

Merge

Volume 5 | Issue 1

Article 1

4-19-2021

Another Case for Posthuman Dignity

Amy Azwell

Mississippi University for Women, arazwell@myapps.muw.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://athenacommons.muw.edu/merge>



Part of the [Applied Ethics Commons](#), [Ethics and Political Philosophy Commons](#), and the [Philosophy of Science Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Azwell, Amy. "Another Case for Posthuman Dignity." *Merge*, vol. 5, Iss. 1 2021 .

Available at: <https://athenacommons.muw.edu/merge/vol5/iss1/1>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Undergraduate Research at ATHENA COMMONS. It has been accepted for inclusion in Merge by an authorized editor of ATHENA COMMONS. For more information, please contact acpowers@muw.edu.

Another Case for Posthuman Dignity

Amy Azwell

Mississippi University for Women

I. Introduction:

Medical technology has progressed to the point that the fringes of possibility more closely resemble the concepts imagined in the pages and screens of science fiction. With capability comes an obligation to responsibility, and the philosophical and ethical deliberations of whether Pandora's box of technological marvels should better be left untouched. One such debate centers around the possibility of genetic alterations leading to the formation of a *posthuman*, or an individual who has benefitted from extreme alterations in such a way that they may be subsequently viewed as superior in some aspect to general humanity, or to the human. A lesser extreme of posthumanity is the concept of a *transhuman*, an individual that has received genetic modifications but that does not reject their human nature. While a posthuman has received so many alterations that they may be reasonably considered as something "other" than human, the transhuman is viewed as more similar to an "enhanced" human.

While posthuman and transhuman individuals would be physically superior to humanity, some dissenters argue that the state of being genetically altered takes away the natural dignity of the individual as granted through experiencing the human condition. Nick Bostrom (2016) provides compelling discourse in his essay "In Defense of Posthuman Dignity" for future posthuman and transhuman entitlement to the same standard of dignity as the rest of humanity. Arguing a case for transhumans and posthumans, Bostrom posits that the concept of individual dignity, or perceived worth based on morals and actions, is based on individual choices instead of one's genetic makeup. To be unworthy of dignity, a posthuman must be demonstrated to be less than human; a consideration of the principles of beneficence, justice, autonomy, and utility demonstrate that this is not so.

II. Setting the Terms of the Debate

First, Bostrom identifies the two sides of the debate over genetic modifications: transhumanists vs. bioconservatives. Believers in *transhumanism* argue that the current state of humanity can be improved upon through science and genetics. While it may seem that medical assistive technology such as prosthetics and pacemakers are already fulfilling this function, transhumanists advocate for genetic modifications for preventative or personal reasons instead of the restorative functions of these technologies already used. Transhumanist arguments tend to assume the resulting superiority of humans through genetic modifications. Members of this ideological camp welcome the use of technology as it pertains to use for human enhancement, though they acknowledge the need for restrictions on the applications of these interventions to protect individual human rights. Opposing the transhumanists are the *bioconservatives*. This group fears that the use of advanced scientific technology for the formation of posthumans disregards the sanctity of the human condition, leading to an eventual blemish on future people who are not posthuman. They believe that the creation of posthumans will make those who are unaltered "less than" in the eyes of a heterogenous, human and posthuman society.

Bioconservative arguments tend to center on implied moral and ethical inferiority of human modification.

While bioconservatives take an extreme preventative approach and advocate the worldwide banning of human genetic enhancement, transhumanists believe that human enhancements should be accessible to the general public. Bostrom also indicates two forms of individual freedoms transhumanists advocate for: *morphological freedom*, an individual choosing how to modify himself, and *reproductive freedom*, a parent choosing which methods of technology to apply for the benefit of their children (208). Bostrom's arguments, which will be addressed further later, indicate that he is in favor of both morphological freedom and of reproductive freedom as it applies to biological enhancements.

