

The New Eugenics of Transhumanism: A Feminist Assessment

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Abstract

Transhumanists are futurists who aim to upgrade the human into a posthuman species by supporting the use of reproductive technologies. The transhumanists Nick Bostrom, John Harris, and Julian Savulescu are bioethics scholars who identify as “new” eugenicists. They disavow the beliefs and practices of the late nineteenth, early twentieth century—here referred to as the “old” eugenics. They claim that contrary to these outdated eugenic principles it is individuals, not governments, who should determine the use of biotechnology. However, the new eugenicists insist that human beings are obligated to pursue the posthuman. In this paper, I contend that the principles of the new eugenic movement are not identical, but still worryingly similar to those of the old eugenics. The individualism of the new eugenics does not change the fact that its implications are strikingly similar to the old eugenic ideal of the able-bodied person. The new eugenicists suggest that the posthuman state aspires for the transcendence of the human body, and the elimination of dependence and chronic pain. Hence, they argue for a moral obligation to use biotechnology to prevent the births of many people with conditions that they consider to be disabilities. The new eugenicists defend their claims by supporting an antiquated medical model of disability that solidifies their connection to the old eugenics, and conflates disability with genetics, disease, and impairment. The feminist disability theorist Melinda Hall has challenged their contentions with a cultural model of disability. This paper will use the feminist disability theorist Jackie Leach Scully’s position on vulnerability to lend support to Hall’s argument. Hall and Scully show that the new eugenic position on disability is ableist and untenable, and much closer to the ideals of the old eugenics than Bostrom, Harris, and Savulescu admit.

Introduction

1 Transhumanism is a futurist philosophy and global movement that is increasingly popular among scientists, scientifically literate philosophers, and social thinkers. Transhumanism is an extension and partial derivation of humanism. In “The Transhumanist FAQ”, the transhumanist Nick Bostrom, and other transhumanists, define humanism as a philosophy that values the human species and human individual. They claim that humanism involves a moral obligation to improve humanity with “rational thinking, freedom, tolerance, democracy, and concern for . . . fellow human beings” (Bostrom et al 4). However, Bostrom and the other transhumanists do not restrict their advocacy to humanistic methods, such as education and cultural development. Transhumanists endorse the use of “enhancement” technology to upgrade humans into “posthuman” beings with physical, cognitive, and moral faculties that supposedly exceed those of the humanist conception of humanity (Bostrom et al 5). Transhumanism is distinct from posthumanism, a philosophy that has roots in postmodern feminism and is also known as post-anthropocentrism. Posthumanists criticize humanist conceptions of humanity, on the grounds that they are hierarchical and specieist social constructions. The posthumanist concept of the

posthuman is one that transcends these hierarchies (Ferrando 29). The transhumanist concept of the posthuman on the other hand postulates a being with capacities that are (by transhumanist standards) so far superior to those of the humanist conceptions of humanity, that one cannot consider it a clear part of the same species (Bostrom et al 5).

2 Transhumanist visions of the posthuman are both conflicting and ambiguous. Bostrom and other transhumanists write that “[p]osthumans could be completely synthetic artificial intelligences, or they could be enhanced uploads . . . or they could be the result of making many smaller but cumulatively profound augmentations to a biological human” (Bostrom et al 5). Nevertheless, many of these visionaries believe that seeking the posthuman is not only permissible, but morally obligatory. Transhumanist conceptions of human enhancement can be as ambiguous as their accounts of the posthuman. Many transhumanists claim that human enhancement requires increasing capacities that are “intrinsically valuable” in humans, which they define as “health, cognitive abilities, and emotional well-being” (Bostrom et al 22). The enhancement technologies that interest the transhumanists range from artificial intelligence to biotechnology. In the twenty first century, many have focused on the recent developments in reproductive biotechnology, such as in-vitro fertilization (IVF) and preimplantation genetic diagnosis (PGD). IVF involves artificially creating embryos and implanting them into a person’s womb for gestation and birth. The pregnant person could be the resulting child’s intended parent, or a surrogate. PGD is a process by which potential parents screen the embryos they create through IVF for various traits before choosing the ones that they will implant in the womb (“Procreative Beneficence” 413).

