The Debate about Enhancement: Chances, Risks and Possible Limits

Graduate Seminar (Hauptseminar)
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Course Description

This graduate seminar (Hauptseminar) “The Debate about Enhancement: Questioning Chances, Risks and Possible Limits” is part of The Enhancing Life Project organized by the Divinity School at the University of Chicago, in conjunction with the Protestant Theology Faculty at Ruhr University Bochum, funded by the John Templeton Foundation. I participate in this interdisciplinary cooperation with my postdoctoral project “Government of the Self: Towards an Anthropological Rethinking of Humanity”. My project will be divided into two main parts: In the first part, philosophical anthropology will be spelled out by building a bridge from Kant to Nietzsche in order to develop an exemplary ethic. The second part deals with the question in which way that exemplary ethic gives orientation in biotechnological development.

Against this background, the graduate seminar will be in affiliation to the second part of my postdoctoral project. In this seminar, we aim to discuss the chances, risks and possible limits of the new enhancement technologies by understanding the current debate: How do the different camps, the bio-conservative strand, the middle-path and the post-humanist strand, underpin their argumentation? In the first step, we will consider what enhancement means. So far, there is no definite notion of enhancement: rather it is understood from different perspectives. In the second step, we will have a closer look at three main types to define enhancement: treatment vs. perfection, nature vs. artificiality and on a broader lever: making life better. In the second step, we will examine the chances, risks and possible limits of enhancement without a priori restricting any technological development. The leading questions, thereby, will be raised as follows: Do we ethically want to put everything into practice that we can? Are we not rather challenged to think through possible limits beyond any essentialist pitfalls but at the same time without limiting technological progress a priori?

1. Week of April 18: Introduction

2. Week of April 25: Defining Enhancement I: Treatment vs. Perfection


3. Week of May 2: Defining Enhancement II: Nature vs. Artificiality

4. Week of May 9: Defining Enhancement III: Making Life better


5. Week of May 16: Mapping the Debate I: The bio-conservative strand 1


6. Week of May 23: The bio-conservative strand 2


7. Week of May 30: The bio-conservative strand 3


8. Week of June 6: Mapping the Debate II: The post-humanist strand 1


10. Week of June 20: Mapping the Debate III: A middle path


11. Week of June 27: Arguments based on Autonomy

12. Week of July 4: On Economic Constraints


13. Week of July 11: The case of genetic engineering


14. Week of July 18: Final Discussion