Dialogues on Human Enhancement

We face an emerging range of technologies that can be applied to our human natures with the goal of enhancing us. There are nootropic smart drugs and gene editing that influence the development of the brain. The near future promises cybernetic technologies that can be grafted onto our brains and bodies. The challenge for readers of Dialogues on Human Enhancement is to decide how to respond to these and other coming enhancement technologies.

As you read these dialogues you will meet passionate advocates for a variety of responses to enhancement tech, ranging from blanket rejection to ecstatic endorsement. You’ll encounter Olen, for whom there is no such thing as too much enhancement. You’ll meet Winston, a bioconservative who fiercely but also imaginatively opposes any human enhancement. And there is the moderate Eugenie, who strives to distinguish between enhancement technologies that should and should not be accepted. As these characters philosophically engage with each other they will benefit from the supervisory presence of Sophie, the philosopher.

Dialogues on Human Enhancement does not arrive at a single conclusion. Olen’s transhumanism, Eugenie’s moderation, and Winston’s bioconservatism are presented as viable and necessary views as we enter a future made uncertain by human enhancement tech.

And the book also welcomes the voices of students, even – and especially – if they challenge the opinions of our age’s experts. As students join the conversations in this book, they will formulate their own views about how humanity could or should be in our Age of Human Enhancement.

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Dialogues on Human Enhancement

Nicholas Agar
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Foreword

The human enhancement project aims at making life better for us by making us better. Life is to be improved through the improvement of human nature. Largely inspired and fuelled by the perennial fear of ageing and death and rising frustration over the many limitations of our power and autonomy, human enhancement is meant to liberate us from the current conditions of our existence. The rapid and really quite astonishing technological advances that we have seen in the last few decades have raised hopes that it might actually be possible to escape what has long been our destiny: a life that is much shorter and often contains much more suffering than many of us would like. This is how it has always been, but now it seems that perhaps it doesn’t have to stay that way. And if we can do something about it, why shouldn’t we? Who wouldn’t want a better life? Who wouldn’t want to be smarter and emotionally more balanced and live a long disease-free life with their body and mind strong and undiminished by age and decay? It appears to be a no-brainer.

And yet, not everyone agrees that we should try to improve human nature, or at least not before we have thought about it more carefully. Making things better than they are is by definition good, but that doesn’t tell us yet what would actually constitute an improvement. Being smarter or more intelligent than we are now certainly sounds appealing, but what exactly do we hope to gain by becoming smarter? How smart do we need to be to be able to do what we think needs doing? Will it make us happier? What
does it mean to be smart anyway? Would our becoming smarter simply make it easier for us to achieve our ends, or would it also enable us to accurately identify the ends that are worth achieving? And if we are not smart enough now, how do we know that becoming smarter is indeed one of those ends?

Similar questions arise with respect to emotional enhancement and life extension. Would our lives be better if we had complete control over our emotions (and would an emotion that we can switch on and off at our will still be an emotion)? Or would it be best if we simply got rid of all emotions, on the grounds that they can only distract us from fully rational and unbiased decision-making? Or should we seek to get rid only of all “negative” or “inappropriate” emotions? But what counts as a negative or inappropriate emotion? And as for life extension, what do we need the extra time for that we would gain through the extension of our life and health span? How much longer would we want to live? Is there a cut-off point after which life would no longer be worth living, or should we aim for a potentially immortal or postmortal life?

