikler, Cambridge University Press, 2000) as well as my own critical stance on the issue.

The interlocutors in this dialogue are Mr. H and Ms. T. 'Ms. T' represents the transhumanist perspective whereas as 'Mr. H' is the critical voice on the transhumanist position. 'H' is used as an acronym for a very general *humanist* position, so to speak.

[Site: Canteen of the IHGE ('Institute for Human Genetic Enhancement'); Time: Lunch Break]

Mr. H: [approaching the table where Ms. T was enjoying a can of fat-free milk]. Hi, Ms. T, how are you? Oh, you're still pulling [derogatory for 'sipping'] your 'fat-free' milk. Still on diet?

Ms. T: [annoyed by the rather humdrum question and the sarcasm in it] How many times should I tell you that this is not actually 'diet'? Isn't diet for something momentary and trendy? What I am …

Mr. H: Oh, I forgot! [H interrupted T while he was taking a seat] You are playing Nietzsche's Superman. That is it!

Ms. T: No!…no!…no! I am playing 'transhuman'!! [T cried out]

Mr. H: Well, I don't see much difference between your research program and that of Nietzsche's *Thus Spake Zarathustra*. Can you justify?

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Ms. T: **You must be kidding. First of all, the Superman is a symbolic representation of a spiritual journey of a human being that tries to surpass the moral life of modern human beings. It is the symbolic expression of humanity that moves towards spiritual self-mastery. Nietzsche's treatise is therefore aiming at a sort of spiritual purification. Mind you! Nietzsche's Superman is a cultural hero that tries to negate humanity as we know it in the modern world. By contrast, what transhumanism aims at is a continuity of humanity. It is by using what human beings possess today (as well as new technologies that would be developed in the future), especially scientific and technological advancements, that transhumanism targets the rearing of post-humans. Besides, the scope of transhumanism is much broader. Yes…it is true that our transhumanist project would have a cultural component – education is for example one of our tools in order to enhance the human condition. Nonetheless, we aim high and broad. Genetic engineering takes the forefront here. We "hope that by responsible use of science, technology, and other rational means we shall eventually manage to become post-human, beings with vastly greater capacities than present human beings have."**

Mr. H: I still smell the 'Superman' here. However, you may convince me if you are able to show me that your project clearly differs from that of Nietzsche's. Let me probably help you – risking that I am handing over the ball to my opponent – by giving you a hint: Say something more on your idea of continuity between the human and the post-human. If you can do this adequately, it means you have a point. For in Nietzsche we do not actually see continuity between these two phases.

Ms. T: **Yes, what I am saying is that we transhumanists "view human nature as a work-in-progress, a half-baked beginning that we can learn to remold in desirable ways." Thus, though our project is comprehensive, what we are trying is to augment this work-in-progress. Plus, we mainly rely on scientific and technological knowledge in order to enhance or perfect humanity.**

Mr. H: What is your vision?

Ms. T: **Well… our vision is to "create the opportunity to live longer and healthier lives, to enhance our memory and other intellectual faculties, to refine our emotional experiences and increase our subjective sense of well-being, and generally to achieve a greater degree of control over our own lives." In order to attain all these goals, we must know that technology comes to the forefront. Genetic engineering and medical science must play a crucial role in order to overcome our biological limits.**

Mr. H: Slightly frightening … but, above all, far-fetched.

Ms. T: **"Frightening?" Are you allying with those who accuse us of playing God? That we are messing with nature?**

Mr. H: [Furious] Do not play red herring. When I say 'frightening' I was in fact alluding to the possible inequalities and injustices that such enhancement programs might create. But I will come to this point later on. What surprised me most is how you are capitalizing on my "fear" and pass over as if I didn't say anything else. Didn't

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I note also that your vision is far-fetched? That was in fact my major concern…. Don't' you think that your aim is so fantastic that it remains a castle in the air? We will consider the issue of justice when we somehow begin to have a hazy image of its possibility. Now, the question is whether this is not a mere illusion.

Ms. T: Excuse me! I think I have to be more explicit here. When I didn't comment on the part of your concern that refers to whether these aims come to fruition, it was in fact deliberate. When I jumped to the issue whether the matter is alarming I was in a sense presuming that there is no question that this new human situation (i.e. the situation of post-humans) is possible sometime in the future.

Mr. H: Oh, No! Are you still trying to justify that this world of transhumans is possible? Be this as it may, I have another difficulty here. That is, when I see the way you are describing this post-human world, it looks like it is something we can never conceive of standing in this human world. How can we conceive of this state of post-humans given the limitation we have at the moment? "Just as chimpanzees lack the brainpower to understand what it is like to be human, so too do we lack the practical ability to form a realistic intuitive understanding of what it would be like to be post-human." What do you say on this?