The New Eugenicists

3 Bostrom famously supports a moral obligation to seek the posthuman through the use of IVF and PGD. John Harris and Julian Savulescu are two of the most influential transhumanist scholars to concur with him on this point (Hall xvi, xxviii). Bostrom is Professor of Philosophy and Director of the Future of Humanity Institute at Oxford University (Hall xxii). Harris is a Professor of Bioethics at the University of Manchester (Harris, “One principle”; Hall vii). Savulescu is editor-in-chief of the Journal of Medical Ethics, and director of the Oxford Uehiro Centre for Practical Ethics (Hall xxxi). In several works, Bostrom, Harris, and Savulescu admit to being “new” eugenicists (Sparrow 32). They all disavow what they term the “old” eugenics, a collection of pseudoscientific, perfectionist philosophies that sought to improve the health of the

human “race” and subjected people to state-sponsored reproductive coercion in the United States and Nazi Germany (Sparrow 32). One of the most violent atrocities that the old eugenicists committed in the name of their ideal was the forced sterilization of people considered “unfit” to reproduce, including disabled people (Hall 1: 5). The historical strains of the old eugenics were united in their visions of the ideal human being: a tall, able-bodied white man with blonde hair and blue eyes (Sparrow 35). The new eugenicists attempt to distinguish themselves from their predecessors by claiming that the use of enhancement technologies should be a matter of individual discretion. Governments and other entities cannot force people to use them. The new eugenicists present their case for individual choice as though it promotes the values of freedom, genetic diversity, and experimentation (Bostrom, “Transhumanist Values”).

Thesis

4 In this paper, I argue that the new eugenics is not identical, but still worryingly similar to the old. This paper uses feminist disability theory to explore the implications of the new eugenics for disabled people. The implications of the new eugenics mirror the old eugenic ideal of the able-bodied person, and the individualism that the new eugenicists espouse does not mitigate this ableism. The body of this paper opens with an overview of Bostrom, Harris, and Savulescu’s positions; it will highlight the resemblance between the new eugenics and the old. The second section discusses the feminist disability theorist Melinda Hall’s critique of the new eugenics. The final section uses the feminist disability theorist Jackie Leach Scully’s work on vulnerability to support Hall’s position and underscore the fact that the new eugenics is ableist.

5 The new eugenicists seek to transcend many limitations of the human body. They are averse to dependence and chronic pain and use a medical model of disability to support selection against embryos with conditions they see as disabilities. The medical model is essentialist and outdated, but prevalent in popular culture (Hall 2: 60). Feminist disability theorists have challenged it with social and cultural models of disability. The social and cultural models both hold that disability is a social construction (this paper will discuss their differences). Hall is a proponent of the cultural model. She uses it to critique the new eugenics (3: 121-130). This paper shows that Scully’s work on vulnerability lends support to Hall’s case against the new eugenics.

Bostrom, Harris, and Savulescu's Positions

6 An oft-neglected but important chapter in the history of the old eugenics is the deep commitment of some of its adherents to a particular kind of “transcendence of the body” (Hall 1: 4). In fact, the term “transhumanism” was coined in 1927 by Julian Huxley, a brother of Aldous Huxley, a biologist, and a staunch proponent of the old eugenics (1: 19). Huxley did not revoke his support for the old eugenics after World War II; he denounced the practices of the Nazi regime but sought to rehabilitate the image of the old eugenics. Huxley defended the old eugenics on the grounds that it was paramount and very possible for human beings to transcend their current parameters (1: 19-20). For Huxley, transhumanism was a principle within the old eugenic tradition that would realize the hitherto untouched possibilities of the human species (1: 20). The concept of transhumanism itself connects the new eugenics with the old. Like Huxley, the new eugenicists seek a particular kind of transcendence. Hence, they are averse to dependence and chronic pain.

