

Transhumanism, Human Dignity, and Moral Status

Ronald Sandler

John Basl

In “Human Dignity and Transhumanism: Do Anthro-technological Devices Have Moral Status?” Fabrice Jotterand argues that transhumanism is incompatible with human dignity--i.e. that technologically augmented individuals (transhumans) would not possess the dignity that non-technologically augmented human beings possess. In this commentary we argue that Jotterand’s case against the possibility of transhuman dignity is unsound. We then sketch a positive argument for the view that it is possible for transhuman individuals to have the same sort of dignity possessed by human beings.

Jotterand’s Argument Against Transhuman Dignity

Jotterand focuses his case against the possibility of transhuman dignity on Nick Bostrom’s (2005) conception of transhuman dignity. The case against Bostrom consists of two main arguments. The first targets Bostrom’s claim that human dignity admits of degrees. Jotterand argues that any adequate conception of human dignity underwrites the moral equality of those that possess dignity. The second argument defends an account of the sources of human dignity and aims to show that transhumans lack the basis for dignity. None of the premises in Jotterand’s second argument are particular to Bostrom’s account. It therefore functions as a general argument against the possibility of transhuman dignity. We believe that Jotterand’s first argument misrepresents Bostrom’s position and conflates dignity and moral worthiness. However, we set these worries aside to focus on the more general second argument.

Here is a reconstruction of Jotterand’s general argument:

1. Transhumans can possess human dignity only if technological enhancements do not remove from transhumans the source of dignity.
2. The source of human dignity is uniqueness (of personal identity and personal narrative or biography) (Jotterand, AJOB PAGE #, MSS p. 16).
 - "...a unique identity characterizes one's dignity" (Jotterand, AJOB PAGE #, MSS p. 17).
3. Technology, by its very nature, undermines uniqueness.
 - "...technology, by its very nature, tends towards conformity and productivity (in the sense of mass production) hence removing uniqueness and promoting conformity" (Jotterand, AJOB PAGE #, MSS p. 18).
4. Therefore, technological enhancement deprives individuals of their uniqueness. (From 3 and the definition of technological enhancement as adding technological components to humans).
 - "...the use of technology to "enhance human dignity" specifically removes the idea of uniqueness (qua irreplaceability) of each individual (biological and personality uniqueness)..." (Jotterand, AJOB PAGE #, MSS p. 16)
5. Therefore, technological enhancement removes the source of human dignity. (From 2,4)
6. Therefore, Transhumans cannot possess human dignity. (From 1, 5)
 - "Hence what can be replaced - body parts, intellectual faculties and moral intuitions - loses its worth, its value, and ultimately its dignity" (Jotterand, AJOB PAGE #, MSS pp.18-19).

The above argument rests on two key claims: (A) the source of human dignity is the uniqueness of individuals; (B) technology, by its nature, undermines uniqueness. There are

significant problems with both A and B, as well as with the inference made from premise 3 to 4. We discuss these in turn.

A. The source of human dignity is the uniqueness of individuals.

In the second half of this commentary, we suggest a basis for human dignity other than uniqueness of individuals. However, let us assume (for now) that Jotterand is correct and the source of human dignity is in the uniqueness of individuals. Uniqueness admits of degrees. Individuals are more or less unique with respect to the component of uniqueness related to personal narrative (as described by Jotterand). While each individual is unique in the sense of being numerically identical only to themselves (a fact that will also necessarily obtain for transhumans), individuals are not equally dissimilar with respect to life trajectories, perspectives, values, identifications, self-conceptions and experiences. The fact that some individuals are more similar to other individuals than are others does not seem to undermine the dignity of those individuals that are more similar. Suppose that somehow two distinct individuals come to have qualitatively near identical personal narratives. It seems as if they would retain their dignity as much as an individual with a more unique personal narrative.

One possible response to the complications posed by degrees of uniqueness might be that human dignity is a matter of meeting a threshold of uniqueness of personal narrative. All individuals that meet the threshold would have the same amount of human dignity. Such an account fits well with Jotterand's view that "It is precisely the idea that some people could possess dignity at higher levels than others (posthuman dignity) that is incompatible with human dignity" (Jotterand, AJOB PAGE #, MSS p. 11). However, if this is the case, then all human beings possess human dignity and all transhumans lack it only if any two humans differ with

respect to their uniqueness (of personal narrative) more than any pair of individuals consisting of a human and a transhuman (or two transhumans). Is there good reason to believe that this *must* be the case? It seems reasonable that a human and a posthuman would have *greater* potential for dissimilarity in personal narrative than two humans, precisely because of the possibilities that posthuman technologies enable. Indeed, that one sees herself as posthuman and the other does not would itself seem a significant differentiation in personal narratives.

Jotterand believes that the justification for the claim that transhumans will be less unique than humans rests on the fact that transhumans are created from humans with technology, and technology by its very nature undermines uniqueness. It is this claim to which we now turn.

