

Playing to Lose: Transhumanism, Autonomy, and Liberal Democracy

• BY [SUSAN B. LEVIN](#)

The debate over human “enhancement,” or the biotechnological heightening of human abilities, is prominent in bioethics. The most controversial stance is transhumanism, whose advocates urge us to develop biotechnologies enabling the “radical” elevation of select capacities, above all, rationality.

Transhumanists insist that their vision of the radical bioenhancement of human capacities is light-years removed from prior eugenics, which was state managed. Decisions about how far and even whether to enhance oneself and one’s children-to-be would stem strictly from personal discretion. Since autonomy is retained—indeed, powerful biotechnologies would offer individuals marvelous new avenues for its expression—transhumanists’ vision fits squarely within liberal democracy. Or so we are told.

This reassuring, empowering picture is undercut by transhumanists’ own arguments, which offer incompatible pictures of personal autonomy in relation to decisions about the use of bioenhancement technologies. Autonomy is, indeed, front and center when transhumanists’ immediate goal is debunking the charge of substantive ties to eugenic history. It recedes, however, when they focus on why one proceeding rationally should find their “posthuman” ideal compelling. Here, transhumanists depend on rationales from utilitarian ethics, within which autonomy cannot be valued in its own right, to support the strong desirability of bioenhancement and even its moral requirement.

Utilitarian ethics and its ties to politics

For utilitarians, only well-being, gauged in terms of states of affairs, is intrinsically worthwhile. Utilitarians aim to maximize well-being, calculated in terms of the overall balance of benefit and harm. Decisions are to be made impartially, their reference point not individuals or families, but, instead, generations. From a utilitarian perspective, the course deemed to maximize generational well-being is the rational and, thus, morally required path.

Ethical and political stances are always connected, but in utilitarianism, this tie is especially tight. A utilitarian umbrella for law and policy would run counter to liberal democracy, a cornerstone of which is personal autonomy. Familiar measures undertaken to promote public health, whose dominant warrant is utilitarian, are a

visible exception to the wide rein that individual discretion usually enjoys. Though they are exceptional in this sense, such measures in the United States—among them laws precluding smoking in public areas and parental immunization of children as a condition of school admission—are consistent with liberal democracy and foster individuals' ability to be active members thereof. By and large, these measures and, thus, at least implicitly, their utilitarian justification, are accepted. Furthermore, in deference to autonomy, some of these requirements allow for exceptions (e.g., most states permit religious exemptions to the immunization requirement).

Contra the above scenario, within transhumanism, contextually variant emphases on autonomy and broader welfare are not distinct aspects of a unified perspective. Rather, transhumanist writings include two separate lines of argument whose implications for personal autonomy are deeply at odds.

What are these antithetical positions on autonomy?

Although transhumanists vaunt autonomy when insisting that their thought is remote from eugenic history, their dependence on utilitarian rationales when directly supporting bioenhancement is usually tacit or denied. An outlier is Ingmar Persson and Julian Savulescu's contention that, to avoid human extinction, bioenhancement of two moral attitudes, altruism and "a sense of justice," is morally required. [They assimilate moral bioenhancement to fluoridation and education](#), familiar measures aimed at public health and welfare, pointedly leveraging those measures' utilitarian justification. In addition, Persson and Savulescu's fluid, open segue from a moral requirement to a legal obligation is vintage utilitarianism. What's more, to ensure that no one was psychologically primed to wreak disaster on humanity, the use of moral bioenhancement would have to be exceptionless.

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Moral bioenhancement emerged as an area of focus within transhumanist writings only in 2008, and, thus far, its advocacy has been tied closely to Persson and Savulescu. The utilitarian reasoning that they employ, however, is also evident, albeit tacitly, in two focal areas of transhumanist concern: cognitive bioenhancement and procreative decision-making.

Cognition is the flagship capacity that transhumanists would augment: this ability, as instantiated by the most gifted scientists and technologists, would drive humanity's self-transcendence; moreover, in a radically augmented form, it would be the fulcrum of posthuman existence. When urging cognitive bioenhancement upon us, transhumanists draw parallels with familiar public-health measures, including fluoridation, vaccines, and seatbelt laws. But they forge these connections to public health without owning the utilitarian justification that anchors all such measures. Beyond that, multiple transhumanists showcase what they deem societal boons of cognitive bioenhancement, including greater economic productivity.