One main concern of bioconservatives is that the natural state of being human, and subsequently the quality of human nature, will be degraded by the existence of posthuman individuals. Apocalyptic works of fiction, such as *Brave New World* by Huxley, paint pictures of humanity existing in a diminished state as the result of technological advancements (Bostrom 209). As renowned bioconservative spokesperson Francis Fukuyama claims, *Brave New World* demonstrates the dangers of using technologies that seem to have "obvious benefits" and "subtle harms in one seamless package" (Fukuyama 2005, 3). While other new technologies have more evident dangers, medical technology in and of itself is not something society usually considers to be evil. At first glance, the ability to live longer seems like something that could be desirable, as does the inability to feel pain, or to alleviate all sorts of temporary or permanent maladies. As Fukuyama points out, however, this does not solve the problems of mental deterioration with aging, or address that the inability to feel pain could result in a complete change of personality as knowledge of pain is what allows us to empathize with other people. His claim is that these physical limitations of humans are what create human nature, and set our determinations of standards for morality and values (Fukuyama 4). This argument seems a compelling reason for not pursuing posthuman modifications.

When considering this argument, the current use of technology in medicine must be also examined. Fukuyama's view may be used to argue that medical advances of any kind should not be in use because they will impact human morality. However, this is not the argument Fukuyama makes. Many of the medical devices in common use already (such as pacemakers, prosthetic body parts, hearing aids, cerebral shunts, and dialysis ports, among others) are meant to enable health-impaired individuals to live free from the impact of their diagnoses. Thus, current medical technologies are not going to "alter human nature" in its base form, as Fukuyama and Huxley fear, but instead are simply providing restorative functionality to the individuals in question (Fukuyama 3). While these supports fix such physical limitations as Fukuyama seems to argue in favor of, they are measures meant to improve the quality of life instead of creating individuals that are incapable of having these same flaws. This distinction justifies their use.

Transhumanists, in contrast to Fukuyama's moral argument, argue that the natural state of man is imperfect as evidenced by these same physical and societal maladies. They also point out that fictional examples such as *Brave New World* demonstrate a sensationalized, worst-case scenario of irresponsible uses of technology and societal structure. They contend that these situations can be prevented through general education about technologies and through individual morphological and reproductive freedoms (Bostrom 209-210). In granting the public accessibility to technology and information, a totalitarian, apocalyptic structure can be avoided. Additionally, the claims of Fukuyama and others about the supposed effects on human nature,

though they are important in the debate and give a good reason to stop and think, are not definite outcomes of the use of genetic enhancements. In fact, these speculations are very similar in character to the predictions made by Orwell in *1984* and Huxley in *Brave New World*. The events of 1984 did not come to pass as Orwell predicted, so who is to say that Huxley's concerns, and the concerns of bioconservative individuals will play out as they currently predict either?

Bioconservatives' second main concern regarding the creation of posthumans is the potential for physical and political conflict between humans and posthumans, as a result of posthumans being considered both genetically superior and morally inferior to the rest of humanity. Bioconservatives claim that human enhancement is a form of bioterrorism because enhancements to posthumans can lead to a threat to unmodified humans in conflict. Also, the existence of posthuman or transhuman individuals who have been enhanced in any way creates a civil rights issue of deciding which "human" rights to grant them (Bostrom 2016; McNamee and Edwards 2006). As McNamee and Edwards point out in "Transhumanism, Medical Technology, and Slippery Slopes" civil rights are protections that are historically earned through the struggles of the class that is eventually protected. This seems to imply that there will have to be conflict at some point for transhumans and posthumans to gain a comfortable position in society despite their assumed moral inferiority, if ever. Transhumanist supporters oppose this by pointing out that genetic enhancements can also be used for therapeutic purposes, such as the treating of disease. Additionally, societies construct laws and organizations like courts to prevent the type of violence that bioconservatives fear. While it is true that society is not always accepting of physical differences in individuals, resulting violence would indicate a societal pathology enduring whether or not posthumans exist (Bostrom 210-211). These fears of degrading human nature and the potential for violence from posthumans are interesting objections to the use of biotechnology for enhancement reasons. Despite this, they have no bearing on whether modified individuals should have a right to individual dignity.