These are just some of the questions that need to be considered before we can be certain that the kind of enhancement that we might want to pursue is actually worth having and is, as Nicholas Agar memorably called it in one of his previous books on the topic, “truly human enhancement.” Things get even more complicated when we consider that, despite what Ray Kurzweil and other enhancement enthusiasts have claimed, scientific and technological progress does not seem to be governed by any reliable laws and is really quite unpredictable. Breakthroughs may happen, or they may not. They may happen now or much later or not at all. Also quite unpredictable are the consequences. We simply don’t know how things will work out once human enhancement has become the order of the day and has started to change what it means to be human. Will our lives one day be “wonderful beyond imagination,” as a prominent transhumanist philosopher once raved, or will we be swept out of existence by intelligent machines, which according to the same philosopher is not at all unlikely?
Nicholas Agar has been working and writing on human enhancement for more than 20 years, grappling with the many difficult and often perplexing questions it raises. And to his credit, he has never shied away from modifying his position in light of new or previously not sufficiently appreciated considerations. In his first book on the subject, *Liberal Eugenics*, published in 2004, he defended everybody’s right to use enhancement technologies on themselves and their offspring in pursuit of their own personal conception of human excellence, while in his later work he has become increasingly sensitive to the dangers of all attempts to radically enhance humanity and suspicious of the relentlessly optimistic predictions of those who see human enhancement as a panacea for all our ills and problems.

What Agar has shown in his previous work is that it makes little sense to be for or against human enhancement. Rather, what we need to figure out is which proposed changes of our current nature are most likely to improve our lives and whether those improvements are worth the risk that we run with all changes radical enough to substantially change our lives. As Agar demonstrates in the following *Dialogues on Human Enhancement*, it is best if we do this together, by talking and listening to each other, learning what concerns others have and why they have them, and taking a variety of different viewpoints into account before we make up our minds about which concrete interventions we may want to support, and which to oppose.

Michael Hauskeller
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Introducing *Dialogues on Human Enhancement*

This is a Socratic dialogue about human enhancement. It brings the model of philosophical investigation of the ancient Greek thinker Plato to what may be the most important question about humanity’s future, should we survive the climate crisis and avoid extinction by pestilential virus.

Drugs that credibly enhance some human capacities are today available in the Amazon Marketplace. These include nootropics, drugs that purport to enhance cognitive functions. Claims made on behalf of some nootropics are likely exaggerated or outright false. But there is scientific support for some of them as enhancers of human memory or powers of concentration. Recent advances in gene editing and genomics enable experimentation with DNA influencing many human traits. There are experiments in cybernetic brain implants and replacements for human body parts. I call this diverse range of interventions in human minds and bodies *enhancement technologies*.

The book presents, in the form of dialogues, a variety of views about how we should use enhancement technologies. The views advocated here range from enthusiastically embracing enhancement and all its possibilities to blanket rejection.

My inspirations for these dialogues are iconic texts for philosophers – Plato’s dialogues. I have fond memories of my first exposure to philosophy through the Penguin Classics edition of Plato’s *The Last Days of Socrates: Euthyphro, Apology, Crito,* and
Phaedo. Plato introduced an idea about how to conduct philosophical inquiry that came to be known as the Socratic Method – named for Socrates, the star of his dialogues. The Method is a way to seek philosophical truth by argumentative dialogue. In Plato’s dialogues, characters attempt to find the truth about a variety of issues and are cajoled, coaxed, challenged, and even bullied by Socrates.

The dialogues address a variety of philosophical questions. What does it mean to enhance human cognitive and physical capacities? Should Amazon be allowed to sell drugs that may enhance human capacities in its Marketplace? Do concerns about truth in advertising require that they be described differently? What should we make of promises to use exponentially improving digital technologies to improve human capacities not just a bit, but radically? If you have consented to the application of enhancement technologies to your mind or body when does it make sense to say enough? What should we make of suggestions to rebel against our age’s technological imperatives by taking our brains and bodies “off the grid”? Does the rejection of all forms of human enhancement in our technological age even make sense?

The characters in these dialogues offer a variety of answers to these and other questions about enhancement. I hope that as readers imaginatively engage with the dialogues they will venture their own answers. They should also be inspired to ask questions about human enhancement not asked in these dialogues and to consider how they might be answered.