7 Of the new eugenicists that this paper discusses, Bostrom provides the clearest illustration of the new eugenic quest for transcendence and aversion to dependence. Bostrom defines human enhancement as the “radical extension of human health-span, eradication of disease, elimination of unnecessary suffering, and augmentation of human intellectual, physical, and emotional capacities” (“Transhumanist Values”). A form of mind-body dualism undergirds this stance and emphasizes Bostrom’s discomfort with dependence. Bostrom has written many bioethics papers in favor of this position; however, in “Letter from Utopia” he makes his case through the medium of fiction. (Unlike the majority of transhumanist scholars, Bostrom does not restrict himself to academic writing. His works of fiction are seminal texts in transhumanist philosophical literature. They have been critiqued in the past by Hall and other disability theorists) (Hall xxviii, xxx). In “Letter from Utopia”, Bostrom writes to humanity from the perspective of a posthuman being. The posthuman claims to have transcended the dependent conditions of the human body and attained a blissful state. The posthuman urges humanity to become like it:

Your body is a death-trap . . . You are lucky to get seven decades of mobility; eight if you be Fortuna’s darling. That is not sufficient to get started in a serious way, much less to complete the journey. Maturity of the soul takes longer . . . In time, you will discover ways to move your mind to more durable media (“Letter from” 3).

Bostrom uses the terms “soul” and “mind” almost interchangeably, suggesting that the mind can exist outside the body. The body bogs the mind down, with its gradual loss of what he calls

mobility, and its tendency to become more obviously dependent with age. The mind can transcend the “biological shortcomings” of the dependent body, which for Bostrom include not only aging, but diseases and “feeble” memories and intellect (“Transhumanist Values”). Bostrom does not consider that the assumed independence of individuals without the dependent conditions he decries is a function of social forces. However, he suggests that even if the independence he observes in these individuals is an illusion, he wishes them to attain it through the use of enhancement technology. Bostrom holds that technologies can give human beings greater control over their bodies, including their metabolic rates. He claims that technologies can replicate the chemical and computational processes of the human brain and transform the mind into a computer upload. An uploaded mind may lengthen its life by duplicating itself, travel at the speed of light, and inhabit real and virtual worlds by controlling a robot proxy (“Transhumanist Values”).

8 Bostrom endorses an ethic of consequentialism that reveals a hostility to chronic pain. The posthuman being in “Letter from Utopia” entreats humanity to “[e]levate well-being!” by maximizing pleasure and minimizing pain (“Letter from” 6). Implicit in the words of the posthuman is a horror of chronic pain:

I will not speak of the worst pain and misery that is to be got rid of; it is too horrible to dwell upon, and you are already aware of the urgency of palliation . . . The roots of suffering are planted deep in your brain. Weeding them out and replacing them with nutritious crops of well-being will require advanced skills and instruments for the cultivation of your neuronal soil. But take heed, the problem is multiplex! All emotions have a natural function. Prune carefully lest you reduce the fertility of your plot. (“Letter from” 7)

Bostrom does not recommend eliminating pain that serves a discernible purpose in the human body. However, he thinks that human beings are programmed for other kinds of unnecessary pain—including chronic pain—and suffering. The feminist disability theorist Susan Wendell defines chronic pain as that which does not serve a purpose, and promises to persist indefinitely, intermittently, or unpredictably. Wendell finds that people sometimes cannot be rid of chronic pain (118-119). The conditions that Bostrom (and other transhumanists) wish to eliminate through gene therapy (including embryonic screening) can have symptoms that meet Wendell’s definition of chronic pain. They encompass conditions like cystic fibrosis, sickle cell anemia, and Huntington’s disease (Bostrom et al 8). Bostrom suggests that the human mind can transcend embodied experiences of chronic pain, as well as dependence. Bostrom’s quest for transcendence

is continuous with Huxley's old eugenic position. The new eugenic approach to disability stems directly from this desire to transcend the body. The next part of this section will discuss Harris and Savulescu's contributions to the new eugenic medical model of disability.

9 In "One principle and three fallacies of disability studies", Harris solidifies the connection between the new eugenics and the old, by revealing the essentialist and outdated aspects of the medical model. Like Bostrom, Harris is a consequentialist, and he is disturbed by the notion of gratuitous pain and suffering. Much like the old eugenicists, including Huxley, Harris insinuates that there is a moral obligation to prevent the births of disabled children, on the grounds that their conditions are guaranteed to increase the amount of "unnecessary suffering in the world" (Sparrow 34-35). Harris is also troubled by what he considers to be harm against human beings. Harris suggests that there is as strong a consequentialist obligation to prevent "harm" as there is to counteract pain and suffering. Harris refers to his version of the medical model as a "harmed condition" model of disability ("One principle" 384). He defines disability as "a condition that someone has a strong rational preference not to be in and one that is in some sense a harmed condition" ("One principle" 384). Harris defines a harmed condition as one which "if a patient was brought unconscious into the emergency department of a hospital in such a condition and it could be reversed or removed the medical staff would be negligent if they failed to [do so]" ("One principle" 384). This model of disability reflects the old eugenic assumption that disability is, by definition, an exclusively and inherently negative experience (Sparrow 34; Hall 1: 23). It is both essentialist and broad; it collapses the categories of disability, impairment, and disease into one. According to Hall, impairment is an experience associated with a particular medical condition, which may—or may not—lead to disability (Hall 2: 118, 122). Harris's portrayal of disability and impairment as pathologies reinforces the social stigma that many disabled people face.