Bostrom identifies dignity two ways: the right to be treated with respect, and the state of being morally worthy or excellent (211). Bioconservatives contend that humans inherently possess the second form of dignity through an indefinable quality of the human condition, which a posthuman would not possess as something considered other than human. Bostrom, as a transhumanist, argues that this form of "moral worthiness" is instead earned and maintained through a result of the individual choices to be made by both humans and posthumans alike (212). This view acknowledges that there would be individuals in both categories that make decisions contrary to this status of worth. Bostrom argues that posthumanity and humanity are both capable of being dignified, and that they do not have to compete with each other for this quality because it is earned through individual choices instead of through genetic makeup (213). As such, to deny posthumans dignity is to also deny their status as a person. Considering future posthumans through the lenses of autonomy, beneficence, justice, and utility, what Vaughn (2016) considers the four principles of moral reasoning, further support the transhuman and posthuman rights to individual dignity.

III. Using Four Principles of Moral Reasoning in Defense of Posthuman Dignity

i. Autonomy

Autonomy is the moral principle that describes one's own personal ability to make individual choices regarding his or her life (Vaughn 9). To best examine the role of autonomy in the creation of posthumans and whether this moral principle is violated through the undertaking of enhancements, it is necessary to distinguish between two types of genetic modification. As David Resnik (2016) defines them in "The Moral Significance of the Therapy-Enhancement Distinction in Human Genetics," genetic modifications are either considered gene therapies or genetic enhancements. Gene therapies are already in use today to treat diseases and congenital defects. In contrast, genetic enhancements are genetic modifications for the sole purpose of performing alterations or improvements that are not medically required (Resnik 190). While gene therapy is widely accepted, genetic enhancements are the contested issue in the debate about posthumanity.

As McNamee and Edwards (2016) discuss, there is a wide spectrum among those advocating for transhumanism and the creation of posthumans as to what is considered acceptable change; limits to the proposed alterations of the human body do not seem to exist. Furthermore, it is hard to know the implications of these changes upon the future of humanity. For this reason, bioconservatives seek to either ban the technology, or as Fukuyama wishes, to have it be regulated by the national or international government (Fukuyama 5).

These arguments appear in contrast with the concept of autonomy, because they place limitations on an individual's morphological freedom. If an individual chooses to alter themselves out of their own volition, how is this different from the person choosing to get a tattoo or a piercing, or deciding to receive plastic surgery? These too are forms of permanent modification that are considered socially acceptable. Gender reassignment surgery, though much more contested than these examples, is more similar to the idea of genetic enhancement surgery. The procedures are costly, create permanent changes to the body, and are undergone only with much consideration. These procedures, even if politically contested, are socially allowable. If undergone with the same degree of informed consent, why should genetic enhancements not be?

Vaughn asserts that the ability to provide informed consent is what grants autonomy (9). This logic dictates that morphological freedom should be granted the respect extended to other issues of autonomy. While informed consent is clearly able to be determined in cases of morphological freedoms, it is much less clear in the case of reproductive freedoms. Bioconservatives claim that reproductive freedom to genetic technology does not provide the child with the respect it deserves, because it takes away the child's autonomy for his or her own future. One may make the case that reproductive freedom removes autonomy from the child, yet informed consent can legally be given by proxy through a "competent" parent or guardian "acting in the child's best interest" (Resnik 194). Bostrom further counters the bioconservative view by pointing out that posthuman children would be modified to their benefit, therefore opening up their future to more possibilities and a better chance to thrive (212-213). With a better chance for their future being granted from birth, few children whose parents exercised reproductive freedom would likely object.

