

Traditionalists vs Transhumanists **on Ageless Bodies:** **Enhancement and Degradation of the Human Person**

Tihamer Toth-Fejel

Tihamer.Toth-Fejel@gd-ais.com

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Nanomedical Enhancements and Ethics

Drexler worried about accidents and about people using it in evil ways.

Drexler is an optimist: What about nanotech applications that seem good but actually hurt?

Traditionalists: Leon Kass and the President's Council on Bioethics: Ageless bodies are a subtle seduction that may rob us of our humanity.

Transhumanists: Death robs of us of our greatest asset—life.

Politics, Ethics, Epistemology, & Metaphysics

- **Politics:** Should it be legal? Should it be legal to drive at night without headlights if the driver can see in the dark?
- **Ethics:** What is right and wrong? Is it right or wrong to enhance our vision to see in the dark?
- **Epistemology:** What is knowledge? How do we get it? What is the process by which can we discover if seeing in the dark is good?
- **Metaphysics:** What is the fundamental nature of reality? Is there actually such a thing as objective good? Does darkness really exist, or is it just the absence of light? Does evil really exist, or is it just a corruption of good?

From “Is” to “Ought”

- **Every ethical theory must be:**
 - reciprocal
 - universally applicable
 - consistent
 - practical
 - objective
 - based on both limited and shared knowledge
 - contain non-provable assumptions (which can be true or false).
- **Step 1: Teleology: What is it for?**
- **Step 2: “Convertibility of being into good”**
 - Existence is better than non-existence.
 - E.g. light really exists, therefore “better” than its lack (shadow).
 - Health is better than its lack (disease).

Ordinary Questions

- **What is primary? For example, in the case of life versus death, life is primary, while death is secondary and parasitic; death cannot exist if life didn't exist first.**
- **Are other deficiencies confusing the issue? Are there overlooked benefits or harms?**
- **Does increasing an existing human capability change the ordering of goods that are intrinsic to personhood?**
- **Will the consequence of the enhancement cancel out the enhancement's original goal?**
- **Will the enhancement help one achieve a desire but make fulfilling a need impossible?**
- **Does increasing a capability to extremes change the person?**
- **What are the ends, means, and the circumstances?**

The Ultimate Question

Does a nanomedical change such as extreme life extension enhance or degrade our humanity?

What Does It Mean to Be a Human Person?

More Than Just Bodies

- Self-aware, subjective viewpoint
- Teleological, search for meaning
- Make controversial moral choices
- Persons with rationality and emotion
- Both subconscious and conscious cognitive activity

Persons are Not Objects

- Die
- Make promises and claim inalienable rights
- Enter into relationships
- Need to love and be loved

Persons Are Made For the Good Life

- Four models of a good life are: the contemplative, the active life, the fatalistic (stoic) life, and the hedonistic life.
- With nanotech, all can be simulated, including feelings of accomplishment and satisfaction.
- Given a simulated life that conforms exactly to our desires, under what conditions would we instead prefer a life full of suffering, moral failure, and disappointment only because it was real?
- Heroes and saints live for the good of others; such a life cannot be simulated.

Ageless Bodies: *Social Consequences*

Traditionalists: Ageless bodies have negative effects

Transhumanists: Technology can eliminate that effect

Traditionalists

- **Overpopulation**
- **Skewed demographics**
- **Reduced rate of innovative ideas**

Transhumanists

- **Low Earth Orbit < \$1/lb; frontier stimulates new ideas**
- **Mature parents may be better**
- **More time to pursue knowledge, love, truth, and beauty**

If life extension hurts society, does the harm outweigh the good?

If nothing is worth dying for, is there really anything worth living for?

Ageless Bodies: *Disparities of Wealth*

Traditionalists: Unjust for the rich to be “immortal” while poor the poor die

Transhumanists: Medical advances will quickly filter down to everyone

Traditionalists are admitting that life extension is a good thing. Otherwise why would it be unjust?

Ageless Bodies: *An Interesting Life*

Traditionalists: Limited human life span offers the benefits of interest and engagement

Transhumanists: Life didn't become boring when life expectancy increased from 30 to 70; Because of technology; there are more exciting things to do

Why are suicide rates higher in developed countries than undeveloped ones?

What it is about life that makes it interesting?

Ageless Bodies: *A Serious Life*

Traditionalists: Mortality makes life matter; exceptional people “do not require finitude as a spur”

Why? Have these exceptional people have discovered an objective purpose for human life?

Transhumanists: Life only becomes devoid of meaning if we want it to be

What gives life meaning?

We cannot create meaning – we can only discover it.

Ageless Bodies: *A Beautiful Life*

Traditionalists: “Death is the mother of beauty.”

Does not God make things beautiful?

Transhumanists: With enhanced brains our appreciation for beauty will increase

What evolutionary purpose does beauty serve?

How can we cannot program what we cannot understand?

Ageless Bodies: *A Virtuous Life*

Traditionalists: “The immortals cannot be noble.”

Aren't angels noble?

Transhumanists: If nobility is measured by sacrifice, then the immortal person can sacrifice much more.

What is connection between morality and death?

What is connection between morality and suffering?

Other Voices

Isaac Asimov: Immortality bad for humanity because it halts human evolution and allow the endless reign of powerful and inflexible tyrants

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle: “When one tries to rise above Nature, one is liable to fall below it”

Bill McKibben: Without death, we’re no longer human

Francis Fukuyama: “Transhumanists are just about the last group I'd like to see live forever” because rights depend on a human essence, and modifying that essence is the core of the transhumanist project.

Nick Bostrom: Human essence is “the capacity for moral agency” - something that expanding human lifespan, memory, emotional self-control, and intelligence will never change.

Robert Freitas: *Death is an Outrage*

There is a huge social cost to aging and premature death.

“Nanomedicine” is the biggest step towards stopping it.

Since death is inevitable, Freitas might as well call the heat death of the universe an outrage.

Actually, he does:

The heat death of the universe *is* an outrage, perhaps the single greatest outrage in all known time and space. The purposeless degradation of matter, of things running down or falling apart for no reason, of beauty once laboriously and lovingly constructed suddenly withered to dust, of knowledge painstakingly gathered by billions of souls over millions of years crushed into oblivion, and of countless loving beings winking into and out of existence without ever having shared the leisure of each other's company -- all these things are outrages, and, someday, they will be stopped.

Conclusion

Needed: A good understanding of ethics and a good imagination

Death is parasitic on life – therefore life is better than death
Life fundamental to a person's essential nature
Living longer does not reorder the goods of personhood

Death is bad – but a selfish life is worse

Worst yet is a lying vampirism that preys on the innocent

Reasoning about ethics is difficult. If we make a mistake, then we will face three enormous difficulties:

1. Accepting that ageless bodies may degrade us
2. Discovering how this degradation occurs, and finally
3. After being degraded almost into subpersonhood, finding the superhuman strength to resist its alluring seduction