10 Harris argues that a disability or harmed condition is "relative to one's rational preferences, conditions which one might define as harmful, and possible alternatives" (One principle" 384). By Harris's reasoning, a posthuman world could have very different definitions of normalcy than the human societies of today. However, Harris still downplays the role that social factors play in determining conditions that are defined (or even experienced) as harmful. Harris insinuates that deafness harms deaf people by preventing them from hearing spoken language and music. Deafness harms deaf people in his view, even if they live well and do not sense the harm (One principle" 384). Harris's perspective on deaf people is as outdated as the old

eugenic tendency to essentialize disability. Harris misrepresents the capacity ranges of many deaf people, who can and do experience spoken language and music. He also overvalues the actions that able-bodied people can perform and undervalues those which many deaf people engage in within their range of capacities. Able-bodied people have constructed the world to reward themselves, and disadvantage those who deviate from their norms (Lennard Davis 10). The harm that deaf people experience often stems not from their conditions, but from societies that pathologize and stigmatize them for deviating from normative standards. Harris reinforces the normative standards of the human body that generate this stigma. Thus, potential parents in a posthuman society that subscribe to his definition of harm might well select against conditions that have historically (and unfairly) been stigmatized, and eventually produce a world that is “remarkably” similar to the ideals of the old eugenics (Sparrow 35).

11 Savulescu concurs with Harris on the definition of disability, and further establishes the similarity of the new eugenics to the old (Savulescu & Kahane 1). Namely, Savulescu focuses more than Harris does on justifying a moral obligation to prevent the births of disabled children. In “Procreative Beneficence: Why We Should Select the Best Children”, Savulescu introduces an explicitly eugenic principle he calls Procreative Beneficence: “[potential parents] should select the child, of the possible children they could have, who is expected to have the best life, or at least as good a life as the others, based on the relevant, available information” (413). Savulescu claims that potential parents have a moral obligation to use IVF and PGD and select against what he terms “disease” genes (415). For Savulescu, “disease” genes cause “genetic disorders” or predispose people to the development of “diseases” (415). Savulescu’s position on disability is more explicitly essentialist than that of Harris. Savulescu places a great deal of emphasis on genetics, which he conflates with disease, impairment, and disability. He suggests that it is possible to rank the impact of different genomes in the environments in which they manifest (Sparrow 36).

12 Savulescu underscores the ableist associations that Harris and Bostrom make between harm, dependence, and chronic pain. Savulescu describes asthma as “bad” on the grounds that it is a lifelong condition and may require lifelong treatment with drugs such as steroids (417). He states that asthma can make people “wheel chair bound” with chronic obstructive airways disease (417). He assumes that people with dependent, chronically painful conditions like asthma experience them as harmful. Like Harris, he does not provide enough evidence that these conditions are harmful in ways that are unmitigated by society, especially where the people that

have them do not perceive them as such. The fact that Savulescu uses the ableist expression “wheel chair bound”—when wheelchairs increase accessibility for many people—solidifies the ableism of his position.

