

# Being Better Bodies

by Joel Michael Reynolds

Bioethics has an uneasy relationship with embodiment. Only with vigilance does knowledge of the body *as it is lived* counterbalance the momentous inertia of knowledge of the body *as an object* brought about by modern medical sciences. As a field tethered to detached, technical ways of knowing the world, bioethics must toil to treat the body as more than mere material and machine. To be more is, among other things, to be social—to live in the thickets of interdependence and the institutions and practices we build, hone, and defend to facilitate it. I take this tension to define the ultimate stakes of Melinda Hall’s *The Bioethics of Enhancement: Transhumanism, Disability, and Biopolitics*. Hall homes in on transhumanism, the idea that we should embrace technology to vault beyond current human limitations. Yet, the work serves as a reminder for all bioethicists and philosophers of how easily one can be led astray by otherwise irreproachable values when they are disconnected from the conditions and realities of human life, including being irretrievably interdependent embodied beings. Put more acerbically, the book is a reminder of how thinking goes wrong when divorced from the principal sources out of which human appraisals emerge: our fleshy, messy, social bodies.

The book’s primary theoretical resource is the work of twentieth-century philosopher and intellectual historian Michel Foucault. Hall draws especially upon his lectures at the Collège de

France in the late 1970s, wherein he first develops the concept of *biopolitics*. Foucault argues that a qualitative shift in forms and practices of government occurred in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The shift was from sovereign governance through threat of the sword to more decentralized forms of governance aimed at population-level phenomena, such as health, hygiene, birthrate, and race. These are phenomena without which neither bioethics nor modern medicine would exist. Whether one looks to the World Health Organization or to federal funding of health clinics and programs, biopolitics names a world in which governance is thought to include the health and health practices of the governed.

The concept of biopolitics has garnered enormous traction, in philosophy, intellectual history, science and technology studies, sociology, anthropology, and many forms of critical bioethics, whether anchored in feminist philosophy, disability studies, or critical philosophy of race. Despite this diverse lineage, Hall’s application of biopolitics and Foucault’s genealogical method to the discourse and arguments of transhumanists proves a breath of fresh air. Recalling Shelly Tremain’s pioneering work on a Foucauldian critique of biomedical discourses surrounding disability and impairment, Hall’s analysis demonstrates the continuing relevance of Foucault’s thought to bioethical inquiry. More specifically, Hall shows how rhetoric used by transhumanists and

some bioethicists—“improving quality of life,” “enhancement,” or even the implicit meaning of “ability”—often gains normative force through a simultaneous misunderstanding and disparagement of lives lived with disability. To get their arguments off the ground, transhumanists build their foundation on both normality and normativity. This practice should worry any and every ethicist.

In chapter one, Hall examines the work of Nick Bostrom and Julian Savulescu, two of the stronger proponents of using biomedical and other technologies to ameliorate woes both personal and social. She lays out their arguments in context, providing ample quotations and paraphrases. However, it quickly becomes clear that their arguments are brought into such charitable focus only in order to better dispatch them. She shows how transhumanists fall prey to the triple threat of biological determinism, biological reductionism, and political idealism: they inflate the import of biological (and especially genomic) factors with respect to human development, overemphasize the role of biology to determine the quality of lived experience, and devalue the way in which extant sociopolitical conditions shape human futures. One of the touchstones of transhumanism, Hall contends, is the implicit endorsement of the idea that “political and social problems can be solved through bodily interventions” (p. xix). Yet, the emphasis on the body to solve sociopolitical problems is a transhumanist sleight of hand insofar as the ultimate goal is to get rid of bodily limitations—to bring about the total eradication of the need for embodiment. As Hall puts it, “[T]he fleshy human body becomes the transhumanist target of innovation as a result of its unacceptable

*The Bioethics of Enhancement: Transhumanism, Disability, and Biopolitics*. By Melinda Hall. Lexington Books, 2016.

vulnerability to injury and death” (p. 19).

Chapter two looks at theories of disability. She engages a large range of disability studies’ literatures to demonstrate that transhumanists’ understanding of disability is untenable. She then defends a Foucauldian-inspired cultural understanding of disability centered on ideas of deviance, influenced by Rosemarie Garland-Thompson’s work. Chapter three offers a genealogical analysis of physical culture near the turn of the twentieth century, the birth of endocrinology in the decades following, and the post–World War II re-emergence of eugenicism. Hall aims to show transhumanism to be a new name for old thinking—and by my lights, she succeeds. Chapter four focuses on Savulescu’s arguments for procreative beneficence. Hall builds upon numerous rebuttals that reveal many of his arguments as little more than a conflation of normality with normativity. It is easy to argue for people to make choices in the name of what is “best” when one fails to provide sufficient argumentation for the meaning of that term, leaving ableist intuitions to fill in the gaps.