B. Technology by its very nature undermines uniqueness.

The claim that technology by its nature undermines uniqueness is ambiguous. Does technology universally undermine uniqueness, or merely tend to in general? (And does it entirely undermine uniqueness or just to some degree?) If the claim is understood universally, it is false. At least some technologies promote diversity. Consider those technologies developed and used by artists or those technologies that allow humans to live in conditions that were not otherwise possible. Furthermore, technologies have led to vast increases in the choices we make concerning, for example, sustenance and recreation. Thus, there is a variety of examples in which technology increases, rather than undermines uniqueness (even when conceived in terms of replaceability).

If the claim is understood in terms of what the effects of technology tend to be (i.e. in general), it is unproven. Whether technology, in general, tends to undermine the components of

uniqueness specified by Jotterand is an empirical question, but no data has been given in favor of this generalization. Moreover, Jotterand must develop an account of the kinds of uniqueness, diversity, irreplaceability, and narrative that are undermined by technology. It may be that technology tends to increase uniqueness in some respects (and in some cases), while reducing it in others.

Given these difficulties, perhaps one might try to reformulate the premise more specifically, so that it concerns only uniqueness of personal narrative--i.e. that technology use by its nature undermines uniqueness of personal identity. However, this reformulation is also problematic for at least two reasons. First, it appears that people, all the time and in all sorts of contexts, create personal narrative by using technology. People use technology to highlight moments in their lives which frame their narrative, they use it as part of the core projects in their lives, and they extend their narratives into virtual places, for example. Second, this premise, when situated in the rest of this argument, generates the claim that all technology--telephones, antibiotics, radiators, whatever--is contrary to human dignity, since all technology interacts with human beings--i.e. is employed by us and reciprocally shapes our form of life. The absurdity of this implication is especially plain when we consider that our form of life--the human way of going about the world--is (in part) technological. Without technology our form of life is not possible at all; our species is not viable. So even this more restricted premise, situated in Jotterand's broader argument, generates an absurd conclusion.

C. The inference from premise 3 to premise 4

The inference from premise 3 to premise 4 (the key inference in the argument) is problematic. It does not follow that technological enhancement of humans undermines

uniqueness by undermining personal narrative or by increasing replaceability. Enhancement technologies will be of very different kinds. Even if it is possible to undermine personal narrative via technological enhancement, whether or not a particular enhancement does undermine an individual's personal narrative will depend on the nature of the enhancement. It does not seem plausible that having a bionic hand, even if almost everyone else had the same model of bionic hand, would undermine the uniqueness of its possessor's personal narrative. After all, many people, with very different personal narratives, share many things in common - e.g. the same model of eyeglasses, computers, mobile phones, or prosthetics. The same goes for cognitive enhancements. Enhancing individuals' memory, ability to concentrate, or capacity for problem solving, for example, do not seem to be the kind of things that will collapse personal narratives. Indeed, less robust cognitive enhancements--e.g. coffee and calculators--have not done so. Given this, enhancement technologies potentially threaten personal narrative only if they allow for the replication and replacement of those components of individuals that are closely tied to their personal narrative. Whether or not these components are replaceable is a contingent matter--i.e. it depends upon the details of the enhancements--and it may be that replacement of these components is not even possible.

Futhermore, even assuming that transhumans are such that their mental content can be fully replicated and replaced, this doesn't undermine the uniqueness of the resulting individual. The *content* of an individual's experience is what seems crucial to that individual's uniqueness. The fact that this content can be backed up, stored, and retrieved does not detract from the uniqueness of the content. Consider that as we write this response we maintain copies of the document on our computers as well as on the internet. This fact hardly seems to detract from the uniqueness of the response--i.e. the content. Similarly, even if some of the individual parts of

transhumans (those that are technological) could be replaced and personal narrative of an individual "backed up" it would not follow that the content of the individuals' personal narrative, which is the crucial part for personal identity, would be diminished.

Finally, the ambiguity in B is relevant to the inference from 3 to 4. As discussed above, if the claim is understood as a universal or necessity, it is false because it is open to clear counter examples. If it is understood as a generality, it is unproven, but possibly true. However, if it is only the case that technologies tend to undermine the relevant sort of uniqueness, then the inference from 3 to 4 is clearly invalid, since this allows for the possibility that some technologies--including some cognitive enhancement technologies--do not undermine the relevant sort of uniqueness and therefore do not undermine the basis for the sort of dignity possessed by humans.

A Case for the Possibility of Posthuman Dignity

In the remainder of this commentary we sketch an argument for the view that it is possible for technologically augmented transhuman individuals to have the same sort of dignity possessed by human beings.

