The Importance of Dignity:
A Kantian Perspective on Transhumanism
Abstract

The transhumanist movement has been hailed as optimistic and forward thinking in its ambition to “ascend humanity beyond its biological constraints” and bring it to the next stage of evolution. However, critics such as Nicholas Le Dévédec have claimed that the movement represents a reversal of the Enlightenment project of autonomy, despite claims otherwise. In this paper, we shall adopt the perspective of the moral philosophy of an Enlightenment thinker important for the democratic thought of the era: Immanuel Kant. With an emphasis on Kant’s conception of Dignity and the second formulation of the categorical imperative, the study shows that Kantianism is irreconcilable with transhumanism. The findings not only expand upon Dévédec’s claims, but also emphasizes the potential of dignity as a concept in delineating the limits and use of enhancement technology.

Key words

Kant, transhumanism, Dignity, enhancement, autonomy, perfectibility

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# Table of contents

1 **Introduction**
   1.1 Problem
   1.2 Theory
      1.2.1 Immanuel Kant: Categorical Imperative and Dignity
      1.2.2 Kantian Dignity and Democracy
   1.3 Methodology
      1.3.1 Assumptions and application
      1.3.2 Sources

2 **Transhumanism: A Kantian Analysis**
   2.1 Hypothetical Imperative: Transhumanism and Utilitarianism
   2.2 A Kantian Defense of Transhumanism?
   2.3 Imperative of Skill and the Ambiguous Worth of Traits
   2.4 Different Types of Enhancement
   2.5 Summary of Findings

3 **Conclusions**
   3.1 The Importance of Dignity
   3.2 The Problems with Dignity
   3.3 The Purpose of Dignity
   3.4 Future Studies

4 **References**
   4.1 Internet Sources
Introduction

The aim of transhumanism – the ambition to ascend humanity beyond its biological constraints and bring it to the next phase of evolution – must be seen as admittedly optimistic and hopeful. Indeed, one of its many allies within the field of bioethics, John Harris, writes opportunities to better mankind through efforts such as genetic enhancement should not merely be permissible, but rather a moral imperative. He writes that it is a necessity to “take control of evolution and our future development to the point, and indeed beyond the point, where we humans will have changed, perhaps into a new and certainly into a better species altogether” (Harris 2010: p.23).

What exactly does transhumanism entail? While there is a distinction to be made between enhancement bioethics (such as John Harris) and transhumanists, Tom Koch describes core beliefs that the two schools of thought share, namely that “human biology can be improved through a range of technologies that will eliminate natural deficits in individuals and… the species in general” and that “science can fix” these failings (Koch 2010).

In what way can science fix our failings? James Hughes, one of the writers representing transhumanism in this paper, provides a colorful vision (Hughes 2004: p. xii):

In the twenty-first century the convergence of artificial intelligence, nanotechnology and genetic engineering will allow human beings to achieve things previously imagined only in science fiction. Life spans will extend well beyond a century. Our sense and cognition will be enhanced. We will gain control over our emotions and memory. We will merge with machines, and machines will become more like humans. These technologies will allow us to evolve into varieties of “posthumans” and usher us into a “transhuman” era and society.

Yet not all express optimism for these aspirations. Koch, for instance, is critical of the idea that what may appear as “constraints” can simply be removed in order to improve the person, because their effect is not as easy to predict as one may think. Likewise, an enhancement that may appear reflexively to be a positive thing, but the outcome of such improvements is not a
given (Koch 2010). As expected, the issue is a morally contentious subject, and as such many arguments have been leveled towards the idea of genetic enhancement for the purposes of advancing human beings, and by extension, humanity. While some raise concerns about the act of enhancement itself, others worry about the potential risk of misuse of the technology, or its societal impact (Baylis and Robert 2004).

This paper shall likewise discuss the implications of such enhancement technologies and the agenda of transhumanism. However, while much has been written on the possible dangers of what the technologies should entail should they be implemented without care (See Brown 2001; Levin 2014), this paper shall focus on the desirability of enhancement itself and what it means for citizens of modern democratic societies. To do this, we must turn to the roots of democratic thoughts, and the supposed roots of the transhumanist movement: The Enlightenment philosophy.

1.1 Problem

Despite whatever moral concerns we may have for the goals of transhumanism and a widespread use of enhancement technology, it is unlikely to matter because the movement represents an extension of the human drive towards perfection. This is what Baylis and Robert argue in their “inevitability thesis”; that the advent of genetic enhancement technology and its incorporation into society is inevitable due to (1) the logic of capitalism that governs our society; (2) so-called “heedless liberalism”, which means that prohibition of the sort is generally unattractive; (3) natural curiosity and desire for knowledge; (4) a desire to compete and outperform one’s peers; and finally (5) the human drive towards “self-actualization” and the transcending of limits. In concluding their thesis, they write (Baylis and Robert 2004; My emphasis):

Humans are indeed imperfect creatures, but imperfection is not a necessary condition for humanness. Humans are not merely inquisitive or competitive; rather, we posit that the essential characteristics of humanness are perfectibility and the biosocial drive to pursue perfection. These essential characteristics are neither merely naturally present nor culturally driven, but rather biosocially over-determined. We are on the cusp of what may prove to be our final evolutionary stage.
The usage of “perfectibility” is no coincidence. The term has its origins in Enlightenment philosophy as an inspiration to free humanity from the authorities and paradigms of the time, and to elevate man to allow him, in the words of Pico della Mirandola, “to shape himself” (Dévédec 2018). As such, transhumanists see themselves as descendants of the Enlightenment thinkers in their pursuit to transcend boundaries and pursue a greater mastery over nature, one that will inevitable result in the mastery of the nature of the human being. Nick Bostrom, co-founder of the international organization Humanity+ (formerly World Transhumanist Association), makes this connection explicit: “The heritage from the Renaissance combines with the influence of Isaac Newton, Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, Immanuel Kant, the Marquis de Condorcet, and others to form the basis for rational humanism, which emphasizes empirical science and critical reason… Transhumanism has roots in rational humanism” (Bostrom 2005).

Yet, as much as transhumanism may see itself as a continuation of those thoughts, there is a deeper dimension to Enlightenment philosophy that has been overlooked. While the philosophy had undeniably a technical aspect to it, there was also a deeper critical and political to the movement. This is what Nicholas Le Dévédec argues, who claims that “[T]ranshumanism is emblematic of a depoliticized conception of human perfectibility focused on the technoscientific adaptation of the human being” (Dévédec 2018).

Perfectibility (coined by Jean-Jacques Rousseau) - while a defining human trait denoting our pursuit of “perfection” – is also ambiguous; it reflects the malleability of human nature that can be turned into something good. As Susan Dunn summarized (Dunn 2002; p8):

Rousseau always believed in the Enlightenment notion of human perfectibility. Human nature, he suggested, is malleable; our moral and rational faculties can be nurtured, educated, and guided so that our full humanity can blossom. Even if society has made us unequal and free… it is possible to reconceive and restructure social relations and political institutions on a radically different basis.

This is the political and social dimension of the concept of perfectibility that has been overlooked by the transhumanist movement. The perfectible human being is not corrupt by itself, but has been turned this way by the social institutions and authorities. The Enlightenment project was thus a protest against the dogmas of the time and simultaneously made for a hopeful ambition to transform their despotic society. The Enlightenment
philosophy was thus significant for the modern democratic thought as it “opened the horizon for taking political action in the world through an appreciation of citizens’ critical autonomy” (Dévédec 2018).