13 However, Savulescu (like Harris and Bostrom) denies sanctioning disability discrimination (417). His moral opposition to having children with disabilities does not translate to support for state mandates against doing so. Savulescu endorses the legal right of potential parents to decline selection against embryos that have what he denigrates as “disease” genes (417; Sparrow 32). He even claims that deaf people should have a legal option to use PGD to select for deaf children (Savulescu & Kahane 277, 288-289). Savulescu unwittingly establishes that the new eugenics dovetails with the old. The tactics of the new eugenics do not have to endorse state intervention to resemble those of its predecessors. As the bioethicist Robert Sparrow points out, the “Eugenics Societies” that emerged around the world in the early twentieth century did not involve state-sponsored coercion; they were organizations of ordinary people that used non-coercive strategies to encourage fellow citizens to exercise reproductive choice “responsibly” and have “superior” babies—those without disabilities (37). These old eugenicists were arguably successful in persuading people to act upon their ableist agenda (37). The new eugenics is not identical to the old, insofar as it does not advocate for state intervention. Nonetheless, Savulescu reveals that it is disconcertingly similar to the old in the ends that it aspires for, and at least some of the means that its proponents use to bring about these ends. Unsurprisingly, many bioethicists have criticized Savulescu and charged him with ableism. Hall is one of the most recent to do so.

Hall’s Position

14 In “Transhumanist Utopias: Rethinking Enhancement and Disability”, Hall endorses a cultural model of disability, which defines disability as a complex interaction between the social world and human embodiment (3: 61, 129). The cultural model resembles the social model, in that it challenges the tendency of the medical model to essentialize disability (3: 124). Both the cultural and social models hold that for many disabled people, ableism is at least as much of a problem as the embodied symptoms of their conditions. Both see disability is a social construction (3: 131). The social model was formed as a direct response to the medical model, and Hall does not fully reject it. However, Hall finds that the social model has two potential pitfalls that stem from the ways that it frames its critique of the essentialism of the medical model

(3: 121-122). One is that the social model “swings the pendulum” too far in the other direction; some versions that stress only social factors can de-prioritize discussion of the body, and the ways that embodied experiences of limitation and pain can cause real difficulties in people’s lives (3: 121, 124). The other is that some forms of the social model distinguish between disability and impairment by essentializing impairment and portraying it as immune to social influences. With the cultural model, Hall attempts to find a “third way” between the social and the medical models (3: 130). The cultural model highlights both the body and the social world, suggesting that they impinge upon each other. Ableism and stigma may have adverse effects that are directly experienced by the body, or the body may viscerally respond to these forces in negative ways. The cultural model holds that the body can be a direct source of difficulty (in at least some social contexts), but it does not automatically associate negative embodied experiences with genetics or impairment. It also does not assume that negative embodied experiences are always immutable. For this reason, the cultural model’s position on the body departs from the essentialist stance of the medical model, as well as the tendency of some types of the social model to obfuscate the body (3: 130). The cultural model accepts that disability and impairment are distinct concepts but maintains that both are social constructions. For example, Hall suggests that Savulescu socially constructs impairment, by depicting fetuses with traits that he portrays as impairments as defective and deviant (2: 99).

15 Hall uses the cultural model to make two salient claims against Savulescu’s position. One is that Savulescu’s argument does not account for synecdoche, the tendency to reduce an embryo’s life prospects to the genes that predispose it toward conditions that many societies consider to be disabilities (2: 72). Another is that it presumes that capabilities determine wellbeing among individuals; namely, the greater their number of capabilities, the larger their opportunity range and the better their life. Hall suggests that emphasis on the capability ranges that disabled people do not have obfuscates their possibilities for meaningful lives within the ranges that they do have (2: 61). Although Hall grants that some embodied experiences of impairment and disability can be negative, she does not assume that all are so, and she rejects the notion that attention to negative experiences should overshadow the social forces that construct disability (3: 132).

The New Eugenics and Vulnerability

16 Hall is not the only feminist disability theorist to grapple with the relationship between the social construction of disability and the human body. In “Disability and Vulnerability: On Bodies, Dependence, and Power”, the feminist disability theorist Jackie Leach Scully makes a number of notable observations about the vulnerability of the human body. Scully argues that dependence can be a form of vulnerability, which according to her definition is “the state of being more than usually likely to experience the bad things that can happen to humans” (212). She posits that dependence is necessarily about need, and that needing other people or services for something makes one vulnerable in their absence (212). Scully suggests that some chronic illnesses and disabilities are associated with long-term degenerative processes, fatigue, and reduced lifespans (207). Some of these processes may require assistance to manage chronic pain. Some forms of vulnerability, including dependence and chronic pain, can shape the power dynamics (especially around caregiving) that develop between people (216).

