

PHIL 351 | Who Wants to Live Forever? Introduction to Transhumanism Spring 2025

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Course Description

Transhumanism has transcended its philosophical origins, becoming a cultural movement and a burgeoning field of inquiry. This seminar delves into its complexities, drawing on diverse disciplines:

- **Philosophy of Technology & Anthropology:** We'll explore how technology intersects with our understanding of what it means to be human.
- **Bioethics & the Future of Medicine:** Examine the ethical implications of human enhancement through neuroscience, genetics, and artificial intelligence.
- **Social & Cultural Dimensions:** Analyze the potential social and cultural impact of transhumanist advancements.

Transhumanism proposes that biological evolution is incomplete. It advocates for leveraging technology to transcend our current limitations, potentially culminating in a new human form. We'll critically examine this proposition in light of:

- **Core Values and Goals:** Delve into the philosophical underpinnings of transhumanism, including its relationship to humanism and its aspirations for humanity's future.
- **Moral, Political, and Aesthetic Considerations:** We'll grapple with the ethical implications of human enhancement, potential social and political disruptions, and the very notion of altering what it means to be human.

By engaging with seminal works and contemporary debates, students will develop a nuanced understanding of transhumanism. They will gain the tools to critically assess its promises and perils, its philosophical foundations, and its potential impact on the future of humanity.

Course Approach

1. Exploration of Key Course Topics, Issues, and Questions

In this course, we will explore the philosophical, ethical, and societal implications of transhumanism through a multidisciplinary approach. The following methodologies will be used:

- **Reading Assignments:** Students will engage with foundational texts in transhumanism, as well as contemporary philosophical essays and scientific research papers. Readings will cover key issues such as human enhancement, AI ethics, immortality, and the future of human identity. Primary readings from philosophers, technologists, and ethicists will provide a comprehensive foundation for our discussions.
- **Case Studies:** We will analyze real-world examples and speculative scenarios, such as developments in AI, biotechnology, and cybernetics. These case studies will connect theoretical ideas to tangible technological advancements and help students think critically about the impact of these innovations on human life.
- **Multimedia Resources:** We will use films, documentaries, and TV episodes (e.g. *Black Mirror* episodes like *San Junipero*, *Nosedive*, and *White Christmas*) to reflect on the depiction of transhumanist themes in popular culture. These will act as catalysts for discussions on the portrayal and critique of transhumanism in media.
- **Class Discussions and Debates:** Weekly class discussions will engage students in philosophical debates about pressing ethical and philosophical issues, such as whether we should enhance the human body or mind, or if there are limits to how far we should go in altering human nature. Students will be encouraged to challenge one another's views, fostering a dynamic intellectual environment.

2. Development of Key Academic Skills

- **Analysis and Interpretation of Sources:** Students will critically analyze philosophical texts, scientific research, and cultural portrayals of transhumanism. They will learn to distinguish between normative and descriptive claims, identifying key arguments and evaluating their ethical and philosophical soundness.
- **Writing Assignments:** Students will engage in a variety of written assignments, from analytical essays to reflective journals. These assignments will focus on developing the ability to construct clear, reasoned arguments, with emphasis on structure, coherence, and critical engagement with primary and secondary sources.
- **Research Skills:** A key component of the course will involve independent research on a transhumanism-related

topic of each student's choice. This will involve finding and evaluating scholarly articles, integrating diverse sources, and developing a nuanced thesis.

- **Oral Presentations:** Students will give presentations on specific case studies or philosophical arguments. These presentations will develop speaking skills and the ability to engage the class in meaningful discussions. Peer feedback will be a core part of improving public speaking and communication.
- **Interpretation of Case Studies:** By analyzing real-life scenarios and fictional examples, students will develop the ability to apply philosophical concepts to contemporary issues. This practical application will sharpen their critical thinking and decision-making skills in the context of future technologies.

3. Collaborative and Individual Learning

- **Pair Work and Group Projects:** Students will frequently work in pairs or small groups to explore specific ethical questions or conduct case studies. Collaborative projects will enable students to share perspectives, synthesize different viewpoints, and deepen their understanding through group discussions and problem-solving. Group presentations will be part of the course structure, allowing students to collaborate on topics and share their findings with the class.
- **Class Debates:** Throughout the course, we will hold structured debates on controversial topics, such as the desirability of human enhancement or the ethical implications of mind-uploading. These debates will not only sharpen students' argumentation and rhetorical skills but will also encourage them to understand and engage with opposing viewpoints.
- **Peer Review:** Students will critique each other's written work and presentations, providing constructive feedback to foster a collaborative learning environment. This will help them refine their academic writing and analytical skills, as well as develop critical evaluation abilities.
- **Individual Work:** While group collaboration is vital, students will also have ample opportunity to work individually on research papers, essays, and reflective pieces. Individual assignments will focus on cultivating personal insights into the philosophical and ethical questions surrounding transhumanism.