Bostrom gives a moral argument for autonomy as a support for transhumanism: dignity, as Bostrom indicates, is the sum result of the choices one makes and how they fit within the context of society (212-213). In the same way one would not strip a human's dignity without cause and as a form of punishment for wrongdoing, one must also not treat a posthuman's dignity as something to be discarded rashly. Posthumans are still by nature humans, just with

various modifications. Thus, they are still capable of self-regulation and therefore can be considered to have autonomy (Vaughn 9). Because both forms of freedoms—morphological and reproductive—respect autonomy, and because posthumans are competent in regulating their own actions through their natural state as humans, autonomy once again justifies posthuman dignity because posthumans are just as capable of self-regulation as humans.

ii. Beneficence

Vaughn describes beneficence as a principle that is inseparable from nonmaleficence. Beneficence is to “do good to others,” and nonmaleficence is to “avoid doing them harm” (10). Common human decency implies that all individuals are worthy of respect and acceptance, so long as their actions do not cause harm or conflict within the society to which they belong. As such, the principles of beneficence and nonmaleficence support Bostrom’s argument for posthuman dignity. First, posthumans do not exist as of yet and therefore have not completed any actions that merit the removal of their basic humanity. In the same way, there has not been proof that posthuman actions would *not* cause immense benefit for the good of humankind. Secondly, to rescind this admiration and acknowledgement of individuality without cause would violate the principle of nonmaleficence. Across humanity, personal identity is a concept that individuals fight to protect. This is supported by the bioconservative concern over a posthuman struggle for civil rights (McNamee and Edwards 2006). Damage done to one’s identity and sense of self-worth causes psychological trauma that manifests in a variety of different ways, from depression to acts of desperation in an attempt of the individual to reclaim their sense of self. To be the one who causes this personal crisis in another is deeply selfish and is malicious if done with intent. Therefore, in good conscience with the principle of nonmaleficence, one cannot argue for the denial of dignity to posthumans.

iii. Justice

A consideration of the moral principle of justice gives ear to both sides of the argument. First, there is justice in the most general sense: “people getting what is fair or what is their due” (Vaughn 12). One of the bioconservatives’ main arguments is that humanity is already perfect, so there is no need for posthumanity. While Bostrom does not bring up a religious argument, theology does not contradict his stance for the creation of transhumans and posthumans. Though God created the world perfect in his sight, the fall of man subsequently generated imperfections in creation. Lustig adeptly explains this point by saying “the *consequences* of original sin are universal, with enduring negative effects for postlapsarian life” and by questioning if the current state of mankind is even “relatable to God’s original creative vision of the human” (2017, 326). This theological argument attributes original sin to the transhumanist observation that nature is not always perfect (Bostrom 209). Being born impaired in some way is not just. It is not retributive towards the infant, and therefore cannot be “their due,” but is instead the result of genetics and other etiological factors. If the creation of posthumans could be used therapeutically in these situations as Bostrom contends, these individuals are granted the justice of being without disadvantage. Thus, a consideration of justice is an argument for posthumanity. Instead of being considered an imperfect human due to a perceived imperfection, the individual instead would be granted equal dignity as an equal member of society.

However, an appeal to the concept of distributive justice is much more so in alignment with bioconservative views. Distributive justice is the concept of individuals experiencing all aspects of society, both good and bad, without partiality (Vaughn 12). Bostrom and the

transhumanists argue for the idealistic implementation of distributive justice by desiring all individuals to have equal access to education and knowledge about scientific enhancements so they can carry out their morphological and reproductive freedoms (210). Realistically, not every individual in society has the same access to medical enhancement information or technologies themselves for reasons of finances, physical proximity, and existing medical conditions. The reality of capitalist economic systems and the subsequent inequality of wealth make it so only the extremely wealthy will likely be able to have access to genetic modification technologies, creating the emergence of an elitist social class of transhumans and posthumans (McNamee and Edwards 2016). Fukuyama predicts a world where one's social class will become evident by physical appearance and intelligence, as only the very rich would be able to afford embryonic genetic modification to predispose their children to these traits (Fukuyama 4). Because wealth is often inherited, this creates a potential for a class of posthumans who are not only superior in various physical and intellectual traits, but that also potentially have the benefit of more resources than their human counterparts. Therefore, because of current economic systems and the unlikelihood of fair distribution of knowledge and of wealth, distributive justice does not seem to be in favor of posthumanity.