Transhumanists' union of cognitive bioenhancement with familiar public-health measures lends it the same ethical justification, and this utilitarian anchor brings in its train the prospect of sociopolitical requirements. That state enforcement is a desired or logical outcome of the moral imperative to enhance is evident when [Nick Bostrom](#) favors pressure on individuals, in realms such as health insurance, health care, and education, as an interim tactic to ready society for legal mandates. Contrary to what occurs with moral bioenhancement, however, when pressing for the cognitive variety, transhumanists themselves do not own—let alone connect—the utilitarian dots.

Transhumanists pin their hopes on cognitive ability to steer the production of humanity's "godlike" successors. Implementation of their ideas in procreative decisions is, therefore, key. It is also the arena where transhumanists' dichotomous handling of personal discretion comes most vividly to light: their welcoming stance to create distance from earlier eugenics and quashing of it when locked on supporting their own ideal.

When we are told that the availability of powerful biotechnologies would dramatically augment parental freedom of choice, procedural autonomy reigns. Here, far from ranking decisions due to the caliber of their content, transhumanists presume that what renders decisions legitimate is that they reflect the values and priorities of their makers.

The Principle of Procreative Beneficence (PB) is transhumanists' best-known prescription involving reproductive decisions. [According to PB](#), parents-to-be are morally obliged "to aim to have the child who, given her genetic endowment, can be expected to enjoy most well-being in her life" (275). Concisely put, parents should "create children with the best chance of the best life." From this "ideal" utilitarian standpoint focused on capacities, dedication to their maximization is the sole rational course.

Counterintuitively—given their occupation with radical bioenhancement—transhumanists often unpack well-being in terms of harm-avoidance, not benefit-provision; thus, measures like cognitive bioenhancement are touted in terms of limitations that biotechnology would erase. Here, the scope of "harm" swells vastly beyond its usual sense, for, as [John Harris](#) asserts, a condition is deemed harmful "relative to possible alternatives" (92). From this vantage point, harm is wrought whenever a biotechnology that is available to heighten a feature is not deployed.

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According to Harris, we should eliminate "condition[s] that someone has a strong rational preference not to be in" (91). Here, "someone" means "anyone at all." This generic frame of reference meshes with decision-making in public health. As [Melinda Hall](#) observes, PB covers "the population," with individuals enjoined to do what they can to avoid harming it (xi, 22). Transhumanists' tendency to see the provision of benefit in terms of harm-reduction itself reflects the lens of public health, whose rightful scope at a given juncture relates closely to what the "harm principle" is thought to cover. Within

liberal democracy, harm-avoidance is the preeminent warrant for public-health requirements that constrain personal autonomy.

How remote are we now from a scenario in which personal discretion is front and center? Where autonomy guides decision-making, all of the following are morally legitimate paths: opting against bioenhancement, for oneself and/or one's children; welcoming all bioenhancements available at a given time; and embracing some, while rejecting others. In contrast, when reproductive decisions are filtered through PB, the procedural autonomy that transhumanists extol with eugenic history in view must be scrapped as welfare reducing, for it preserves decisional options that are objectively illegitimate, that is to say, irrational.

Though Julian Savulescu and Guy Kahane recognize that the Principle of Procreative Beneficence lends itself to an impersonal defense, they do not glean the utilitarian anchor of that defense. Allegedly, PB is fully compatible with liberal democracy, for the moral requirement it levies should not be legally enforced. The utilitarian frame of PB, however, undermines an attempt to cordon off moral from legal obligations. Since transhumanism *is* advocacy of radical bioenhancement, transhumanists' argumentative strategy when supporting their posthuman vision is ultimately decisive.

Impact on transhumanists' denial of ties to prior eugenics

The implications for transhumanists' disavowal of substantive ties between their thought and prior eugenics are stark because their insistence that what they propose fits within liberal democracy is the bulwark of these denials. When transhumanists distance themselves from eugenic history, their denials tend to feature Nazi eugenics. This gives their repudiations an unwarranted argumentative edge, for the existence of substantive connections is clearly evident when the comparison point is Anglo-American eugenics, which antedates the Nazi variety. While transhumanists' reliance on utilitarian rationales is usually tacit or denied, Anglo-American eugenicists, including Hermann Muller, Julian Huxley, Karl Pearson, and J. B. S. Haldane, openly gave primacy to overall well-being, whether arguing for the erasure of antisociality or the dramatic boosting of reason and prosocial attitudes. They stressed, as well, the entwining of ethical and political warrants for their favored biological measures. Enacting this interrelation, American eugenics included legislative strictures in the areas of immigration, sterilization, and marriage.