This approach ensures that students engage with transhumanism both philosophically and practically, while simultaneously developing essential academic and collaborative skills.

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

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.

Estimate course workload by using the estimator: 2.18 out of class hrs/wk

Evaluation and Grading

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: 12.5.2025

Policy on Assignments and make-up Work

- **Assignment Deadlines:** Details about homework assignments and presentations will be provided well in advance of their due dates. Deadlines are important to ensure fairness and manage time effectively. Late assignments will generally not be accepted.
- **Extension Requests:** If a significant and unforeseen issue may prevent you from submitting an assignment on time, please contact me as soon as possible and before the deadline. If the reason is justified, we may work out an alternative plan.
- **Absences:** If you know you will be absent on the day of your presentation, notify me immediately. Depending on circumstances, we may reschedule or arrange for an alternate way for you to present your work. Unexcused absences for presentations will result in a grade reduction.
- **Communication:** Open communication is important. If you have any concerns about assignments, deadlines, or your ability to complete work, please speak to me as early as possible.

Evaluation Criteria - Course Assignments

Assignment 1: Class Participation (20%)

- **Criteria 1: Engagement with Philosophical Arguments**
Students will be evaluated on their ability to actively engage with philosophical arguments in discussions and relate them to contemporary political issues. Quality of contributions, critical thinking, and demonstration of understanding will be key.
- **Criteria 2: Group Work and Collaboration**
Students' participation in group activities will be assessed by their collaboration, willingness to evaluate and defend positions, and respectful interaction with peers during debates and discussions.
- **Criteria 3: Presentation and Defense of Ideas**
Students will be graded on how effectively they present and defend arguments within their group and in class-wide debates. This includes clarity of thought, structure of argumentation, and use of relevant examples.

Assignment 2: Weekly Reflections (20%)

- **Criteria 1: Completion and Timeliness**
Reflections will be evaluated based on whether they are submitted on time and consistently for each class. Turning in all reflections punctually will ensure a higher grade.
- **Criteria 2: Engagement with Class Discussions**
Reflections must demonstrate engagement with the prior class's discussions. While not graded for content, a reflection that shows clear attention to the material and thoughtful commentary will be necessary for full credit.
- **Criteria 3: Quality of Writing and Reflection**

Even though these reflections are free-form, they should still be coherent and clearly written, showing that the student has engaged with both the reading and the class discussions.

Assignment 3: Home Assignments and Presentations (30%)

- **Criteria 1: Comprehension of Philosophical Texts**
Presentations will be assessed based on how well the student understands the assigned philosophical text and conveys its core arguments and ideas in their own words.
- **Criteria 2: Preparation of Thoughtful Discussion Questions**
Students will be evaluated on the quality of questions they prepare for class discussion. Questions should demonstrate deep engagement with the text and foster critical dialogue.
- **Criteria 3: Clarity and Effectiveness of Presentation**
The effectiveness of the presentation will be judged by the clarity of explanation, ability to engage the audience, and how well the student leads the discussion through their prepared questions.

Assignment 4: Final Paper (30%)

- **Criteria 1: Originality and Critical Thinking**
The final paper will be assessed based on how original and insightful the student's thesis and argumentation are. Critical engagement with the chosen topic, demonstrating independent thought, will be key.
- **Criteria 2: Coherence and Structure**
Papers will be graded on their logical coherence, clear structure, and how effectively they present and develop their arguments. A strong introduction, body, and conclusion are essential.
- **Criteria 3: Use of Philosophical Texts and Sources**
Students must engage with relevant philosophical texts and incorporate them into their argument in a meaningful way. Proper citation and integration of sources will also be part of the evaluation.
- **Criteria 4: Writing Style and Technical Accuracy**
Papers should be well-written, with proper grammar, punctuation, and adherence to academic writing standards. Clarity of expression and a polished final draft are important for a higher grade.