Ms. T: Are you not playing red herring yourself? You have simply slipped into quite different issue from what we have been addressing so far. Anyways, let me elaborate on this point. The line of argument you are suggesting is in fact "distinct from any principled claims about impossibility. We need not assert that post-humans would not be Turing computable or that their concepts could not be expressed by any finite sentences in human language. The impossibility is more like the impossibility for us to visualize a twenty-dimensional hypersphere or to read, with perfect recollection and understanding, every book in the Library of Congress. Our own current mode of being, therefore, spans but a minute of subspace of what is possible or permitted by the physical constraints of the universe. It is not farfetched to suppose that there are parts of this larger space that represent extremely valuable ways of living, feeling, and thinking."

Mr. H: My friend T, you have come to the point I was eagerly waiting for you to stumble on.

Ms. T: Entrapping?

Mr. H: This is not so much an entrapment as it is channeling our discussion to the right track.

Ms. T: [Perplexed] What right track? Are you intimating that we have not been on the right track? What is the right question for you?

Mr. H: I grant you that it might be possible to surpass most biological constraints. What…

Ms. T: What is then your headache? [shouted T, somehow losing her composure]

Mr. H: Calm down, my dear. What I am saying is that it wouldn't of course be very difficult for me to imagine "a much greater level of personal development and maturity than current human beings, because they have the opportunity to live for

hundreds or thousands of years with full bodily and psychic vigor. We can conceive of beings that are much smarter than us, that can read books in seconds that are much more brilliant philosophers than we are, that can create artworks, which, even if we could understand them only on the most superficial level, would strike us as wonderful masterpieces…." Thus, surpassing our biological limitations may be a possible and viable scenario.

Ms. T: **You kept me in suspense. Come on! Tell me the crucial issue for you.**

Mr. H: Yes, I was about to come to the point. What is at stake here is justice and the moral dilemmas that follow thereof. Let me take the practice of germ-line modifications as an example here. Creating designer babies would mean trampling on the choices of children. Is it not really unjust to choose the color of one's baby? Parents might tend to choose the religious denomination of their children. No problem! Since this is something reversible at the age when their children reach maturation, it won't create much difficulty. But when it comes to designer babies, our intervention is to a great extent permanent, if not totally irreversible. Besides, this practice would reduce children to commodities. We would start to "evaluate our offspring according to standards of quality control, and this will undermine the ethical ideal of unconditional acceptance of children, no matter what their abilities and traits. Are we really prepared to sacrifice on the altar of consumerism even those deep values that are embodied in traditional relationships between child and parents? Is the quest for perfection worth this cultural and moral cost?"

Ms. T: **I share most of the ethical concerns you refer to. But then, such claims do not seem to have adequate ground. They are more of empty speculations instead of viable possibilities. Moreover, germ-line modifications could also bring about positive results. Couldn't this technological achievement help parents to love their children all the more? Isn't it easier to love a child who is brighter, more beautiful, healthier and happier than otherwise? This is of course not to mention the wider opportunity these technologies would create in order to treat disabilities.**

Mr. H: I commend the contribution that new scientific and technological achievements help to treat disabilities. No one will question this. But…

Ms. T: **[Interrupting H] Listen… what about those who go to the extent of trying to defend the right of deaf parents to bear deaf children?**

Mr. H: What do you mean?

Ms. T: **Germ-line modifications help us to treat deafness at the embryonic stage. Right?**

Mr. H: I do not know what you are up to? Anyways, go ahead.

Ms. T: **Despite this, however, some people are telling us that we should not intervene in this matter because deaf parents may not want their child to hear.**

Mr. H: Oh, my goodness. You are trying to solve the wrong problem. First of all, if there are such propensities, they are rare. Or they are extreme cases at their best. Nonetheless, there are still so many legitimate concerns before our eyes. Going back to the history of eugenics suffices. It supplies us with ample and concrete examples. Anyways, let me go back to what I was going to say. I reiterate that the

value of new technologies to treat disabilities is highly commendable. But I was taken aback by what you said about the increasing possibility of loving one's child if he or she is bright, beautiful, healthy, and happy. Will you hate your daughter if she is not as bright as you expect her to be? Will you start to be annoyed if your daughter is not beautiful? Will you be aloof to your boy if he is born blind? … What surprised me most is your reference to happiness. Are you telling me that I would love my daughter if and only if she is happy? Strange! You are putting things up side down. In fact, I have to love my child so that she could be happy. I have to closely follow my son all the more when he is born blind. I have to build my daughter's self-confidence if she or 'society' thinks that she is not beautiful.

Ms. T: Your conclusion?

Mr. H: I have yet to raise a more crucial issue. Before that, however, I would like to say something in relation to what I was just saying. We have the moral obligation to commit ourselves to the wellbeing of our children – and for that matter to all children, despite their natural traits. Even more so to disabled children.

Ms. T: Come to your "more crucial issue?"

Mr. H: Yes… yes, I was going to come to that. You and scholars who subscribe to transhumanism seem to be highly captivated by the sheer-size of the potential fruits that genetic engineering and similar technologies would bear. So you always tell us that your critics overstate the negative consequences without much reference to the positive aspects. And what surprises me all the more is that some of those who cry out this are philosophers. This is especially true of 'applied' philosophers.

Ms. T: What are your qualms on these applied philosophers?

Mr. H: They have almost forgotten the role that philosophy should play, namely its critical stance. Have you, by any chance, come across the Canadian philosopher Jeff Noonan?