Ties of transhumanism to concerning trends today

Transhumanism is also tied revealingly to current, expansive trends involving "population health" and individual responsibility for conduct deemed to be health-related. Transhumanists' aim—humanity's self-transformation into "posthumanity"—is extreme. Nonetheless, their subordination of personal autonomy in areas—including procreative decision-making—where liberal democracy gives it broad scope reflects a more general relaxing of boundaries today between the arenas of "health" and "public health," and an expansion of the latter's scope beyond familiar initiatives.

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For some decades in the United States, individual and population health have been the focus of discrete professional settings—clinical medicine and public health, respectively. Though questions of broader resource allocation have relevance, the guiding idea has been that in clinical medicine, values and priorities of individual patients should be given central weight. Today, as [Madison Powers, Ruth Faden, and Yashar Saghai](#) point out, “Traditional lines between clinical and other aspects of health promotion are blurring at a rapid pace” (6). Indeed, the very “[paradigm](#)” for considering “health” is shifting from clinical medicine to “public health”—an interpretive change that “risks running afoul of normative strictures concerning the bounds of legitimate state action in the area of health” (425). At the same time, due, for instance, to increased attention to social determinants of health, the scope of what is taken to affect population health has swelled. If this trajectory continues, emphasis may shift from the question of what “public health” legitimately encompasses to what it can reasonably exclude.

Because utilitarian rationales translate readily into sociopolitical requirements, this trajectory involving public health should concern us. Public health is “[by definition an arm of the state](#).” Therefore, as [Ruth Faden and Sirine Shebaya](#) observe, lodging an activity or behavior under a public-health umbrella can be “an effective way of taking it out of the realm of legitimate discussion.... Government actions aimed at securing health may be less scrutinized than actions aimed at more controversial ends, leaving public health officials with too much power and too little democratic accountability.”

Linguistic appearances notwithstanding, a mounting emphasis on “personal responsibility” for health fits with the notion that we are shifting to a public-health paradigm, with its preventive core. [Dorothy Porter](#) ties this tendency, which has been building for quite a while, to the waning dominance of epidemics of infectious disease over the course of the twentieth century, as this prompted fresh scrutiny of how personal conduct influenced population health (314). If the sphere of individual accountability continues to grow, individuals might eventually “[be obligated to submit](#)” before actually becoming ill to policies which enforce this responsibility, including those which interfere with ordinary liberties” (90). Here, individuals are equally accountable for acts and omissions. If this trajectory continues, such that we enact constructions of health, public health, and personal responsibility that liberal democracy cannot readily absorb, there is no guarantee that it will remain intact.

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As if this were not enough, transhumanists embrace perfectionism, as did prior eugenicists, when suggesting that the maximal upgrading of capacities, based on available biotechnologies at a given time, is highly desirable and even a moral obligation. Here, transhumanists take to an extreme [a currently surging perfectionism](#), such that, in tandem with an internalization of “irrational social ideals of the perfectible self,” parental investment in children’s autonomy is waning (413–14). This perfectionism, combined with the aforementioned trends involving health, public health, and individual responsibility, yields a dangerous mix that stands to jeopardize the “value pluralism” and personal autonomy that are cornerstones of liberal democracy.

Transhumanism is legitimately critiqued for proponents' insistence that nothing short of humanity's self-transcendence is a rational aim. Although the substance of this ideal is not a logical consequence of the aforementioned broader trends, the line of reasoning that transhumanists employ in its defense reflects the utilitarian springboard from which these developments gain their ethical purchase. In liberal democracy, fostering public health and welfare without jeopardizing the pillar of personal liberty requires ongoing navigation and reflection. If we took our marching orders from transhumanists, and were able to produce humanity's "godlike" successors, the question of how to foster overall welfare without devitalizing autonomy would be moot. For posthumanity would have supplanted us, the very beings for whom this matter is of urgent concern.

Featured image by [Amine M'Siouri](#)

Susan B. Levin is Roe/Straut Professor in the Humanities and Professor of Philosophy at Smith College. In addition to her numerous publications in bioethics, she has authored two books and many articles in Greek philosophy.