Chapter five is in many ways the home run of the text. Hall offers a damning critique of discourses of risk, omnipresent in bioethics and health fields more generally. One need only think of the constant deluge in popular media: eat less of this, more of that; exercise in this way, be mindful in that. What outcomes, precisely, are these risks raised to avoid? She argues that the effect of these discourses, regardless of or despite their intent, is to mark actual, particular disabled bodies as in and of themselves risky. The import of this insight can hardly be overstated. If conceptualizing risk in theory is conceptualizing nondisability in practice, such discourse easily devolves into disability stigma, pure and simple. The Americans with Disabilities Act may have led to more elevators, accessible parking spaces, and novel litigation, but insofar as the health industry uncritically links risk to disability, we live in a world oriented against the existence and continuance of people with disabilities. But, as nearly fifty years of

disability studies research spanning the humanities and social sciences evinces, disability is not a risk. Disability is not the same as disease, illness, or death, though it sometimes comes with them. Disability is an expected, often rich, and even praised part of life.

Knowledge and prediction about how embodiment affects flourishing is a vital part of the transhumanist agenda. Throughout the book, Hall implicitly makes interesting use of two large, theoretical problems about such knowledge that I wish to bring into greater relief here: *inductive risk* and *epistemological transformation*. Hall notes that Bostrom “argues that the posthuman state is better, offering pleasures and fulfillments worth pursuing, although he simultaneously acknowledges that his vision of posthuman life is by definition unknowable to mere humans because it involves the attainment of new capacities and, thus, new insights” (p. 17). The question immediately presents itself: how can one claim the “posthuman state” to be better if one doesn’t know what it will be like?

Inductive risk is the risk of being wrong when accepting or rejecting a hypothesis on the basis of some body of evidence. The literature on inductive risk is large, but the takeaway for the purposes here is simple: even if one believes that the acceptance or rejection of X is solely an empirical, scientific matter, being wrong about X often has consequences far beyond that of scientific inquiry. Transhumanists like Bostrom as well as bioethicists who shun that title often hold that there is a prototypical or at least typical form of embodiment that engenders ideal conditions for flourishing. They further take this to be based on information about *Homo sapiens* from evolutionary biology, developmental and hedonic psychology, and in some cases, normative ethics. However, we do not need to test this idea’s sociopolitical ramifications. The history of the twentieth century has proved a fecund and deadly experiment. We were often wrong about the relationship between bodies and flourishing, and we got this wrong in part because we could not disentangle scientific evidence from

the ideals that shaped it. History would suggest that there is enormous inductive risk in narrowly promoting a model of flourishing based on currently valorized, “normal” bodily forms, whether with respect to intelligence, physical prowess, or what have you. There is even more risk in promoting a model of flourishing based on an *intensification* of today’s “normal.” The problem of inductive risk reveals that values go all the way down. We cannot but assess scientific “truth” and information in light of its presuppositions and effects in not just the lab, but also the lifeworld.

Writing about epistemological transformation, L. A. Paul argues that we can have only seriously limited knowledge about certain types of experience without undergoing those experiences. Many experiences are not a question of this or that being different, but a question of the total or determinative framework of one’s world. I can’t know what it’s like to be blind unless I become blind. To say that becoming blind would be bad (because I am sighted, value sight, and think I’d be unhappy without sight) is to make a claim about an experience the quality of which is phenomenologically unknown to me (for, as studies suggest, blindness is often not experienced as the lack of sight, despite ableist assumptions to the contrary). Transformative epistemology is not merely one issue for transhumanists; it is at its core.

Claims that things will be better when we have progressed beyond our current embodied conditions are based on bad epistemology, bad psychology, and bad philosophy. Were such a future ever to come about, the jury is out on its meaning for human well-being. Those who say otherwise are engaged in sales, not science; publicity, not philosophy. By exposing such subterfuges, Hall’s work marks an opportunity for bioethics to reflect more rigorously about the values shaping the field’s and medicine’s aims—and the effects those values play in building or destroying a more just world. If Hall is right, we should focus less on being better bodies and more on simply being better.

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