Ms. T: What about Jeff Noonan?

Mr. H: He wrote a beautiful article on this matter. [Leafing through the article in question, H said:] Let me read to you one passage from this: "Applied philosophy is wrongly reduced to micro-policy analysis when the understanding of philosophical practice is abstracted from critical reflection upon the social nature of value. Properly conceived … practical philosophy must begin by bringing to light the tension or contradiction between the particularity of given social regimes of value and the universal reasons offered as legitimations for those regimes. When this contradiction is brought to light, the application of philosophy to a problematic reality takes the form of a fundamental calling into question of the generally unquestioned limitations given social forms impose upon what counts as a solution to a problem."[†] [(Noonan 2003: 37)] I wholeheartedly share this understanding of Noonan's. I believe that one of philosophy's principal purposes must be to expose the tension between what is socially particular and

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[†] Noonan, Jeff. 2003. "Can there be applied philosophy without philosophy?" *Interchange*, Vol.34/1, 35-49

philosophically universal. In short, philosophy must help us to adopt a critical stance.

Ms. T: **What is your point here?**

Mr. H: My point is: We need to focus on threats instead of positive aspects that new technologies would bring about. That is why we are increasingly aware of the dangers that new technologies would bring about.

Ms. T: **You know what your problem is?**

Mr. H: What?

Ms. T: **You are thinking in the context of the old world – the world of eugenics. It is true that so many atrocities were committed in the United States and some European countries in the beginning of the last century. Our time is however different. We have a good deal of interventions from certain institutions including governments. People are well aware of the kind of abuses germ-line or genetic enhancements would lead to. We are living in a world where communication plays a very important role in exposing or paying attention towards abusive steps. In short, we have the institutional mechanisms to expose and mitigate mistreatments.**

Mr. H: You seem to mix two things here. One, the kind of atrocities that the so-called old eugenics committed, and the other is the institutional mechanisms that present and future societies would foster in order to prevent abuses. As regards the first one, I do not believe that eugenics is a thing of the past; in view of the technological developments that we have attained and will attain in the future, the 'old' eugenics is only portending what will happen in the future. Thus when I think of eugenics I think of something that will only materialize in the time to come. What you are presuming is that eugenics is something superseded whereas my fear is that genetic engineering and other similar technological achievements will bring up this practice‡. You have also suggested that currently we have institutional mechanisms to mitigate or avoid abuses. I do not have any problem here. I agree with you. What you have forgotten§ is that these institutional mechanisms are the results of our ethical outcry. It is this very active and wider involvement of people in discussing pertinent moral issues that has built these institutional mechanisms that you are talking about.

Ms. T: Well…well… you seem to suggest that a very dynamic deliberation on issues concerning justice and equality would rather help instead of hampering these new technologies. Is that so?

Mr. H: As long as these two matters co-evolve, yes. However, what I am saying or suggesting is that we may even go to the extent of banning new technologies when we think that they could cause lasting damage.

Ms. T: I do understand the kind of danger some new technologies may pose. But what I and those who subscribe to the same perspective are saying is that the

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‡ This idea that eugenics should be taken as something of the future is Tsjalling Swierstra's observation.

§ I believe that we can pass a similar critique on Buchanan and co.

nature of social organization we have now differs from that of the old eugenics. Now we have so many institutional and organizational means to control misuses of new technologies. In other words, we have the means to safeguard justice and equality as much as possible.

Mr. H: You are implying again that technology is something neutral, to which I have told you already that I do not agree. Technology is something which actively influences the way we live and act. In this respect, it is possible that new technological artifacts can easily throw us into unacceptable practice. When the technologies are getting simpler and simpler they could easily slip onto the hands of so many evil-minded individuals above and beyond the control of institutions that defend justice and equality. The other thing I would like to reiterate here is that the potentiality of genetic engineering and similar technologies is so immense that we couldn't imagine the kind of moral dilemmas it poses. As I said before, philosophy's major concern must be to identify problems. Identifying difficulties instead of focusing on positive achievements, even if the latter outweighs the former, must be the crucial concern of moral philosophy. If there are such things as purely positive aspects of new technologies, well and good; but these wouldn't be concerns for moral philosophy. They are good and that is it. Our concern must be what is bad no matter how small the number is. Murder is punished by law not because it is enormous. No! It is punishable because the very act itself is unacceptable in view of the right to live or in view of the principle of human dignity *per se*.

Ms. T: Well, well … we do not seem to agree on many of our points of discussion. But I somehow believe that such a discussion would bear fruit. I hope we shall meet some other time…

Mr. H: You have finally stated something that goes with what I am saying. You said: "… such a discussion would bear fruit." That is what I have been trying to say. It is because of such dialogues and discussions that matters such as transhumanism would get the necessary attention so that they could be corrected or, if necessary, banned. Anyways, good day… I hope you have enjoyed our break. Next time, we might meet and debate on a larger forum since it is by virtue of such discussions that we consolidate and reinforce ethical and institutional mechanisms to deal with new technological knowledge and practice.

Ms. T: Okay, see you!