The importance of Enlightenment philosophy for modern democracy and its emphasis on the autonomy of the individual – its overlooked political dimension - shall inform the premise of this paper. To expand upon Dévédec’s assertion that transhumanism represent a retreat from the democratic tradition, we turn to the prolific Enlightenment thinker Immanuel Kant and his moral philosophy. This is appropriate given that Kant’s conception of autonomy and dignity - given its interrelatedness with the former – have both been essential for the shaping of modern democracy (Schneewind 1998: p. 4-6). As such, going back to the roots of the terms allows us to assess the extent to which transhumanism is compatible with the basic thoughts that underlie modern democracy. With Kant’s influence on democracy in mind, it is thus argued that the views advanced by the transhumanist movement mark a departure from democratic thought that the Enlightenment philosophers proposed and undermines one of the core values of democracy – dignity.

The central question that this paper shall seek to answer is as follows:

What potential conflicts are there between transhumanism and the second formulation of the categorical imperative?
1.2 Theory

Immanuel Kant’s contribution to moral philosophy cannot be overstated. Prior to Kant’s “invention” of autonomy, morality was seen as obedience to external authorities. Likewise, not everyone was equally capable of understanding the demands of morality. As such, certain authorities were necessary to guide those equipped with lesser understanding (Schneewind 1998: p. 4).

Kant, however, provided a conception of morality as that of self-governance and autonomy. It is by the virtue of our will – through our reason - that we can create moral laws (Schneewind 1998: p. 6). In *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morality*, Kant writes (Kant 2002: p. 29):

> Only a rational being has the faculty to act in accordance with the representation of laws, i.e., in accordance with principles, or a will. Since for the derivation of actions from laws reason is required, the will is nothing other than practical reason.

It is reason that gives us the ability to create moral laws and imperatives, and at the same subjects us to them through the will. It is thus the self-governance that becomes essential to morality itself, which had been neglected in previous attempts to establish moral principles (Kant 2002: p. 50):

> Now it is no wonder, when we look back on all the previous efforts that have ever been undertaken to bring to light the principle of morality, why they all had to fail. One saw the human being bound through his duty to laws, but it did not occur to one that he was subject only to his own and yet universal legislation...

1.2.1 Immanuel Kant: Categorical Imperative and Dignity

For moral laws to qualify as such, they must be universally valid. To attain this, morality must be based on *a priori* reason, or what Kant calls “pure” philosophy (Kant 2002: p. 3-7). The problem with previous attempts to establish moral principles, according to Kant, had been their reliance on contingencies – in other words, they were conditional, resulting in doctrines of morals that were “disgusting mish-mash[es] of patched together observations and half-reasoned principles” (Kant 2002: p. 26). By conditional, we mean that they were dependent
on a specific set of circumstances that made either the principle or action “desirable” or a “practical necessity” given a specific interest. Actions based on such grounds are called hypothetical imperatives (Kant 2002: p. 31): If I wish to become a talented musician, I must practice a specific instrument. Practicing the instrument does not have an inherent value, but only in relation to my desired goal of becoming a talented musician.

However, moral principles (or laws) to retain validity cannot be conditional, because by the nature of them being laws or principles, they must represent something that it without exception. Moral laws must therefore be constituted by a priori reason, the pure philosophy. Thus, it cannot depend on contingencies such as the happiness, interests, inclinations that are all dependent on subjective factors; rather, they must remain valid regardless of the rational being that acts in accordance with the moral law. As such, it follows that a moral law that is valid for one rational being, an agent, must be equally valid for another rational being. It must be possible to be made universal (Kant 2002: p. 55-56). The classic example of stealing comes to mind: If stealing was made universal and an allowed “law”, it would lead to a contradiction, since such a law would uproot the concept of private ownership, which would is required if one is to steal.

From this demand of universalization follows Kant’s categorical imperative, which acts as a form of moral command. Kant formulates this in phrase: “Act only in accordance with that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it becomes a universal law”. In contrast to hypothetical imperative (if I want x, I have to do y), it is not contingent and dependent on a desired aim or end; it is unconditional (Kant 2002: p. 37-38). This is the first formulation of the categorical imperative.

It is from this formulation that Kant derives the second formulation. But first, it is necessary to distinguish means and ends. Kant writes: (Kant 2002: p. 45):

The will is thought as a faculty of determining itself to action in accord with the representation of certain laws. And such a faculty can be there to be encountered only in rational beings. Now that which serves the will as the objective ground of its self-determination is the end, and this, if it is given through mere reason, must be equally valid for all rational beings. By contrast, what contains merely the grounds of the possibility of the action whose effect is the end is called means.
The will, which every rational being has, is what allows us to set ends for ourselves. If I was to treat another person as merely means – following the demand for universalization – it would create a contradiction, for such an action would require that the will – the defining faculty of rational creatures – only has instrumental value. This is untrue, for it has categorical (universal) value; it is necessary for the purpose of setting any end whatsoever. As such, to treat another person as means, I would suspend my own will with which I set ends (Kant 2002: p. 55-56).

Kant sums it up in the following: “Rational nature exists as end in itself” (Kant 2002: p. 46). Rational nature cannot have a conditional, contingent value; its value must be absolute, equal for all rational beings since it is a prerequisite in order to set ends. This gives rise to the second formulation of the categorical imperative: “Act so that you use humanity, as much in your own person as in the person of every other, always at the same time as an end and never merely as a means” (Kant 2002: p. 46-47). It is this formulation of the categorical imperative that has been received with widespread acceptance in philosophy (Hill 1980), and the formulation that will be used in judging the potential schism between the Kantian moral philosophy and transhumanism.

Important to note is that prevalent in Kant’s moral philosophy is a dualism between the absolute good and inclinations. Autonomy of the will is achieved by acting on behalf of objective (absolute good) grounds, whereas heteronomy is acting on behalf of anything else, be it inclinations in the form of desire for happiness, instinct, or other contingent factors (Kant 2002: p. 50-51, 58). The motivation for the latter is the incentive, the motivation for the former, by contrast, is the motive (Kant 2002: p. 45). Ultimately, it is through autonomy that rational creatures are given a special standing with dignity. I have constructed a figure to help explain this relationship (See Figure 1).
However, while dualism and the figure above may imply an opposition, it is not a dichotomy. While Kant warned that inclinations of the subjective sort may influence a rational being to such where it is more difficult to put reason into practice (Kant 2002: p. 5), incentives are amoral. They are permitted so long as they do not compromise the absolute good. The relationship between heteronomy and morality can be further explained in the following passage (Kant 2002: p. 57):

> Morality is thus the relation of actions through the autonomy of the will, that is, to the possible universal legislation through its maxims. That action which can subsist with autonomy of the will is permitted; that which does not agree with it is impermissible.

Let us try and bring light to this using a potentially macabre example: I have an incentive to be served a particular set of dish for dinner. So long as this incentive does not undermine the expression of the objective good, there is nothing about incentive that should make it impermissible. However, should I happen to be a cannibal, and to serve this incentive I would have to consume human flesh, it would be impermissible on the basis that it would come at the cost of someone’s dignity; my incentive would be set above the end that a rational by its nature represents.
Given the transhumanist agenda to enhance and adapt human beings, a particular emphasis in this paper will thus focus on what possible repercussions and conflicts the proposed actions may have upon human dignity, and whether or not the solutions advocated by transhumanists would come into conflict with the second formulation of the categorical imperative. In the following section, we shall discuss why the Kantian dignity is important in relation to democracy.