CYA Regulations and Accommodations

Attendance Policy

CYA regards attendance in class and on-site (in Athens or during field study trips) as essential. Absences are recorded and have consequences.

ePolicy on Original Work

Unless otherwise specified, all submitted work must be your own original work. Any ideas taken from the work of others must be clearly identified as quotations, paraphrases, summaries, figures etc., and accurate internal citations and/or captions (for visuals) as well as an accompanying bibliography must be provided.

Use of Laptops

In-class or onsite use of laptops and other devices is permitted if this facilitates course-related activities such as note-taking, looking up references, etc. Laptop or other device privileges will be suspended if devices are not used for class-related work.

Class Schedule
Spring 2025 Tentative Schedule

Day #	Date/Day	Topic / Readings / Assignments Due / Place (if applicable)
1	Jan 28	What Is Radical Enhancement? Reading: Nicholas Agar, <i>Humanity's End</i> , Chapter 1.
2	Jan 30	Radical Enhancement and Posthumanity Reading: Nicholas Agar, <i>Humanity's End</i> , Chapter 2.
3	Feb 4	The Technologist—Ray Kurzweil and the Law of Accelerating Returns Reading: Nicholas Agar, <i>Humanity's End</i> , Chapter 3.
4	Feb 6	Is Uploading Ourselves into Machines a Good Bet? Reading: Nicholas Agar, <i>Humanity's End</i> , Chapter 4.
5	Feb 11	The Therapist—Aubrey de Grey's Strategies for Engineered Negligible Senescence Reading: Nicholas Agar, <i>Humanity's End</i> , Chapter 5.
6	Feb 13	Who Wants to Live Forever? Reading: Nicholas Agar, <i>Humanity's End</i> , Chapter 6.
	Feb 18-21	FS Peloponnese
7	Feb 25	The Philosopher—Nick Bostrom on the Morality of Enhancement Reading: Nicholas Agar, <i>Humanity's End</i> , Chapter 7.
8	Feb 27	The Sociologist—James Hughes and the Many Paths of Moral Enhancement Reading: Nicholas Agar, <i>Humanity's End</i> , Chapter 8.
9	Mar 4	A Species-Relativist Conclusion about Radical Enhancement Reading: Nicholas Agar, <i>Humanity's End</i> , Chapter 9.
10	Mar 6	Radical Human Enhancement as a Transformative Change Reading: Nicholas Agar, <i>Truly Human Enhancement</i> , Chapter 1.
	Mar 10-13	Midterm Exams
	Mar 18-22	FS Northern Greece Thessaloniki
	Mar 25	Greek Independence day
11	Mar 27	Two Ideals of Human Enhancement Reading: Nicholas Agar, <i>Truly Human Enhancement</i> , Chapter 2
14	Mar 28	What Interest Do We Have in Superhuman Feats? Reading: Nicholas Agar, <i>Truly Human Enhancement</i> , Chapter 3.
15	April 1	The Threat to Human Identities from Too Much Enhancement Reading: Nicholas Agar, <i>Truly Human Enhancement</i> , Chapter 4.
16	April 3	Should We Enhance Our Cognitive Powers to Better Understand the Universe and Our Place in It? Reading: Nicholas Agar, <i>Truly Human Enhancement</i> , Chapter 5.
17	April 8	The Moral Case against Radical Life Extension Reading: Nicholas Agar, <i>Truly Human Enhancement</i> , Chapter 6.
18	April 9	A Defense of Truly Human Enhancement Reading: Nicholas Agar, <i>Truly Human Enhancement</i> , Chapter 7.
	April 11-21	Spring Recess (Orthodox Easter April 20)
19	April 22	Why Radical Cognitive Enhancement Will (Probably) Enhance Moral Status Reading: Nicholas Agar, <i>Truly Human Enhancement</i> , Chapter 8.
20	April 24	Why Moral Status Enhancement Is a Morally Bad Thing Reading: Nicholas Agar, <i>Truly Human Enhancement</i> , Chapter 9.
21	April 29	A Technological Yet Truly Human Future—as Depicted in <i>Star Trek</i> Reading: Nicholas Agar, <i>Truly Human Enhancement</i> , Chapter 10.
22	May 6	Forms of superintelligence Reading: Nick Bostrom, <i>Superintelligence: Paths, Dangers, Strategies</i> , Chapters 3,4.
23	May 8	Cognitive superpowers Reading: Nick Bostrom, <i>Superintelligence: Paths, Dangers, Strategies</i> , Chapters 5,6,7.
	May 13	Final Exam Week
	May 15	Final Exam Week

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