The invitation for readers to imaginatively engage is key here. As I write in early 2023 universities are struggling to comprehend the significance of advances in generative AI, most notably from ChatGPT, the artificial intelligence chatbot developed by the American artificial intelligence research laboratory, OpenAI. ChatGPT produces work that bears many of the hallmarks of good scholarship in philosophy. Students are already submitting ChatGPT’s work in their philosophy courses. There are now contributions to the academic literature written by ChatGPT.

I cannot say much in this introduction about the implications for philosophical scholarship of generative AI. I limit myself to...
Introducing Dialogues on Human Enhancement

an observation that connects the arrival of generative AI with this book’s project.

Scholars panicked by ChatGPT have tended to focus on what it cannot do. They point to the many failings of generative AI as it stands in early 2023. But these hasty responses tend to overlook the fact that generative AI is a digital technology. The former world chess champion, Garry Kasparov, has written illuminatingly about the experience of watching computers abruptly go from being mediocre players to beating the best humans. It is a mistake to offer a defence of philosophy written by humans on some advantage that, though genuine in 2023, will predictably vanish with the next iterations of AI-written scholarship. The scholarship of the version of ChatGPT released in November 2022 was marred by sloppy referencing. When challenged to offer academic support for its assertions the AI hallucinated, inventing references that looked authentic but were actually to nonexistent books and articles. Generative AIs will get better at accurately citing academic literature. They are unlikely to achieve perfection, but a level of competence superior to a human scholar is surely within reach. No computer plays perfect chess. But they now play better than the best human players.

These dialogues double down on a human advantage over machines that will be longer lasting than accurate citation of the academic literature. That is the human imagination and capacity for creativity. ChatGPT is clearly not creative. It’s basically a very powerful auto-complete engine trained on 570GB of data from books, Wikipedia, and other writing from the internet.

The thought process Friedrich Nietzsche went through to decide that “God remains dead. And we have killed him” bears little resemblance the process that ChatGPT goes through to tell you that Nietzsche “was not making a statement about the existence or non-existence of a divine being. Instead, he was making a philosophical and cultural critique of the role of religion in shaping our moral and ethical beliefs.” When I ask ChatGPT to write something on the climate crisis in the style of Nietzsche it produces something that looks impressively Nietzschean to me: “For it is
the Superman who shall dance upon the precipice of the abyss, resolute in his defiance against the nihilism that has engulfed the collective will of humanity.” ChatGPT gives these answers because its 570GB of data contains the entirety of Nietzsche’s works and many commentaries on them. It is therefore able to find much more interesting continuations than when your smartphone suggests “work” after you tap in “see you after ...”

The response of this book is to give power to the creativity that produced Nietzsche’s original works. Nietzsche certainly wasn’t a generative AI offering a mash-up of philosophical writing as it stood in the late nineteenth century. This book won’t ask students to synthesize extracts from the vast and growing academic literature on the philosophy of human enhancement. Why attempt that when generative AI already does that so well and future generative AIs will do it even better? Instead I encourage students to think of themselves as contributing to an ongoing conversation about how technology should or shouldn’t be applied to the human species. Students should imaginatively place themselves in conversation with the characters I have invented and think about what they would say. These dialogues double down on what remains humanity’s superpower in this age of generative AI. Generative AIs have shown that they can convincingly fake rationality. But they cannot yet fake the human imagination. Plato’s pupil Aristotle called humans the rational animal. Perhaps in this age in which rationality can so easily be simulated we need to reconceive of ourselves as the imagining animal. It’s by daring acts of imagination that students will best explore the many possibilities and pitfalls of human enhancement technologies. I hope that these dialogues provoke those daring acts of imagination.

Dramatis personae for a quadrilogue on human enhancement

The four participants in these dialogues advocate a variety of views about how we should use enhancement technologies or whether we should use them at all. Olen, Eugenie, and Winston defend distinctive philosophical views about human enhancement. They should not be identified with any particular thinker. Rather their
views represent broad schools of thought about how we should approach enhancement technologies.