1.2.2 Kantian Dignity and Democracy

The Kantian perspective is argued here to be justified on the basis that Kant’s moral philosophy has had a profound impact on democratic thought. It was Kant’s conceptualization as morality through autonomy of the will that paved way for the Western liberal vision of democracy (Schneewind 1998: p.4-5). In his essay An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?, the link between autonomy and enlightenment is further emphasized. In it, Kant defines the idea of enlightenment as that of freedom from “nonage” and to have the courage to use one’s own reason. In the essay he speaks mostly of religion, and thus speak of the manner in which religious authorities have established “dogmas and formulas” that act as “fetters of an everlasting nonage”. Thus, as implied by the word choice of nonage, to become enlightened is to assume one’s own autonomy and mature. We must therefore be free to criticize and use our reason to question established religious doctrines, all while performing our given duties within society: While we have a duty as determined by our post, we also have our duty – to ourselves and to humanity – to be courageous enough use our reason; for to not do so would be “to violate and trample on the sacred rights of man” (Kant 1784).

The “sacred rights of man” can be formulated as “dignity”; the absolute, immeasurable worth of a person, equal to all other persons, which gives them the right to legislate moral laws (Kant 2002: p. 52):

“Reason thus refers every maxim of the will as universally legislative to every other will and also to every action toward itself, and this not for the sake of any other practical motive or future advantage, but from the idea of the dignity of the rational being that obeys no law except that which at the same time it gives itself”
There is thus an emancipatory aspect to the idea of dignity; it claims that no human has more
worth than the other in terms of its quality as a rational being, through which it becomes both
subject to moral laws as well as legislator of them (Kant 2002: p. 53). As Catherin Dupré
argues, this aspect has had a hand in influencing the shaping of modern democracy: “During
the Enlightenment, the concept of dignity started to be considered as a key constitutional
idea, being used by philosophers and political thinkers to constitute human beings as
citizens, i.e. born in equality and with the ability and the right to take part in political
decision-making” (Dupré 2012). However, it was only after the Second World War, during
the drafting of what would become Universal Declaration of Human Rights, that dignity
came to be seen as a universal necessity given what its absence had led to during the Holocaust
(Morsink 1999: p. 36-39). Johannes Morsink, in his work The Universal Declaration of
Human Rights: Origins, Drafting, and Intent, he comments that (Morsink 1999: p. 38: My
emphasis):

[a]fter the Holocaust, Article 1 of the Declaration sounds like a trumpet call of
victory after battle; it announces that “all human beings are born free and equal
in dignity and rights,” that “they are endowed with reason and conscience and
should act toward one another in a spirit of brotherhood.” These are not mere
Enlightenment reflexes, they are deep truths rediscovered in the midst of the
Holocaust...

Jean Bethke Elshtain argues that the Universal Declaration of Human Rights is important
because it marks the world’s commitment to human rights. These rights, which are associated
with democracies more than any other modern political system, “flow directly from the
premise of human dignity”, the concept of which limits the actions of external entities (be
they organizations or governments) regarding what they can impose upon the human being
and the world she inhabits. Elshtain writes that “[t]he premise of human dignity is not up for
grabs. It is non-negotiable. It is no bargaining chip. It is the place from which one begins”.
Rights, in turn, were designed as “immunities” from governmental power (Elshtain 2004). It
is therefore not surprising that given the connection between dignity and human rights that the
former has primarily acted as a legal concept that “connects human beings and democracy: by
placing human beings at the center, used as a judicial argument, it re-balances the power
relationship between (state) power and people” (Dupré 2012).
One need not look to the immediate example, the Holocaust, which inspired the formulations inside the Universal Declaration of Human Rights to assess the risks of what a failure to uphold the concept of dignity might lead to in a democracy. Instead, we shall turn to Hedvig Ekerwald’s article The Modernist Manifesto of Alva and Gunnar Myrdal: Modernization of Sweden in the Thirties and the Question of Sterilization, which discusses the compulsory sterilizations carried out in Sweden between 1935 and 1976; the number of which has been estimated at around 20,000 (Ekerwald 2001).

In particular, Ekerwald’s article discusses the arguments that helped shape the policy. Alva Myrdal, one of the greatest feminists of Sweden, was a “principal advocate” of forced sterilizations, and her ideas were greatly influential in shaping the controversial policy (Ekerwald 2001). The method was one of many radical ideas presented in the work Crisis in the Population Question, which was written by Alva and Gunnar Myrdal to address the societal issue of low nativity rate (G. Myrdal & A. Myrdal 1934: p. 7-14). One of the arguments advanced to justify such a policy was the idea that the technological progress that society had seen necessitated a general increase in the “quality of the people”. The authors argue that in times of dramatic population growth, the question of “quality” is neglected, resulting in much of the populace only qualifying as “cannon fodder”. However, with technological progress comes a higher demand of quality of the populace, as physical labor is gradually being replaced with automation. “All of us, consciously and unconsciously, are progressing in the same direction: To rationalize and complicate the means of production and the entirety of human existence, and therefore increase the quality assurance of ourselves and our fellow people” (G. Myrdal & A. Myrdal 1934: p. 205-206). As such, forced sterilization becomes an effective means of reducing the amount of “cannon fodder” present in our populace, such as the feebleminded, those with bodily defects, weaklings, prostitutes, vagrants, alcoholics, and vagrants (G. Myrdal & A. Myrdal 1934: 215-217).

This policy was undertaken in a democratic country and advocated by a feminist who produced several radical ideas for the betterment of the lives of women. Yet such a violation of human rights and dignity was not justified on the basis of a racist discourse that served to dehumanize a certain group of people; rather, it was “economic discourse [that] played an important role in creating support of compulsory sterilization among government leadership, experts and public opinion” (Nordensvard 2013). It is here where the necessity of dignity
becomes apparent; a guarantee of the person’s absolute worth, and a shield against interests that would undertake projects that we will inevitably look back on with regret.

Unfortunately, as much as the concept of dignity resonates with us deeply and evokes a strong emotional response, it has been rightly criticized as vague and “mercurial” (Neal 2013), as made evident by Elshtain’s unclear conceptualization of the term (Elshtain 2004); so much that it has been argued that it cannot be taken seriously in any ethical or legal capacity (Neal 2013). However, I argue that this makes going back to the roots of the term in its relation to democracy by turning to Kant’s conceptualization worthwhile due to its clarity to modern conceptions of dignity.

