

PHIL 351 Who Wants to Live Forever? Introduction to Transhumanism Spring 2024

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Course Description

Transhumanism developed as a philosophy that became a cultural movement and is now regarded as a growing field of study. It is a complex mix of philosophical anthropology and philosophy of technology that brings together diverse problems from various fields such as philosophy, social sciences, cultural studies, neuroscience, information science, biomedical science, molecular biology and artificial intelligence. Transhumanism aims at modifying and upgrading human beings through technology claiming that biological evolution is incomplete and without direction. Although it adopts elements of humanism such as rationality, self-knowledge, self-care, autonomy and self-creation it does so with reference to the ideal of the creation of a new human species. The aim of the seminar is to provide an overview of transhumanism by examining a) its historical roots, core values, goals and principles and b) its moral, political and aesthetic aspects.

Course Resources and Activities

1. Philosophical texts
2. Class Discussions
3. Films (e.g. Ad vitam)
4. Guest Philosophy Lectures

Learning Objectives

This course offers students a critical introduction to transhumanism and conceptual frameworks for thinking through a spectrum of crucial topics on the social, ethical and cultural implications of human enhancement. It enriches the students' capacity of understanding the digital way of life in a humanistic context and the new relationship between humankind and technology. Furthermore, it develops the students' ability of orientating themselves in their everyday life by elucidating the function and importance of new technologies in it. Hence, they will become better able to look at new technologies, for example, artificial intelligence from a variety of perspectives, to understand different viewpoints and to discover common ground among them. Finally, they will develop good interpretive, comparative, argumentative, analytical and descriptive skills that will allow them to develop in their role as responsible citizens in the digital age.

Course Requirements

- 1) **Class Participation:** I am a strong believer in relating arguments from philosophers to contemporary political controversies and examples, especially when they were themselves politically engaged. In my opinion this accomplishes two objectives: First, it usually sparks your interest in the theoretical arguments of the different thinkers. Second, a well- chosen example can help you grasp what are often abstract and difficult arguments. Connecting thinkers' arguments to contemporary issues can help you see that these arguments are not merely of historical interest. For the above reasons I often will ask you to think about how one philosopher might respond on a topic and then ask you to marshal arguments or examples in favour of one position or the other (or in favour of some synthesis of the two positions). Hoping to make my lectures more participatory I will break you up in groups asking you to evaluate each other's presentations, to defend different positions and to vote on controversial issues.
- 1) **Weekly Reflections:** You will be asked to turn in one weekly 1-2 pages free report or reaction to the discussion of the last class that will be delivered to my email address before the next class. The reports will not be graded separately. You will be graded just for turning them all in on time. You will

get an A+ if you've turned them all in on time and an F if there are more than two reports unjustifiably missing or written in such a manner as to convey that the reading was not actually done. Please paste your reflection in the main body of the email, not in an attachment and send to theofanis.tasis@cyathens.org

- 2) **Home Assignments and Presentations:** You will be asked to participate in a group presentation. Along with another student you will present a philosophical text and prepare questions for a discussion in class.
- 3) **Papers:** You will be asked to write a final paper of 2000 to 2500 words max. The particulars of the process will be discussed in class. Guidelines for writing a paper will be discussed in class as we move on and you turn in more reading reports. Paper topics will be selected freely by you, after prior consultation with me.

There will be no exams for this class.

Grading and Evaluation

Assessment Distribution:

Class participation: 20% of the grade.

Weekly reflections 10% of the grade. (Completion Requirement)

Home assignments and presentations: 40% of the grade. (Completion Requirement) Final paper: 30% of the grade. **Deadline for submission: 10.5.2024**

Class Lectures

1. **The Philosophy of Transhumanism.**
2. **Why I want to be a Posthuman when I grow up: The work of Nick Bostrom.**
3. **Morphological freedom.**
4. **Human enhancement: Life Expansion Media.**
5. **Re-Inventing Ourselves, the plasticity of embodiment, sensing and mind: The work of Andy Clark.**
6. **Why Freud was the First Good AI Theorist: The work of Marvin Minsky.**
7. **Pigs in Cyberspace: The work of Hans Moravec.**
8. **Transhumanism and Personal Identity.**
9. **Is Human Enhancement Worthy of being a Right?**
10. **Technological Singularity: The work of Vernor Vinge.**
11. **Art and Technology in the 21st Century.**
12. **A Letter to Mother Nature: The work of Max More.**