*Olen the Transhumanist:* Transhumanists are the most enthusiastic supporters of human enhancement. One theme as the debate proceeds concerns *how much* enhancement humans should want. Here I understand the transhumanists as expressing a commitment not just to human enhancement, but to a great deal of it. Olen endorses *radical enhancement* – enhancement of human capacities to levels far beyond biological human norms. Transhumanists hope to see enhancement of sufficient magnitude to transform humans into different kinds of beings – posthumans. Olen finds inspiration in the rapid pace of improvement of digital technologies and aspires to apply these exponentially improving digital technologies to human nature. Olen’s friends are quick to point out that some of his advocacy of enhancement is difficult to distinguish from science fiction.

*Eugenie the Moderate:* Olen is joined on “team enhancement” by Eugenie who supports a lesser degree of enhancement – *moderate enhancement*. Eugenie’s main focus is not so much on exponentially improving digital technologies, though she certainly doesn’t rule out selectively and judiciously applying them to our brains and bodies. She looks to the past, taking an idea from the Victorian polymath and cousin of Charles Darwin, Francis Galton – *eugenics*. Galton defined eugenics as the “science which deals with all influences that improve the inborn qualities of a race; also with those that develop them to the utmost advantage.” In effect, Galton planned to apply to the human species the methods of selective breeding that millennia of farmers have used to improve the quality of their livestock. We can understand him as the first person to apply scientific knowledge to enhancing humanity. Galton was a brilliant mind, but his advocacy of enhancement was significantly marred by the prejudices of his age. In the popular imagination, eugenics came to be associated with other crimes of the Nazis who went farthest in the application of Galton’s
ideas about the scientific improvement of humanity. Eugenie learns from Galton’s view but seeks to reject its most morally obnoxious implications. In her version of eugenics there will be no state-sanctioned experts who decide what kinds of lives to protect and promote and which to purge from our species. Eugenie advocates a modernization of eugenics called liberal eugenics. In this view control of humanity’s future is given not to the state but to individual parents-to-be.

**Winston the Bioconservative:** The polar opposites of transhumanists are bioconservatives. Bioconservatives reject human enhancement. One character, Winston, defends these views. He is not a luddite, someone who seeks to reject all novel technologies. Rather Winston hopes to preserve what he views as the essence of humanity. He spends much of the discussion seeking to make apparent the many values that members of team enhancement overlook in their rush to use new scientific understanding and emerging technologies to enhance humanity.

**Sophie the Philosopher:** Sophie comes closest to playing the role of Socrates in these dialogues. Socrates famously joined his discussions about topics including piety, justice, and courage claiming to know nothing about the topic at hand. Sophie also disclaims knowledge about how or whether humans should enhance ourselves. She brings no view about human enhancement to the debate. Rather Sophie professes an earnest desire to learn about whether and how humans should enhance themselves. Sophie’s proclaimed ignorance about the topic of the dialogue perfectly equips her to adjudicate philosophical disagreements among her friends over which is the right response to powerful enhancement technologies. She untiringly corrects her friends’ many philosophical errors. But Sophie is not immune from error. Often her critiques prompt indignant responses from her friends and Sophie is forced to allow that there was more to a view than she initially dismissed.
Sophie is not a perfect fit for Socrates. In Plato’s dialogues Socrates is clearly the philosophical authority – he wins all the debates in which he participates. It’s fun to witness his takedowns of the good and the wise of Athens. In the *Laches* two supposed experts on courage, the distinguished generals Laches and Nicias, are exposed as intellectual fakes. They may be brave but they know much less about what it means to be courageous.