As such, while one may question how relevant Kant’s perspective on transhumanism would be, given that there is naturally going to be a clash given the utilitarian perspective that most transhumanists adopt (Levin 2014). Yet not only did Kant’s conception of autonomy make a great part of the democratic thought of the Enlightenment that proved essential for liberal democracy, he also helped shape the modern idea of dignity (Ober 2012), which in turn related to his concept of autonomy. This paper thus intends to expand upon Dévédec’s claim that transhumanism represents a reversal of the Enlightenment philosophy and its contribution to democracy by examining the movement from the perspective of Kantian dignity. What shall be revealed is that dignity in its absolute form has been neglected in the transhumanism in favor for the supremacy of the individual’s inclination. While problems with the Kantian dignity shall be discussed under the “Conclusion” section, the concept is worthwhile not solely for its theoretical clarity, but also as a starting point for the discussion on what transhumanism means from a perspective of dignity. It shall thus be further argued that the expanding upon the notion of dignity should become a greater priority in the bioethics discussion as well as for democracies in general, as it may serve as a useful marker for what manner of enhancements should or should not be allowed.
1.3 Methodology

The paper will take the form of a critical argumentation analysis from a Kantian perspective, with specific attention given to the second formulation of the categorical imperative. The object of analysis will be several works representing transhumanism. In the critical argumentation analysis, given our adopted perspective, there shall be a particular emphasis on the premise of the arguments advocating the necessity of enhancement, rather than on the implementation of said enhancements or the methods required. The reasons for this is Kant’s own demand that moral philosophy should be focused \textit{a priori}, and not look to empirical factors that could distort the matter. In addition, Kant also pointed out that the reason behind an action, regardless of its effects, would likewise determine whether or not it would become an intrinsically good action. He condemned conformity, saying that laws should be followed because of what the law represents, not merely to avoid consequences of breaking it (Kant 2002: p.5-6). He presents an example of a merchant, who would offer the same prices to every customer, and in so doing he conforms to a duty of fairness towards his customers. However, he may also abide by this duty to gain affection, which in turn may translate into an advantage. On the basis of such an incentive, it would no longer be an intrinsically good action (Kant 2002: p.13).

As shall be seen, most of the arguments advanced by transhumanists are of a conditional nature, hence not universal in a way which would be required to attain “autonomy”. As such, the question going forward will be whether or not the solutions proposed by transhumanists can subsist with the autonomy of the will.

1.3.1 Assumptions and application

Though it would it be desirable to say that adopting a Kantian perspective and analyzing the subject matter at hand would be a straightforward matter, this is not the case. As Ronald M. Green have commented on the ambiguity of some of Kant’s formulations, calling them “murky”. Likewise, they are colored by the conservatism and the biases of the time, such as condemnation of extramarital sex or homosexuality (Green 2001).

As such, it should be noted that the Kantian approach of this paper bears with it the intention of providing a critical perspective on the transhumanist agenda that is less dependent on
presumptions in the form of purposiveness of nature or Christian theology. The reason for this is to make the concept of dignity and the second formulation of the categorical imperative an attractive concept for bioethics; a concept that can act as a counterpoint to the utilitarian leanings of transhumanism. However, adopting and interpreting Kant’s moral theory becomes a balancing act, for one can question to what extent one can interpret and modify Kant’s moral theory before it can no longer qualify as being Kantian. Ultimately, however, the purpose of the Kantian perspective adopted in this paper is not necessarily to advocate that modern society should adopt the moral universalism that the perspective demands: Rather, our ambition here is to ultimately link Kantianism to democracy and to argue that, despite the problems inherent in Kant’s definition and theory, his moral philosophy provide a useful starting point for developing a concept that can delineate what enhancements should be desirable for us as democratic citizens.

An essential point is the coming discussion – given that we shall be speaking of adapting the human (biological) being – is that Kant’s view on the body. Speaking from the second formulation, he provides an example of someone seeking to end one’s life (Kant 2002: p. 47):

If he destroys himself to flee from a burdensome conditions, then he makes use of a person merely as a means… The human being, however, is not a thing, hence not something that can be used merely as a means, but must in all his actions always be considered as an end in itself. Thus I cannot dispose of the human being in my own person, so as to maim, kill, or corrupt him.

This argument presumes that the body (given maim… corrupt) is synonymous with the “human being”, or that he body is the extension of the rational being and hence cannot be harmed. As such, despite my own wishes and desires for my own body, I cannot treat it as merely a tool for the service of my inclinations. Given the requirement of universalization and that I cannot use it as a means for whatever desire I have, the fact that it is my own body gives me no special authority to use it in a harmful manner.

As to what “corrupt” entails, one could speculate. However, the interpretations going forward will be that permanent modifications to the body cannot be tolerated unless it serves to preserve the person in question. However, it would be intuitively odd to consider shaving one’s beard or cutting one’s hair to be corruption of the human being. Corruption therefore will refer to modifications to a person that entail some degree of permanence and
irreversibility. Nevertheless, even an emphasis on permanence will not resolve all the problems that come with this idea of bodily modification.

Considering our desire to make Kant’s moral philosophy attractive for the bioethics, one may question why this paper would adopt Kant’s comparatively conservative view on the body and its relation to the end it represents. However, to dispute Kant’s view on the body and its relationship to the self, one would have to accurately delineate a dividing line between the self and the body that would sufficiently justify seeing the body as a tool of the self that is ripe for modification, instead of seeing it as an extension. Such a task is far beyond the scope of this paper, and the safer assumption (and one more faithful to Kant) is to accept the premise that the body represents an extension of the end, and thus cannot be treated in whichever way we want. This will also have some interesting implications when discussing transhumanism, as shall be further discussed under the “Conclusion” section along with the problems on the emphasis of the permanence of body modifications.

1.3.2 Sources

In describing Kant’s moral philosophy, we have turned to Allen W. Wood and J.B Schneewind’s translation of Immanuel Kant’s *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*, as well as Mary C. Smith’s translation of *Answering the Question: What is Enlightenment?*. There is naturally a weakness in interpreting someone else’s translation of Kant’s work, but we hope to overcome this concern by displaying a sensitivity to possible translation issues (see the “Menschlichkeit” discussion under “A Kantian Defense of Transhumanism?” subsection).

With this theoretical lens, we shall critically analyze the transhumanist philosophy, represented here by several prolific writers. These include John Harris in his work *Enhancing evolution: the ethical case for making better people*, James Hughes in his work *Citizen Cyborg: why democratic societies must respond to the redesigned human of the future*, Ingmar Person and Julian Savelescu in two articles that are derivative of their work in *Unfit for the Future: The Need for Moral Enhancement*, David Pearce in his internet manifesto *Hedonistic Imperative*, and finally S. Matthew Liao, Anders Sandberg, and Rebecca Roache, represented in their article *Human Engineering and Climate Change*. In addition, the paper
will also address Martin Gunderson’s claim that Kantian moral philosophy is reconcilable with human engineering (Gunderson 2007).

One may naturally raise the objection that the quantity of analyzed works will not be sufficient enough to make a conclusive statement on transhumanism as a whole, and its compatibility with the second formulation of the categorical imperative. Therefore, the sample size will not be large enough to be representative. However, it is primarily the nature of the arguments that we are interested in, not in the frequency with which they appear within the field of bioethics philosophy. As such, while the chosen number of different authors advancing the transhumanist (as defined earlier) arguments might seem lacking, they are no doubt some of the more influential writers to such an extent that the sample will sufficiently represent the core arguments we seek to address, specifically those identified by Tom Koch. Ultimately, we will proceed with the assumption that the core beliefs analyzed and their representation by the chosen authors – regardless of their positions within the movement or society in general - will be sufficient to make a generalized statement about the transhumanist movement, and how they relate to democracy.
2 Transhumanism: A Kantian Analysis

To introduce this section, we shall do a brief overview of the arguments that unite the writers and philosophers that are categorized as part of the transhumanist movement in his paper.