Reading List

- 1) Agar, Nicholas, Truly Human Enhancement: A Philosophical Defense of Limits, MIT Press, 2014.
- 2) Agar, Nicholas, Humanity's End, Cambridge, MIT Press, 2010.
- 3) Alexandre, Laurent/ Besnier, Jean-Michel, Do Robots Make Love: From AI to Immortality – Understanding Transhumanism in 12 Questions, Cassell, 2018.
- 4) Anderson, Michael / Anderson, Susan Leigh (Eds.), Machine Ethics, Cambridge University Press, 2011.
- 5) Bostrom, Nick, Superintelligence: Paths, Dangers, Strategies, Oxford University Press, 2014.
- 6) Bostrom, Nick, The fable of the Dragon-Tyrant στο Journal of Medical Ethics, Issue 5.31, 2005.
- 7) Bostrom, Nick, A history of transhumanist thought, Journal of Evolution and Technology, Vol 14, n.1, 2005.
- 8) Bostrom, Nick, Human Genetic Enhancements: A Transhumanist Perspective στο The Journal of Value Inquiry, Issue 37, 2003.
- 9) Garreau, Joel, Radical Evolution: The Promise and Peril of Enhancing our Minds, Our Bodies- and What it Means To Be Human, Broadways Books, 2006.
- 10) Hughes, James, Citizen Cyborg: Why Democratic Societies Must Respond to the Redesigned Human of the Future, Westview Press, 2004.
- 11) Kurzweil, Ray, The Singularity is near: When Humans Transcend Biology, Penguin Books, 2005.
- 12) Manzocco, Roberto, Transhumanism- Engineering the Human Condition: History, Philosophy and Current Status, Springer Verlag, 2019.
- 13) More, Max / Vita-More, Natasha (Eds.), The Transhumanist Reader, Classical and Contemporary Essays on the Science, Technology and Philosophy of the Human Future, Wiley-Blackwell, 2013.
Savulescu, Julian / Bostrom, Nick (Eds.), Human Enhancement, Oxford University Press, 2009.

Rubrics

Below you will find the rubric I use for papers.

	Fails Completely	Unsatisfactory	Needs Improvement	Competent	Exemplary
Thesis	No identifiable thesis or thesis shows lack of effort or comprehension of assignment.	Difficult to identify, inconsistently maintained, or provides little around which to structure paper.	Unclear, buried, poorly articulated, lacking in insight and originality.	Promising, but may be unclear or lacking insight or originality.	Easily identifiable, interesting, plausible, novel, sophisticated, insightful, clear.
Structure and style	No evident structure or organization. No transitions between major points.	Unclear, unfocused, disorganized, lacking in unity, transitions abrupt or confusing, context unclear.	Generally unclear, unfocused, often wanders or jumps around. Few or weak transitions. Does not provide sufficient information, explanation, and context for readers.	Generally clear and appropriate, though may wander occasionally. May have some unclear transitions or lack of coherence. Does not fully appreciate reader's need for information,	Evident, understandable, appropriate for thesis. Essay is focused and unified. Words chosen effectively. Excellent transitions between points. Anticipates reader's need for information, explanation, and context.

				explanation, and context.	
Use of sources (when applicable)	No attempt made to incorporate information from primary and secondary sources.	Very little information from sources. Poor handling of sources.	Moderate amount of source information incorporated. Some key points supported by sources. Quotations may be poorly integrated into paragraphs. Some possible problems with source citations.	Draws upon sources to support most points. Some evidence may not support thesis or may appear where inappropriate. Quotations integrated well into paragraphs. Sources cited correctly.	Draws upon primary and secondary source information in useful and illuminating ways to support key points. Excellent integration of quoted material into paragraphs. Sources cited correctly.
Logic and argumentation	No effort made to construct a logical argument. Failure to support thesis.	Little attempt to offer support for key claims or to relate evidence to thesis. Reasons offered may be irrelevant. Little to no effort to address alternative views.	Arguments of poor quality. Weak, undeveloped reasons offered in support of key claims. Counter-arguments mentioned without rebuttal.	Argument is clear and usually flows logically and makes sense. Some counterarguments acknowledged, though perhaps not addressed fully.	Arguments are identifiable, reasonable, and sound. Clear reasons are offered in support of key claims. Author anticipates and successfully grapples with counterarguments.
Mechanics	Difficult to understand because of significant problems with sentence structure, grammar, punctuation, and spelling.	Several problems with sentence structure, grammar, punctuation, and spelling.	Some problems with sentence structure, grammar, punctuation, and spelling.	Sentence structure, grammar, punctuation, and spelling strong despite occasional lapses.	Correct sentence structure, grammar, punctuation, and spelling.