17 According to Scully, conditions that societies consider to be disabilities can sometimes involve impairment-related “inherent” vulnerabilities, such as dependence and chronic pain (207). These vulnerabilities stem directly from the material conditions of impairments themselves. Scully suggests that at times, genetic syndromes entail multiple impairments, such as the so-called cardiac defects associated with Down syndrome (207). There is a limited, but palpable strain of evidence to support Scully’s claim. It dovetails with Hall’s cultural model of disability, and the position that people’s bodies in general can be a real source of difficulty (Hall 3: 124). Thus, the new eugenicists are not entirely implausible to suggest that some conditions, such as cystic fibrosis, can directly generate dependence and chronic pain that negatively affect people’s lives (Bostrom et al 8; Savulescu 415). However, the cultural model shows that they are mistaken to assume that such conditions have exclusively negative effects, and that they are the sole determinants of people’s life prospects (Hall 3: 129). The new eugenicists also erroneously insinuate that these conditions make people “especially” vulnerable (Scully 217). Scully does not argue that all human beings have impairment-related inherent vulnerabilities, but she strongly suggests that everyone is inherently vulnerable and dependent in other ways. All human beings (regardless of impairment and dis/ability) depend on one another to some extent for many kinds of care (such as food and housing). In the absence of this care, human bodies may not flourish and humanity might not survive. Scully posits that these dependencies do not stem directly from impairment, but that they are intersubjective and (most likely) intrinsic to humanity. Societies

permit them because they impact able-bodied people who conform to their norms, and unfairly malign the impairment-related inherent vulnerabilities that tend to affect people seen as disabled (214-218).

18 Scully suggests that it may not be possible, even by challenging ableism, to eliminate all negative effects that impairment-related inherent vulnerabilities have on the lives of disabled people (207). Socio-political change in “medical care, insurance, public policy, transportation, accommodation, and schools” may help to eliminate most, but perhaps not all of them (Hall 2: 72). Like Hall, Scully emphasizes that societies and states have a moral responsibility to do what they can to make this change (Scully 207). Scully’s suggestion has merit to some extent, but it is not only applicable to the inherent vulnerabilities that she attributes to impairments. The line she draws between impairment-related and permitted vulnerabilities is significantly blurred. This ambiguity fits with Hall’s assertion that impairment (like disability) is a social construction (3: 123). On Scully’s account, vulnerabilities that fall under either label are in some ways inherent to humanity. Depending on the context, both impairment-related and permitted vulnerabilities have the potential to directly generate negative, neutral, and positive effects in the body. It is difficult to quantify their effects in any individual, regardless of impairment or dis/ability, and assess how these effects may change in the absence of ableism. Scully’s views on both types of vulnerability are consistent with Hall’s cultural model, which does not automatically equate negative embodied experiences with genetics and impairment. By Hall’s reasoning, ableist societies that conflate disability with impairment may deem certain medical conditions to be impairments, stigmatize the vulnerabilities that come from them, and ignore the chance that they can have neutral or positive effects. The new eugenic model of disability, and impairment, closely resembles the old. However, societies may not have monolithic ideas of what constitutes impairment-related and permitted vulnerabilities. Attention to shifting social constructions of disability and impairment is important, in light of the fact that Bostrom’s quest for transcendence, mind-body separation, and posthumanity denigrates potentially inherent vulnerabilities of dependence in all human bodies (Hall 1: 4-5). The new eugenics disparages the vulnerabilities of dependence that societies currently permit, even as the new eugenicists are more likely to target those that stem from conditions they see as impairments.

19 The new eugenicists suggest that the potentially negative aspects of impairment-related inherent vulnerabilities—in conditions that they conflate with disability—generate an obligation to select against embryos that have them. It is not at all apparent that these vulnerabilities justify

this position, and it would not be even if the definitions of impairment were static across different societies. Scully buttresses Hall's critique of the new eugenics. In addition to impairment-related vulnerabilities, Scully argues that disabled people experience contingent and ascribed global vulnerabilities. Contingent vulnerabilities stem from social and environmental factors like ableism. For Scully, the overall proportion of vulnerabilities that are purely inherent—and have no social or environmental factors mediating them—is much lower than traditional disability models suggest (207-208). Ascribed global vulnerability is the tendency to extrapolate a genuine (possibly inherent) vulnerability in one area of a disabled person's life to one stretching over the entirety of that person's life. It is an oppressive stereotype that disabled people are “unusually” open to exploitation by other, more powerful, and unscrupulous people (209-210). Scully corroborates Hall's critique of the new eugenic tendency for synecdoche, and its scant attention to social forces like ableism (Hall 2: 72). By the consequentialist reasoning of the new eugenicists themselves, one could improve many disabled people's life prospects more by challenging ableism than by preventing the births of children with their conditions.