As mentioned, Koch has identified several core beliefs of which three will prove most interesting to us. The first, and arguably the most essential of which, is “that human biology can be improved through a range of technologies that will eliminate natural deficits in individuals and thus, eventually, the species in general”. The other beliefs relevant to our purposes here is related to the role of science in this quest, namely that “science can fix our failings” and “that the scientifically enlightened know which human characteristics are desirable and which are not, what should be promoted and what should be eliminated from the individual life and from humanity-at-large” (Koch 2010). While the question of enhancement will be the primary focus of this paper, the latter beliefs become relevant in the discussion of what the transhumanist ideas mean for democratic citizens.

2.1 Hypothetical Imperative: Transhumanism and Utilitarianism

Given the utilitarian starting point of most transhumanists, it should come as no surprise that most of the arguments depend of the prospect of increasing happiness. The general reasoning is that more means better; the greater the capacities of the citizens, the greater the opportunities to a better life. For instance, Hughes argues for the widespread distribution of cognitive enhancement technologies: “The more intelligent the citizens, the more capable they will be at understanding their own interests, understanding the political process and effectively organizing” (Hughes 2004: p. 42). This in service of what truly matters in our lives, namely “to be happy, to reduce our pains and increase our joy and fulfillment. It seems obvious that the ethical goal for society should be to make life as fantastic for as many people as possible…” (Hughes 2004: p. 44).

It should thus come as no surprise that most of the reasoning behind the need for enhancing ourselves would qualify as hypothetical imperatives, given their conditional nature and the justification that they would serve a specific end, usually tied to our inclinations.

An example of this would be Hughes’s argument for anti-obesity drugs: “The basic cause of [the] obesity [epidemic] is that we have bodies designed to spend hours walking around the
savanna every day, and brains that find easy access to fats, sugars and carbohydrates irresistible. Only safe and cheap genetic and pharmaceutical therapies can successfully stop the deadly worldwide rise of obesity” (Hughes 2004: p. 19-20). There may not have been a need for such technologies a thousand years ago, but the conditions of modern society make such means necessary and desirable. In similar vein, David Pearce argues in his internet-manifesto *Hedonistic Vision* that human suffering is strictly biological, and that it is a “legacy-wetware of our evolutionary past”. In service of our inclination in the form of our happiness, it is proposed that nanotechnology and genetic engineering will allow us to experience perpetual bliss; that pain – of both mental and the physical variety - is “destined to disappear into evolutionary history” and that “malaise will be replaced by the biochemistry of bliss” (Pearce 2003).

The arguments are therefore not formed on objective and universal grounds that would be necessary for them to qualify as categorical imperatives. Thus, they cannot be considered moral obligations.

2.2 A Kantian Defense of Transhumanism?

This does not mean the methods advocated by transhumanists would not be desirable on amoral grounds, however, nor that it is not possible to argue for a transhumanist agenda on other grounds. For instance, one could argue in favor of the transhumanism on the basis of the second formulation of the categorical imperative, given Kant’s emphasis on the duty towards developing one’s talents and natural gifts. He constructs an example of a man who is naturally endowed, but has no desire to expand upon his talents. Instead, he resorts to idleness, laziness, and enjoyment (Kant 2002: p. 39-40). Using the second formulation – as humanity as an end in itself – he writes (Kant 2002: p. 48):

[I]t is not enough that the action does not conflict with humanity in our person as end in itself; it must also harmonize with it. Now in humanity there are predispositions towards greater perfection, which belongs to ends of nature in regards to the humanity in our subject; to neglect these would at most be able to
subsist with the *preservation* of humanity as end in itself, but not with the *furthering* of this end.  

The second formulation thus contains a positive duty. It is not simply enough to refrain from using other rational beings as means to an end, but also to develop and cultivate the talents within us. The act of enhancement itself becomes desirable on universal and objective grounds, and hence desirable regardless to what end it serves. This is what Martin Gunderson argues, saying that “Kant’s moral philosophy provides support for genetic engineering”, on the basis of one having a duty to “cultivate our natural perfection” (Gunderson 2007).

There are however issues that makes this argument unlikely. The basis for Kant’s argument of self-cultivation seems tied to idea of “ends of nature”, which is made more apparent in the discussion of the example from the perspective of the first formulation of the categorical imperative. While making negligence of one’s talents a universal law is not unimaginable, and that nature could still subsist in accordance with such a law, Kant objects that (Kant 2002: p. 39-40: My emphasis):

“[I]t is impossible for him to **will** that [not cultivating one’s talent] should become a universal law of nature… For as a rational being he necessarily wills that all the faculties in him should be developed, because they are serviceable and given to him **for all kinds of possible aims**.”

The reason we cannot neglect our talents and natural endowments is because they have been gifted to us for a reason. The argument seems to presuppose that nature (or God) has acted with intelligence, and to not use what has been given to us is to squander such a gift. This idea is made explicit earlier, where he states: “In the natural predispositions of an organized being, i.e., a being arranged purposively for life, we assume as a principle that no instrument is to be encountered in it for any end except that which is the most suitable to and appropriate for it” (Kant 2002: p. 10-11). It seems contradictory to justify changes to our natural capabilities and

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1 Important to note is that the usage of humanity (originally *Menschlichkeit*) does not imply the collective of human beings, but is rather synonymous with “rational nature”; our capacity to set ends. Kant urged caution that we should not link the intrinsic worth of human beings to their particularity of their “human essence”, for rational nature (humanity) could possibly exist in non-humans (Woodland and Schneewind 2002: p. 47). The argument is not thus tied to the essentialist debate that often dominates the discussion about transhumanism (Levin 2014 – 2).
endowments on the grounds that organized beings are created with purposiveness, leading us to intervene with nature’s intent for ourselves. The more plausible course of action following such an assumption would be to refrain from intervening with the composition of a human being altogether.

The idea of justifying moral principles based on the intent of nature, however, is not attractive, especially not to transhumanists. That said, Gunderson advances further arguments in favor of a Kantian genetic engineering on the basis of happiness – the pursuit of which Kant did elevate as an “indirect” duty (Kant 2002: p. 14-15) - Gunderson claims that, given that Kant argues that so-called “affects” (negative emotions that can obstruct one’s rational reflection) can obstruct moral agency, there is cause to intervene and enhance the moral agency of human beings by making them happier: Insofar as genetic engineering can help to accomplish such things, the imperfect duty to seek the happiness of others and various indirect duties provide a reason to pursue it (Gunderson 2007).

As it may be apparent, one has to question the arguments advanced by Gunderson on the basis of whether or not they can truly be deemed “Kantian” in nature. The primacy which is given to happiness seems strangely utilitarian, given that Kant was careful to emphasize the separation of inclinations from moral theory (Kant 2002: p. 14) and that moral theories based on the primacy of happiness could not be sustained because of “the problem of determining, certainly and universally, what action will promote happiness… is fully insoluble”, as “happiness is an ideal not of the reason but of imagination” (Kant 2002: 35). Likewise, Gunderson’s reasoning seems heavily guided by the effects of the supposed act of genetic engineering (consequentialist, if you will), something which – tied to the previous point – cannot be the reason why an action is moral, given that morality is established a priori. Hence, it must be blind to the effects it can cause; the action (or the law) must be good in itself (Kant 2002: p. 3-5, 10-12, 16-17, 32-33). While certain questions can be raised as to how the indirect duty to seek one’s happiness can be justified on the fact that the “lack of contentment… can easily become a temptation to the violation of duties” (Kant 2002: p. 15) when moral actions cannot be grounded on inclinations or justified on the basis of their aftermath, this contradiction alone cannot account for the Gunderson’s interpretation of Kant. Rather, it is a problem of priority, where happiness and its effects are given such an elevated status to the point where one question why the theory should even be deemed Kantian.
Thus the act of genetic engineering cannot be morally justified on the motive that it could bring about happiness, as such could be “brought about by other causes” (Kant 2002: p. 16-17). Likewise, if we look to Hughes’s argument of intelligent people being more likely to understand their own interests (Hughes 2007: p. 42), its desirability is contingent on such actually being the following effect. This would not qualify as a moral imperative, since it would force us to examine the action *posteriori*, and thus we would no longer operate in the realm of “pure” philosophy which is required for moral philosophy (Kant 2002: p. 16-17).