iv. Utility

The principle of utility indicates an adjunct moral reason to grant posthuman dignity. Utility, Vaughn states, is the principle of "providing the most favorable balance of good over bad...for all concerned" (11). To cause the most good and prevent the most harm possible, humanity must be able to live without conflict as much as possible. As Bostrom asserts, posthumans are not a threat to the rest of humanity simply by existing, nor do their enhancements make them less than human (210). This recalls the argument appealing to beneficence, and the idea that since posthumans do not yet exist and have not yet committed any acts either good or bad, we do not know whether they are predisposed to either do good or do harm to others. Further, in the field of medical research, they may prove to do more good than harm. A modification in a genetically altered individual may be found to secondarily prevent a disease such as cancer, or prevent the likelihood for chronic issues such as high cholesterol or obesity. These discoveries would lead to advances that all of humanity could benefit from, whether transhuman or not.

McNamee and Edwards (2016) point out that transhumanism allows humanity to take the reins of our species' future evolution, based on a plan for what we believe humanity should look like instead of depending on genetic natural selection. This is an exciting possibility for the future of both medical research and the quality of human life. While there are concerns over the means by which posthumans come to existence, and the implications on future society once they do, potential harm is not realized harm. As such, there is no solid ground to deny posthumans dignity based simply on a fear that they will do harm, because there is just as much potential for them to do good.

Based upon these moral arguments and how they reflect Bostrom's definition of dignity as moral worth, there seems to be no valid reason to deny transhumans and posthumans this dignity. Because these individuals do not exist yet, it is unfair to restrict the scope of their human experience before learning what benefits these individuals can bring to society.

IV. Conclusion

If there was a valid reason by which posthumans and transhumans could be considered less than human, there may be a case for the bioconservative desire to deny them human dignity through classification as something other than human. However, posthumans in their enhanced state of humanity are potentially capable of just as much good for humanity and are subject to the same feelings and desires. They are just as deserving of coming into the world with equal footing or modifying themselves to be more equal, and are able to give informed consent and regulate their own actions. To prevent conflict and release humans and posthumans alike to better occupations, posthumans should be granted the dignity for which Bostrom argues.

Works Cited

- Bostrom, Nick. "In Defense of Posthuman Dignity." *Bioethics: An Anthology*, edited by Helga Kuhse, Udo Schüklenk, and Peter Singer, 3rd ed., Wiley Blackwell, 2016, pp. 208-214.
- Fukuyama, Francis. "Biotechnology and the Threat of a Posthuman Future." *Genetics: Science, Ethics, and Public Policy*, edited by Thomas A. Shannon, Rowman & Littlefield, 2005, pp. 1-9.
- Lustig, Andrew. "The Image of God and Human Dignity: A Complex Conversation." *Christian Bioethics*, vol. 23, no. 3, 2017, pp. 317-334.
- McNamee, M. J., and Edwards, S. D. "Transhumanism, Medical Technology, and Slippery Slopes." *Journal of Medical Ethics*, vol. 32, no. 9, 2006, pp. 513-518.
- Resnik, David B. "The Moral Significance of the Therapy-Enhancement Distinction in Human Genetics." *Bioethics: An Anthology*, edited by Helga Kuhse, Udo Schüklenk, and Peter Singer, 3rd ed., Wiley Blackwell, 2016, pp. 189-198.
- Vaughn, Lewis. *Bioethics: Principles, Issues, and Cases*. 3rd ed., Oxford University Press, 2016, pp. 3-17.