20 The new eugenic position is unjustifiable and would remain so, even if its ableist assumptions about inherent vulnerabilities were true. Suppose that impairment-related inherent vulnerabilities did, in fact, unilaterally worsen the life prospects of disabled people. It would not follow that there is a moral obligation to select against embryos with traits that predispose them to conditions considered to be impairments or disabilities. Bostrom, Harris, and Savulescu do not make a watertight metaethical case that their brand of consequentialism is the most fruitful approach to the ethics of enhancement. Among bioethicists, consequentialism does not enjoy universal acceptance. Even if all bioethicists subscribed to it, the possibility remains that it is not the best framework with which to approach the ethics of enhancement. Deontology (the oldest rival of consequentialism) posits that people must act from rules and duty (Delk 1-5). Natural law ethics are premised on the idea that moral laws stem from natural ones (Deeney 355). Virtue ethics postulate that a person's character traits—not the consequences of their actions or the rules that they must respect—are the key to ethical conduct (Olesen 29). Feminist ethics of care hold that interpersonal relationships and care are virtues central to moral action (Hall and Scully sympathize with this framework, but do not discuss it in detail) (Kittay 53; Hall 4: 171; Scully 216). None of these traditions accept that the consequences of actions determine their morality alone, or at all. Their adherents may balk at the notion that negative effects produced by impairment-related inherent vulnerabilities, in conditions deemed to be disabilities, justify an

obligation to select against embryos with these traits. One or more of these traditions may have greater insight into moral truth than consequentialism. This paper does not attempt to determine which of these complex frameworks—even the feminist ethics of care—is the best ethical approach to the new eugenics. However, it underscores that there are both consequentialist and non-consequentialist reasons to doubt the new eugenic claims about disability, which parallel those of the old eugenics and are disturbingly ableist.

Conclusion

21 The new eugenics of Bostrom, Harris, and Savulescu is not identical, but still worryingly similar to the old. For disabled people, the consequences of new eugenic reasoning would be a deeply ableist world. The main inhabitants of this world would be posthumans that closely resemble the old eugenic ideal of able-bodied people who have transcended the human experiences of dependence and chronic pain. Further research on the new eugenics should focus on identifying the most promising metaethical framework to evaluate the questions that it raises. Feminist disability theorists should consider which ethical traditions, from consequentialism to the feminist ethics of care, provide the most fruitful insights into the questions around the new eugenics.

22 Finally, another important topic for further research is the palpable link between the new eugenics of transhumanism and the alt-right. Hall observes that self-identified transhumanists are overwhelmingly white men, and tend to give cursory attention the potentially ableist, sexist, and racist impacts of their ideologies (4: 179). The alt-right is a strain of right-wing populism that is infamous for its bigotry. Outside academia in the United States, transhumanism attracts a significant number of Silicon Valley libertarians. The techno-libertarianism of these futurists has calcified into a form of far-right authoritarianism. The transhumanists seem to think that if technological progress makes humanity obsolete, there is an unprecedented opportunity for them to impose and entrench social hierarchies. Posthumanity and egalitarianism are irreconcilable for them. The transhumanist Peter Thiel has claimed that he no longer believes that freedom and democracy are compatible (O’Connell, “The Techno-Libertarians”). When the *New Yorker* asked him whether the kinds of life-extension technologies he invested in might exacerbate social inequalities, Thiel said: “Probably the most extreme form of inequality is between people who are alive and people who are dead” (Packer, “No Death”). Thiel has notable social ties to the alt-right. The alt-right blogger Curtis Yarvin has described Thiel as “fully enlightened, just plays it

very carefully” (Kircher, “4 Key”). The transhumanist connection to the alt-right fits with the concerns outlined in this paper. Feminist disability theory can offer timely commentary on the trajectories that the transhumanist movement is taking, in the United States and throughout the world.

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