2.3 Imperative of Skill and the Ambiguous Worth of Traits

Kant recognized that capacity (or skill) to achieve an end only has worth in relation to the established end, not intrinsic value. The judging of the worth of a desired “command” (based on one’s reason) – given a specific goal in mind - hinges on the effect to which it achieves its desired aim; this being what Kant calls “imperative of skill”. He further writes that (Kant 2002: 31-32):

> Whether the end is rational or good is not the question here, but only what one has to do in order to achieve them. The precepts for the physician, how to make his patient healthy in a well-grounded way, and for the poisoner, how to kill him with certainty, are to this extent of equal worth, since each serves its aim perfectly.

Likewise, Kant raised this point when discussing the worth of qualities. While some such as courage or resoluteness can be desirable, but they can become “evil and harmful” if the character that inhabits these is not good (Kant 2002: p. 9). He writes that (Kant 2002: p. 10):

> Moderation in affects (negative emotions) and passions, self-control, and sober reflection not only are good for many aims, but seem even to constitute a part of the *inner* worth of a person; yet they lack much in order to be declared good without limitation… For without the principles of a good will they can become extremely evil, and the cold-bloodedness of a villain makes him not only far more dangerous but also immediately more abominable in our eyes than he would have been held without it.

It is exactly traits like these that Persson and Savulescu mean to target with their proposed solution to the deficient morality of the human being in the form of moral enhancement. They
write that cowardice, for instance, is a trait that could prevent a person from acting morally, as would “weakness of will”. Their proposed solution is to weaken “strong dispositions that are liable to interfere with action on the central moral dispositions of altruism and a sense of justice” (Persson and Savulescu 2013). Yet weakening said disposition could also result in a stronger desire to partake in what Kant would deem “evil”; courage could be transformed into a cold-bloodedness, and hence it is not intrinsically desirable (Kant 2002: p. 9-10).

Rational beings, on the other hand, do not have worth based on their relative value towards an end; they are of an “absolute worth” (Kant 2002: 45-46). Gunderson’s desire to “enhances talents and capacities that enable one to pursue morally justifiable goals” (Gunderson 2007) is misguided not only on the basis of the value of talents and capacities being relative, but also because a rational being cannot enhance moral agency; a rational being is a moral agent on the basis of its inherent rationality and autonomy. Either one has the capacity to set ends for oneself, or one does not.

The transhumanists thus seem to place an inherent value in the act of enhancement itself. This is explicit in Harris’s work Enhancing evolution: the ethical case for making better people, where Harris argues that “[i]n terms of human functioning, an enhancement is by definition an improvement on what went before. If it wasn’t good for you, it wouldn’t be an enhancement” (Harris 2010: p. 26). In truth, enhancement can only be an improvement relative to something else, be it an end or compared to other, unenhanced beings; something can only “better” than others when compared and measured against a specific aim.

The human biology, or the human being, is thus deficient in relation to the transhumanist agenda in question that is being advanced. An example is a solution - advanced by S. Matthew Liao, Anders Sandberg, and Rebecca Roache - to the problem of climate change that involves “the biomedical modification of humans to make them better at mitigating climate change”. The authors of the paper in which the solution was advanced emphasize the point that “engineering potentially offers an effective means of tackling climate change”. Some examples are given of what the potential of the technology is, including making people intolerant to meat through pharmacological means. A more radical example is the idea of “making humans smaller”, on the basis that (Liao, Sandberg and Roache 2012):

> Human ecological footprints are partly correlated with our size. We need a certain amount of food and nutrients to maintain each kilogram of body mass.
This means that, other things being equal, the larger one is, the more food and energy one requires.

In other words, our current body structure is deficient for the purposes of the political end of halting the climate change. The human being must thus be adapted to serve this end.

Similar to this argument is the one advanced by Ingmar Persson and Julian Savulescu, namely that human beings, as we are today, are morally inadequate to deal with the threats that we face today (Persson and Savulescu 2015):

Our moral psychology has been adapted to life in small, close-knit societies with primitive technology, in which human beings have lived for virtually all of their history. This is reflected in the fact that we are psychologically myopic, that is, disposed to care more about what happens in the near future to ourselves and some individuals who are near and dear to us. We are also incapable of responding adequately to the suffering of larger collectives.

The authors hence argue that this deficiency be corrected, and that “it is imperative that we investigate the possibility of moral enhancement by means of genetic and biomedical techniques” (Persson and Savulescu 2015). Liao, Sandberg and Roache likewise provide an example of the potential of genetic engineering similar to Persson and Samulescu’s “moral enhancement”, which entails pharmacological enhancement of altruism and empathy: “While altruism and empathy have large cultural components, there is evidence that they also have biological underpinnings. This suggests that modifying them by human engineering could be promising” (Liao, Sandberg, and Roache 2012).

The focus on adapting the human being – seen as deficient – into something better; more ecological, more moral, stronger, smarter – emphasizes the instrumental capacities of the human being. Hughes, for instance, claims that humans are all “biological equals” is a vacuous and empty claim, since there is such variance in our capabilities as a result of our natural endowments. He points out that patriarchy, for instance, is a concept dependent on the biological differences between men and women. By reducing the biological differences between individuals – be in gender or abilities - there will no longer be the biological basis for social inequality; the result will be a more equal society (Hughes 2007: p. 195-196).
Yet if we are to adopt the Kantian perspective, we must recognize that what marks us as human beings in the first place is our rationality, and thus our morality – that which makes us ends in ourselves. As such, we have *dignity*, which is elevated about the relative worth of any skill or emotion. Beings with dignity is above relative worth, and they have no equivalent; such ends – human beings – are thus of absolute and unconditional worth (Kant 2002: p. 52-53). So regardless of our relative, instrumental worth - regardless of our capacities – we have value simply as human beings. To admit any deficiency that necessitates enhancement is to elevate the instrumental value more than the dignity of the human being. In so doing, the principle that we cannot treat any rational beings as means is violated.

Important to reiterate here is that this too applies regardless if a person wishes to undergo bodily modifications on his own terms, or if it state ordained. This same limiting principle applies to both, and thus it does not matter whose inclination or end is being served.

### 2.4 Different Types of Enhancement

A natural objection – and one that is of much focus in the transhumanist debate (Levin 2014) – is that “enhancement” is a vague term (Harris 2010: p. 34-46), even when speaking in terms of bodily changes. One could argue that the act of physical exercise is “improving” your strength or agility, and as far as enhancement goes, such an exercise seems fairly uncontroversial. Condemning all enhancement modifying our bodily capacities seems excessive and unsustainable. To answer this, I refer to the notion of *permanence* introduced earlier; should the enhancement bear some manner of irreversibility to it, it cannot be permitted.

