
Reimagining the Guiding Forces of Synthetic Biology: The Ethical Preoccupation of Transhumanism

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Abstract

”Humanity stands to be profoundly affected by science and technology in the future. We envision the possibility of broadening human potential by overcoming aging, cognitive shortcomings, involuntary suffering, and our confinement to planet Earth.” So begins the 2009 ”Transhumanist Declaration”, a document outlining the values and goals of those who identify themselves as transhumanists. This paper evaluates transhumanism where it intersects with the idea that technological advancement is inextricably entwined with social structure. With advances in synthetic biology and biotechnology come looming ethical and security challenges. While the wave of transhumanist literature that has been emerging in recent years seeks to abate these concerns with ethical arguments for human modification, the influence of social, economic, and political systems on the propagation and dissemination of technology are treated largely in a prescriptive way. This paper argues that these kinds of discussions would be more fruitful if reframed to consider the constraints placed on technology by social systems rather than by ethical considerations. For example, it may be more productive to discuss how political systems and social structures create and perpetuate security risks such as open-source biotechnology and ”DIY biology” rather than the ethical role of government in regulating these enterprises. This paper argues that we should stop looking so much at what ethics we can impose on biotechnology, and start looking at what role our social systems play in creating the ethical dilemmas in the first place.

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