Socrates’ philosophical humbling of the distinguished generals is an excellent read. But the dialogue seems to leave readers with an intellectually scorched earth in which we are left with little idea about what it really means to be courageous. We finish the dialogue confident that, in spite of Socrates’ entreaties to the generals to come up with new theories, he would run rings around whatever the generals come up with. In the dialogue we learn from Laches of Socrates’ courage in battle. But Socrates does not draw on his brave participation in the retreat from Delium to venture his own theory about courage. We can only speculate about how Socrates the philosopher might have treated any suggestion about what it means to be courageous ventured by Socrates the brave soldier.

Sophie will challenge the philosophical views about human enhancement advanced in the dialogue, but she plays a more constructive role than Socrates does in the *Laches*. Often the other characters’ views about how enhancement technologies should be applied to human nature are advanced with too much certainty. Sophie uses her superior grasp of argument to expose this philosophical overconfidence. But it’s important that each of the views advanced are left standing. Readers will finish these enhancement dialogues with Olen’s transhumanism, Eugenie’s moderation, and Winston’s bioconservatism as viable conjectures about how enhancement technologies should be applied to our brains and bodies, or whether they should be applied at all.

Put another way, the failure of these dialogues to arrive at a single winning view about enhancement is a philosophical feature not a bug. Readers should view these *Dialogues on Human Enhancement* as an essentially unfinished philosophical work. As
we enter an uncertain future we will need to draw on a variety of different views about how humans could or should be. For as long as there are humans capable of applying technology to our natures we will be debating human enhancement. As we and our descendants enter the Age of Human Enhancement, we will be building on the philosophical beginnings of Olen, Eugenie, Winston, and Sophie but also adding new ideas about enhancing humans that they didn’t think up.

**An enhancement quadrilogue as a philosophical conversation**

There are significant differences between this philosophical work on human enhancement and a conventional philosophical monograph. I have written three monographs on the human enhancement debate. There was my 2004 book *Liberal Eugenics* that defended a prerogative of prospective parents to use emerging genetic technologies to select some of the characteristics of their future children. In 2010, I published *Humanity’s End* that discussed some of the philosophical excesses of those who would apply tech to our natures, radically enhancing our intellects and extending our lifespans. My human enhancement trilogy concluded with 2013’s *Truly Human Enhancement* that presented a view about how much enhancement might be good for us.\(^2\)

A philosophical monograph makes a case for a specific conclusion. It is defined by its focus and is careful to avoid extraneous material. Points are arranged to most efficiently support the intended conclusion. After a clear statement of the thesis to be defended, there’s an argument that offers philosophical support for this thesis. As they make their case, good philosophers are careful to avoid extraneous or self-indulgent asides. These take up space on the page but offer no philosophical support for the view that is defended. In many philosophical monographs there is a section that responds to objections. The objections section of a monograph can cover only the merest fraction of the totality of possible responses to a thesis. But readers are meant to come out of the objections section with a sense that the author probably has
a good answer to any objection they might offer. If the philosopher has done their job well, readers with dissonant views may share the sense of philosophical defeat of the distinguished generals in the *Laches*.

In my career advising students how to write essays or term papers, I have always advised that their short, say 1,500-word philosophical pieces, should adhere to the same basic structure. Good student essays need an introductory paragraph that clearly states the thesis to be defended and very concisely summarizes how the student will defend it. The argument for the thesis should be presented in the paragraphs that follow. Students should then consider and rebut objections to their view. “How many objections should I consider?” Perhaps a couple. “Can I consider only objections that are easy to rebut?” No, you should consider the objections that might be raised by an intelligent, informed opponent of your view and rebut those. A passing essay ends with a conclusion that summarizes what you accomplished in your philosophical assignment. Generative AIs are doing these traditional forms of philosophical assessment increasingly well. This should suggest the need for new forms of assessment that draw on human strengths not increasingly encroached on by machines.

In a single monograph an author is simply not permitted to change their mind. To do so is to perpetrate the greatest sin in philosophical writing, affirming a logical contradiction. Logical consistency is a requirement of the snapshot of philosophical belief presented in a monograph. If you successfully diagnose a logical contradiction in a philosophical monograph, you can cast it aside, confident that it is unworthy of your attention.