However, there are enhancements involving permanent changes to the body of the human being that few would object to. For instance, Harris points to vaccines, which do indeed “change” the human body to be more resistant to infectious diseases. Hence, there is nothing inherently wrong with the concept of improving oneself (Harris 2010: p. 35). A distinction, however, is that it would indeed be an enhancement, but it does not target one’s instrumental capacities nor adapt the body towards a specific end. Rather, the aim of the enhancement is the *preservation* of the affected individual. Kant, in discussing suicide from the second formulation of the categorical imperative, discusses that maiming, killing, or corrupting a human (body) is to use the person solely as means to an end. However, an admitted exception would be, for example, to amputate a limb to preserve the person in question. It is a moral
action, since it results in the preservation of an end, and is thus objective (Kant 2002: p. 47). It is on this basis that an “enhancement” such as a vaccine could be encouraged.

On this basis, we must also admit that genetic engineering used to combat diseases and extend the lifespans of human beings must not only be permissible, but seen as actions that are inherently good, since they aid in the preservation of ends. However, this assumes that there can be a clear distinction between enhancements that serves to preserve an end, which would be morally mandated, and enhancements that emphasize the instrumental capacities of the human being, which would mean reducing the human being to means and would thus not be permitted. This would hinge on a concept of health that can accurately provide a distinction between the two, which is problematic since such concepts are inevitably relative and shaped by societal beliefs. This discussion is important, but it will not be addressed further here; it shall instead be brought up under the paper’s “Conclusion” section.

2.5 Summary of Findings

Many of the arguments advanced in favor of the transhumanist agenda – to enhance the human being beyond its biological constraints – are of a conditional nature, hence they only qualify as hypothetical imperatives. They are not objective and intrinsically good, and hence cannot be elevated to the level of categorical imperative. Likewise, they cannot be justified on the basis of the duty to cultivate one’s talents and “further one’s humanity”, since this argument presumes that nature has acted with purposiveness, which would contradict the desire to enhance and eliminate the deficiencies of our biology. The enhancements that transhumanists desire would empower the instrumental and relative values of a person, while Kant emphasized that rational beings have an unconditional, absolute worth in the form of dignity. In advancing the necessity of the adaption of a human being towards a specific aim or political vision, the person is reduced to merely means to an end. An exception would be enhancements that do not adapt a rational being towards a specific aim or end, but rather ensure its preservation.
3. Conclusions

3.1 The Importance of Dignity

As shown, Kantian moral philosophy – specifically the second formulation of the categorical imperative – is not reconcilable with transhumanism. The grounds for which one would emphasize the need to enhance the human being – whether it is because he is deficient and must be adapted to what he should be, or that it is seen purely as an improvement – all assign moral value to the instrumental capacities of the human being, which are of relative worth; in Kantian philosophy, the rational being itself has an unconditional, absolute worth in the form of its dignity.

It is dignity that is the essential concept which democracy owes to Kant. Regardless of whether or not transhumanism acknowledges Kant’s universalism, if they wish to consider themselves part of the democratic tradition, they must acknowledge dignity. As Josiah Ober demonstrates, dignity it is the third core value of democracy (along with liberty and equality). Without the recognition of a person’s inner worth, a democracy must be “fragile” (Ober 2012):

Like equality and liberty, dignity stands in a reciprocal relationship to democracy, sustaining and sustained by it. Dignity makes democracy robust: Democratic institutions defend dignity, whereas the habits of dignified citizens provide behavioral foundations for defending democracy and for improving institutions over time.

3.2 The Problems with Dignity

Yet the Kantian concept of dignity as we have advanced it in this paper is not without its problems. Mary Neal has criticized the Kantian dignity for being paradoxical; the appeal of the concept of dignity is, after all, its universality, and that every person has it. Yet the grounds for which the grounds for dignity is justified is based on the rationality (alternatively, “the humanity in oneself”), meaning one’s capacity to set ends. Ultimately, then, capacity – which is a relative notion that dignity is meant to offset - comes back into question, for there are human beings who are not autonomous (at least not in the traditional sense; capable of making decisions by themselves). It would seem particularly callous to reduce them to mere
things on such a basis, not to mention the notion of dignity would no longer be universal among humans. Likewise, the idea of dignity depending on the autonomy of the individual may risk leading to a conflation of the two notions to such an extent where the idea becomes indistinguishable (Neal 2012).

An additional problem hinted at earlier is the notion that enhancements can be justified on the basis of “the preservation of the end” (the person in question), which ties the question to health. Brown has raised the difficulties in answering the questions (Brown 2001):

“‘What is a defect, what is a disease, and how does one define normal and abnormal, healthy and sick?’ The problem defining these terms are in some ways insoluble. Sharp lines are impossible to draw between what counts as normal human variation and what counts as abnormal variations indicative of disease.”

Likewise, basing it on “defects that restrict opportunities” is also problematic, since the line between what is considered a flaw in health is greatly informed by societal belief (Brown 2001). An example of this is the shoplifting epidemic taking place towards the end of the nineteenth century: given that the largest group of offenders was middle-class women, the seemingly irrational behavior (as the women were affluent, and thus were not considered to have a motive) was explained as a mental illness in the form of kleptomania (Abelson 1989).

The health issue may also conflict with the idea of “bodily modifications”. If my arm is severed, some medical intervention would be necessary to stop my imminent death by excessive blood loss, as it would be justified by the duty to preserve ends. However, if it was possible to restore my severed arm, this would be a secondary priority, but nevertheless a desirable one, even though it would entail some degree of permanent bodily modification. It is hard to see Kant argue against this; it is more likely that he would see the initial damage to myself as that of a “maiming or corruption”, and that restoring me to my initial state of function is merely to right a wrong. This despite Kant’s own emphasis that health was not an intrinsic good in of itself (Kant 1785/2002: p. 9).

Still, other issues remain that can potentially make our used conception of dignity come across conservative and illiberal in many ways. After all, even with the emphasis on the permanence and the irreversibility of the bodily modification (or corruption), it is hard to see
why a tattoo or piercing would be morally problematic. Likewise, assessing the “permanence” of a modification as a basis for its desirability does not make for a solid foundation. On one hand, piercings can be removed in a manner not too dissimilar to clothing. On the other hand, it may scar the person in such a way where it would be impermissible according to Kant’s second formulation of the categorical imperative. It seems warped that the notion of dignity – often highlighted as a shield against acts forced upon the individual by external forces – would provide such restrictions upon what the person may do with one’s body; it seems contradictory to the notion of autonomy.

3.3 The Potential of Dignity

Yet the objection that dignity infringes upon the person’s own desires to use one’s body as one wishes must admittedly miss the point of the notion of dignity altogether. After all, what makes the Kantian moral philosophy and its associated notion of dignity such a powerful concept in its prohibition of acts such as suicide is that the value of a human being is absolute and unflinching, regardless of whatever inclinations a subject may harbor; whether one is considered “cannon fodder” by the Myrdals, if one is “unfit” for Persson and Savulescu’s future, or one simply wishes to end one’s life based on one’s own inclinations, the notion of dignity is something that cannot be surrendered and is non-negotiable; a threshold which cannot be crossed.