Component	Sophisticated	Competent	Not Yet Competent	Unacceptable
<i>Conduct</i>	Student shows respect for members of the class, both in speech and manner, and for the method of shared inquiry and peer discussion. Does not dominate discussion. Student challenges ideas respectfully, encourages and supports others to do the same.	Student shows respect for members of the class and for the method of shared inquiry and peer discussion. Participates regularly in the discussion but occasionally has difficulty accepting challenges to his/her ideas or maintaining respectful attitude when challenging others' ideas.	Student shows little respect for the class or the process as evidenced by speech and manner. Sometimes resorts to ad hominem attacks when in disagreement with others.	Student shows a lack of respect for members of the group and the discussion process. Often dominates the discussion or disengages from the process. When contributing, can be argumentative or dismissive of others' ideas, or resorts to ad hominem attacks.
<i>Ownership /Leadership</i>	Takes responsibility for maintaining the flow and quality of the discussion whenever needed. Helps to redirect or refocus discussion when it becomes sidetracked or unproductive. Makes efforts to engage reluctant participants. Provides constructive feedback and support to others.	Will take on responsibility for maintaining flow and quality of discussion, and encouraging others to participate but either is not always effective or is effective but does not regularly take on the responsibility.	Rarely takes an active role in maintaining the flow or direction of the discussion. When put in a leadership role, often acts as a guard rather than a facilitator: constrains or biases the content and flow of the discussion.	Does not play an active role in maintaining the flow of discussion or undermines the efforts of others who are trying to facilitate discussion.

<i>Reasoning</i>	Arguments or positions are reasonable and supported with evidence from the readings. Often deepens the conversation by going beyond the text, recognizing implications and extensions of the text. Provides analysis of complex ideas that help deepen the inquiry and further the conversation.	Arguments or positions are reasonable and mostly supported by evidence from the readings. In general, the comments and ideas contribute to the group's understanding of the material and concepts.	Contributions to the discussion are more often based on opinion or unclear views than on reasoned arguments or positions based on the readings. Comments or questions suggest a difficulty in following complex lines of argument or student's arguments are convoluted and difficult to follow.	Comments are frequently so illogical or without substantiation that others are unable to critique or even follow them. Rather than critique the text the student may resort to ad hominem attacks on the author instead.
<i>Listening</i>	Always actively attends to what others say as evidenced by regularly building on, clarifying, or responding to their comments. Often reminds group of comments made by someone earlier that are pertinent.	Usually listens well and takes steps to check comprehension by asking clarifying and probing questions, and making connections to earlier comments. Responds to ideas and questions offered by other participants.	Does not regularly listen well as indicated by the repetition of comments or questions presented earlier, or frequent non sequiturs.	Behavior frequently reflects a failure to listen or attend to the discussion as indicated by repetition of comments and questions, non sequiturs, off-task activities.
<i>Reading</i>	Student has carefully read and understood the readings as evidenced by oral contributions; familiarity with main ideas, supporting evidence and secondary points. Comes to class prepared with questions and critiques of the readings.	Student has read and understood the readings as evidenced by oral contributions. The work demonstrates a grasp of the main ideas and evidence but sometimes interpretations are questionable. Comes prepared with questions.	Student has read the material, but comments often indicate that he/she didn't read or think carefully about it, or misunderstood or forgot many points. Class conduct suggests inconsistent commitment to preparation.	Student either is unable to adequately understand and interpret the material or has frequently come to class unprepared, as indicated by serious errors or an inability to answer basic questions or contribute to discussion.

Rubric I shall use to assess class participation (both in symposia and in regular class discussions)