When an author has written more than one monograph on a particular topic it’s possible to infer that they changed their mind on an issue of philosophical significance. Each of my three monographs on the debate about human enhancement, considered in isolation, advances a view that I maintain is logically consistent. But over twenty-five years of thinking and writing about human enhancement, I have changed my mind about some key issues. Often these changes of mind have mainly amounted to changes in emphasis.
A view which I once thought was of utmost importance, I now view as less so. I once viewed the inclusion of enhancement choices within the scope of procreative freedom as of utmost importance. That is the view presented in my 2004 book *Liberal Eugenics*. In these dialogues Eugenie advocates that view. I continue to view this as important, but less so. In consideration of the totality of implications of enhancement, I now think human enhancement can be an important expression of procreative freedom but believe that it must often be traded off against competing values.

The structure of typical philosophical conversations is quite different. While a philosophical monograph is a snapshot of the author’s philosophical beliefs at a given time, a philosophical conversation occurs over time. In a monograph, the channel of information is one way. Participants in a good philosophical conversation are not only speaking, they are listening too. Good conversations are characterized by turn-taking. When participants in a philosophical discussion are really listening, sometimes they change their minds. An indicator that you are actually listening is that responses to points made by your interlocutors prompt reasonable concessions from you. It’s rude to just ignore the points raised by a friend and to continue with your philosophical peroration as if nothing was said. Philosophical concessions needn’t be wholesale renunciations of a view. But an especially good point can necessitate significant changes in emphasis. A view formerly advanced as very important continues to be advocated but is now advanced with less confidence. This is what progress can look like over the timeframe of a philosophical conversation.

Philosophical conversations lack the strict editing of philosophical monographs. When friends get together to discuss philosophical issues they often find themselves coming back to points raised earlier. As the discussion moves on, new points are made. Sometimes it’s apparent as the philosophical conversation progresses that one participant has temporarily dropped out of the discussion, only to rejoin in a way that suggests they have continued thinking about a point raised earlier and that they now feel was unfairly dismissed.
They may find that a freshly raised point has unexpected significance for an earlier issue. When they initially advanced their view they couldn’t have anticipated the impact of this fresh information. They take the opportunity to double back, giving fresh expression to a point they raised earlier but now think wasn’t given a fair hearing.

Some of the exchanges in these dialogues get quite heated. Olen, Eugenie, Winston, and Sophie may be friends but they don’t hesitate to express vigorous disagreement about how or whether at all enhancement technologies should be applied to our natures. Sometimes there is progress made on a dispute, but often the friends remain philosophically unreconciled. I think that contemporary philosophy, especially in the analytic tradition, is too characterised by argument in which on side tries their hardest to achieve the rational defeat of an adversary. We learned about the importance of that from Plato’s Socrates. But an overemphasis on argument tends to occlude ways for ideas and their advocates to interact. In places in these dialogues the friends comply with the first rule of improv – “yes, and ...”. In an improv scene performers are encouraged to accept what has been said and build on it, rather than denying or rejecting it. In improv the first rule is intended to move a scene on in a way that encourages collaboration and creativity. Sometimes my characters comply with a philosophical first rule of improv. They don’t reject an unfamiliar idea about how technologies should be applied to human nature. Rather they accept it, at least provisionally, and explore how it might be built on. At a later stage they leave themselves free to withdraw that provisional acceptance.

In philosophical conversations extraneous points are sometimes made. Discussants may briefly consider a freshly made point before collectively deciding that it is not pertinent to the issue at hand. But those passages in the record of a philosophical discussion can be valuable for readers who might have offered these points.

One of the thrills in reading Plato’s dialogues as a young student is that they look like philosophical conversations. I got the impression of Plato as a young man attentively listening in on Socrates’