An enlightening example to highlight the potential usefulness – and the potential issues with Harris’s arguments for enhancements - is the reported increase of plastic surgeries performed in in the South Korean capital of Seuol, a service especially to the capital’s the youth. In the article, Marx describes the peer pressure to undergo a surgery to prevent oneself from being left behind by remaining “unimproved”. The practice likewise extends to adolescents: “A typical high-school graduation gift for a Korean teen-ager is either a nose job or a blepharoplasty, also called a double-eyelid surgery (the insertion of a crease in the eyelid to make the eye look bigger), which is by far the most common procedure performed in Korea” (Marx 2015).

It is unlikely any transhumanists see anything problematic with this trend; after all, if an adolescent is gifted a plastic surgery as a present, it is likely that he or she wants it. Likewise, the parents most likely experience a sense of satisfaction in giving their child something he or she desires. It does not matter how these wants of each party is based on, for as long as there
is no coercion involved, there is no reason to call such a practice into question. Yet from the perspective of the Kantian dignity, this practice must appear problematic for two reasons. First, Harris claims that enhancements ought to be defended as they are “absolute goods rather than positional goods. I defend them because they are good for people not because they confer advantages on some but not on others” (Harris 2010: p. 41-42). As discussed earlier, however, enhancements can only be relative in value. There may have been a time when the technology – in this case, plastic surgery – was first introduced and made a definite improvement on someone’s appearance that led to an increase in self-esteem. However, if we are to believe what has been reported, the culture surrounding the enhancement has undoubtedly taken on a competitive spirit, which in turn lessens its position and effect as an “absolute good”.

The second issue – and the most important – is that while the enhancement may serve to satisfy the needs of the parties involved, it comes with a degree of instrumentalization. It modifies the person towards a specific end; to adapt them to be more in line with the beauty standards of the society they find themselves in. By emphasizing the “perfectibility” of the person, one compromises the unconditional value of the person. The point is not that there did not exist notions of beauty and ugliness prior to plastic surgery, but the availability of the technology has led to an environment in Seoul which suggests that, rather than having accepted the variances in appearances, there is an expectation to adapt the individual to the societal expectations of beauty (Marx 2015).

Harlan Hahn’s comments on Peter Singer’s criticisms towards “disability advocates” becomes interesting in light of this discussion. Singer had endorsed a position which allowed parents to terminate their child should it display signs of severe disabilities. Hahn, a paraplegic himself, criticized Singer for having a “poor understand of disability in modern society” and disputed that, despite his own disabilities, he would not want to be “cured” and that his “60 years of everyday experience with a wheelchair has given me valuable ideas and positive insights that I probably would never have had as a nondisabled person”. While he is careful to acknowledge that this is not likely the attitude of every disabled person would have (Hahn 2006), the famed “disability paradox” confirms that, despite experiencing severe disabilities, most of the studied persons reported a “good or excellent quality of life” (Albrecht and Devlieger 1998). Another study also echoes Hahn’s point of an existing a bias towards people with disabilities. The study suggests that healthy people “often overestimate the emotional
impact that chronic illnesses and disability will have on their lives” (Ubel et al. 2005). Hahn ultimately stresses that “impairments or limitations can be ameliorated in an accessible environment”, something which Singer fails to realize (Hahn 2006).

This echoes Dévédec’s point that the concept of human perfectibility must entail a social and political dimension, and that we must adapt society to fit the human, not the other way around. The notion of dignity can certainly act as a powerful baseline that aids in this endeavor. However, by concluding the human being as deficient in relation to our world or a specific aim, be it because our evolution is always one step behind or because of other contingent factors, we reject the idea that the human has unconditional value. Instead of mastering our world and the objects in it to suit ourselves, we must adapt ourselves to existing conditions. The pursuit of perfection has been reduced to solely be a concept of technical mastery of nature, which much eventually include our own. As such, we have relinquished our part in this quest and left it in the hands of the scientists – be they biologist, bioethics, philosopher – to define our deficiencies and adapt us. The human being has been reduced to a means in the technoscientific pursuit of perfection (Dévédec 2018).

The human being cannot question authorities on what must be done to solve issues such as global warming, or to attain the universally desirable goal of “eradicate the suffering of all sentient life” (Pearce 2003). One of the arguments that Liao, Sandberg, and Roache advance in favor of genetic engineering of the human being to make it more eco-friendly is the resistance that comes with autonomy: “While reducing the consumption of red meat can be achieved through social, cultural means, people often lack the motivation or willpower to give up eating red meat even if they wish they could. Human engineering could help here” (Liao, Sandberg and Roache 2012). Pearce likewise assumes a dismissive tone of the autonomy, stating that the freedom we have today is not true, since we cannot choose our own “chemistry of consciousness”. Thus, “our own contemporary ‘choices’ are in any case oversold. In the current era, we may seem relatively biologically unconstrained… In fact, we can subsist only within the largely insensible confines of an extremely restrictive state space of psychochemical reactions” \(^2\) (Pearce 2003). In this bioreductionistic perspective, we are not

\(^2\) One cannot help but point out the paradox of this stance; given that we are trapped within a “chemistry of consciousness” that we did not choose and thus we are not free to make true choices, one has to wonder how it would be possible to freely choose another “chemistry of consciousness”,

33
autonomous beings, but rather just biological creatures that have yet to realize their true potential.

Similar in its dismissiveness of human autonomy is the inevitability thesis; that capitalism and liberalism combined with the facets of human nature that promote technological progress nullifies and invalidates any moral qualms about transhumanism (Baylis and Robert 2018). Our morality is irrelevant because transhumanism will prevail by due to the fixed conditions of our world and our nature.

If we truly wish to continue the idea of Enlightenment idea of perfectibility, we must recognize its political and social dimension (Dévédec 2018). We must bear the courage to question existing dogmas and beliefs. With respect to the notion of human dignity and the related autonomy, we cannot have the ambition to adapt the human being to fit any society; rather, we must see to shape a society in which all human beings – no matter their instrumental capacities or biological composition – have a place. One might scoff at this ambition, seeing it as naïve and unrealistic; for all the conceptualizations of what an ideal democratic society would look like, it is unlikely that any of them have been realized. Yet in making such a concession, we neglect not only the wisdoms of the Enlightenment that helped inform democratic thought, we also surrender our autonomy and our stature as a legislator of moral laws; our ability to change societal institutions. While we may never create the perfect society, the Enlightenment philosophers stressed the need for us to bear upon this ambition; that we must question existing truths and denaturalize present conditions (Dévédec 2018). We must do, as Kant suggested, to “have the courage to [our] own understanding” (Kant 1784). Therefore we must reject the inevitability thesis, for as rational beings with our inherent dignity, we are also moral agents; nothing is inevitable unless we will it to be.

3.4 Future Studies

Given the potential of a universal and absolute dignity in delineating the restrictions of enhancement that could otherwise prove morally problematic, it is recommended that further research delves into the conceptualization of the notion of dignity. At this time, the philosophical problems are too many to make the Kantian concept of dignity attractive to since presumably such a choice would have to be made while inhabiting an original “chemistry of consciousness”.

34
adopt. Nevertheless, while notion of dignity is at best murky in what exactly it entails, a more elaborated concept bears a potential that cannot be understated.
4 References


### 4.1 Internet Sources

