

Enhanced Humanity: Heaven or Hell?

James J. Hughes, Ph. D, Executive Director of the Institute for Ethics and Emerging Technologies and Professor of Health Policy at Trinity University

George J. Annas, Boston University School of Public Health, Chairman of Department of Health Law, Bioethics & Human Rights

Moderated by: Joel Garreau, Washington Post



The question of ethics and societal responsibility is at the core of any discussion of “enhanced humanity.” Joel Garreau, our morning keynote speaker, moderated the panel, which examined the ultimate impact of “GRIN” technologies (Genomic, Robotic, Information and Nanotechnologies) on mankind. While the investment implications of these technologies are numerous, so are the unintended consequences.

After finding common ground in agreeing that “we all want what is best” for society and mankind, Hughes and Annas offered dissenting definitions of what that means and how we arrive at that aim collectively as a society.

Garreau began the discussion by asking Dr. Hughes if he was “out of his mind” in advocating citizenship for telekinetic monkeys or implantable memory chips in our brains. Dr. Hughes addressed the question in the following manner:

George Annas and I are not so different; we both want what is best for society and mankind. We just disagree on how we get there. History provides numerous examples of medical advances that were met with resistance by ethical protest, including autopsies. Society constantly moves the goal posts on what is ethically acceptable. Are we to be punished for our hubris while we strive to improve our quality of life? There are many important considerations on this journey, including safety, universal access for all members of society. Regarding safety, the FDA is simply not up to the task. Universal access is also a daunting task but nevertheless a critical pursuit. There are social and economic benefits to enhanced humanity. This longevity dividend is witnessed throughout our economy every time there has been a significant advance in expanding the duration of productive, quality of life. This would help tremendously in supporting our increasingly stressed social safety net. Bio-conservatists often believe diversity will be threatened by these technologies. I do not agree. Society, rather, will be more diverse in the age of enhanced humanity, just “better diverse.” Are our children in harms way of these technologies? Quite the contrary, our kids are already an experiment. And is not contraception already a version of genetic engineering or social planning? Abortion? In-Vitro Fertilization? Indeed, we have an obligation to help our children to be as healthy and strong as possible.

We do not need oversight of our reproductive decisions. Eugenics (coercive sterilization) was one of the most terribly misguided social experiences in history. I believe strongly in the Proactionary Principle – we should anticipate ways to apply technology to make us a more resilient species. In conclusion, I believe we need to anticipate the future use of medical technology to help us live longer, happier, more productive lives.

Garreau turned the floor over to George Annas with the following question: George, you admittedly stand in the way of developing technologies to make us live longer, thinner, more active, beautiful lives. Are you out of your mind? Mr. Annas provided the following:

A large degree of medical innovations about which we hear is hype. Some is real, but not all of it. Twenty five years ago it was predicted that there would be 100+ artificial hearts implanted per year by '05. Last year, there were none. Extending life is good, but not life in a nursing home, he agrees. Fighting disease is important as well. The question of enhanced humanity comes back to “what is better?” and “who decides? What is an enhancement? Using genetic cloning to develop medicines is one thing, but trying to create a perfect baby is absolutely wrong.

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Genetic genocide is a real possibility if the world of trans-humanists is ever developed. Mankind's unfortunate propensity for genocide supports this view. I advocate people doing whatever they want to themselves...but we must draw the line at what we do to unborn children. Finding cures for disease is an important pursuit, but not through manipulation of the genetic material of an embryo. Informed Consent to Human Experiment is a principle that must be upheld. I also believe in the Precautionary Principle, where one must substantially prove that no evil will likely come about as the result of this experimentation. In other words, the burden of proof is on the Cloners. We can not do better than random selection and random mutations in the natural evolution of our species. Lack of oversight is a big problem and the United Nations is dysfunctional. Don't blame the scientists, the real fault lies in the military and business applications that seek to apply the science in dangerous ways.

The ethical debate surrounding enhanced humanity is vitally important. Our panelists, as well as our moderator, recognize the tremendous responsibility inherent in the progress we're witnessing within medical technology. In an age of increasingly rapid change, this debate is critical to the end game of applying this science towards the betterment of society.