The concept of human dignity has significance to bioethics (and to ethics more generally) only because of its relationship to moral status. As Jotterand indicates, characterizing precisely *what is due* to individuals in virtue of having posthuman dignity, or human dignity for that matter, is difficult. However, the problem of identifying the *source* of the kind of moral status associated with human dignity is more tractable.

There are two possibilities for the type of basis for the moral status associated with human dignity. Either it is possessed in virtue of species membership or it is possessed in virtue of some other properties. There are, however, difficulties with the view that species membership is necessary and sufficient for having a certain level or kind of moral status. These difficulties include: (a) that any distinction made on the basis of species-membership is arbitrary in the same way that a distinction made on the basis of race or gender would be arbitrary (Singer 1977; Singer 1989); (b) the problem of spelling out how mere membership in a group confers properties had by certain individual members to all group members (McMahan 2005); and (c) that it seems as if individuals of other species that are like humans in all ways except that they are of a different species should possess the same moral status as humans. These familiar difficulties are sufficiently strong to justify rejecting a strictly species-membership account of moral status. Moreover, Jotterand does not appear to accept a species membership account. On his view it is something other than species membership--the uniqueness of an individual's personal narrative--that is the basis for human dignity. (It should be noted that it is not obvious that all cognitive transhumans will be of a different species than humans. This would depend on what constitutes species membership – a vexing problem in the philosophy of biology.)

What, then, are the other sorts of properties that might be the basis for moral status, including human (or transhuman) dignity. The most promising (and prominent) alternatives are that it is possessed in virtue of: (A) an individual's capacities (or likely capacities under normal circumstances), particularly psychological capacities; or (B) an individual's relationships, such as reciprocal concern and cooperative relationships. If either of these is correct, then it would seem that the sort of moral status associated with human dignity is compatible with being cognitively poshuman.

If the basis for moral status is psychological capacity, then human dignity is a sort of moral status that human beings have in virtue of the psychological capacities that most human beings have (or would develop under “normal” circumstances). Transhumans will lack the capacities relevant to dignity on this view of moral status only if augmentation removes these capacities. It might be that some forms of cognitive enhancement would do this—that the resultant individuals would be so psychologically unlike human beings that they would lack the relevant capacities and so moral status. But, it is not a necessary implication of cognitive enhancement *qua* cognitive enhancement. It may be that some forms of cognitive enhancement would result in transhuman individuals with the relevant psychological capacities (e.g. autonomy, empathy, biographical self-awareness, and so on), *in addition to* a greater capacity for memory or problem solving than non-augmented individuals. Indeed, it might be that transhuman individuals have the relevant capacities to a greater degree (e.g. greater empathy, richer self-biography) than non-augmented humans; or they may have additional capacities, which non-augmented humans lack, that are also moral status conferring. The point is that, given a capacities-based account of the basis for moral status (including that associated with human dignity), there is no in principle reason why a cognitively posthuman individual could not possess the capacities that are the basis for human dignity. The details of the augmentation—what capacities are introduced, what are compromised, and so on--will be determinative. For this reason, it is *possible* for cognitive transhuman individuals to possess the sort of moral status associated with human dignity.

Now suppose that basis for the sort of moral status associated with human dignity is relational—e.g. being in mutually caring relationships or participating in cooperative systems. On such an account, being cognitively posthuman would preclude possessing the relevant sort of

moral status only if being transhuman made being in such relationships impossible. This is certainly not a necessary implication of being cognitively transhuman. The sort of relationships that it is possible for an individual to be in—particularly insofar as it concerns care, empathy, and cooperation, for example—supervenes on the cognitive capacities that the individual has (as well as the capacities of others). Again, there is no in principle reason why being cognitively transhuman should itself preclude possession of any of the relevant capacities. Indeed, some forms of cognitive enhancement might augment those capacities crucial for the relevant relationships—e.g. increase empathy, concern for others, or cooperative capabilities. Moreover, there is no in principle reason why being a cognitively transhuman individual should make it impossible for others (human or transhuman) to care about the individual or cooperate with the individual. After all, we already have all sorts of such relationships with individuals who are cognitively and psychologically quite different from adult human beings (e.g. infants, cognitively disabled people, and non-human animals). Once again, the details of the augmentation will be determinative, and it is *possible* for technological cognitive transhuman individuals to possess the sort of moral status associated with human dignity.

The foregoing only outlines the argument that posthuman cognitive enhancement is compatible with possession of the sort of moral status associated with human dignity. However, it does provide a *prima facie* case that: (a) whether they are incompatible depends upon the type of basis for human dignity; (b) on only one type of basis (species membership) might they be incompatible (and this would depend on whether cognitive transhuman individuals are of a different species, which might be contingent on the particular form or method of enhancement); and (c) that type of basis on which cognitive transhumanism might be incompatible with human dignity is problematic. Thus, not only is Jotterand's argument that being cognitively transhuman

is incompatible with possessing the sort of moral status associated with human dignity unsound, its conclusion is very likely false.

References

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