
Playing God? The ethics of biomedicine

October 2014

[Andy Miah](#) , [Sorcha Ui Chonnachtaigh](#) , [Steve Fuller](#) and [Anna Bergqvist](#) will introduce a discussion on the ethics of biomedical enhancements



Over the past decade, dramatic advances have been made in synthetic biotechnology, neuroscience and digital technology. Engineers of brain computer interfaces predict headbands that will deliver digitally enhanced cognition, letting us talk without speaking, see round corners, and drive just by thinking about it. In 2010, Craig Venter made headlines with his (partially) synthetic cell, and, as he plans to patent an entire manmade lifeform in the future, work continues on the creation of smaller DNA constructs known as bioparts. This year a man in Austria voluntarily had a (damaged) hand amputated so he could be fitted with a bionic limb controlled by brain signals. Stem cell science and synthetic biology bring the prospect of replacing flesh with 'synthetic skin' rather than creating crude cyborgs.



Yet while futurists and transhumanists talk excitedly about the possibilities of biomedical enhancement, there is considerable ambivalence about such advances across wider society: the so-called 'yuck factor.' Ethics committees and 'public dialogues' have risen in prominence in recent decades partly to tackle public fears about the impacts of experimentation in controversial areas such as mitochondrial exchange, acting as a significant check on its development in the UK.



Even on a prosaic level there is little popular enthusiasm to allow the use of performance enhancing technologies in sport while Google Glass seems to be met with scepticism even from ardent technophiles. In last year's documentary *How To Build a Bionic Man*, psychologist Dr Bertolt Meyer even raised privacy concerns around his robotic prosthesis being 'hacked' and urged for careful regulation of future developments.



Why is there such a seeming gulf between the possibilities presented by biomedical advancements and the anxieties over their long-term impacts? How should society balance the future ethical questions raised by scientific experimentation when the science itself may be a long way behind? Can the 'yuck factor' be overcome simply through better public engagement or does it reflect the difficult moral questions such advances raise? What role does morality, democracy and the actual science play?

Some background readings

[Engineering Greater Resilience or Radical Transhuman Enhancement?](#) by Andy Miah, Studies in Ethics, Law, and Technology 2008

[God, science and the quest for moral certainty](#) , by Kenan Malik, Sea of Faith conference 26 March 2010

[Humans, Version 3.0: The next giant leap in human evolution](#) , by Mark Changizi, Seed Magazine 23 February 2011

[First synthetic windpipe transplant is a success](#) , by Dr Rebecca Robey, BioNews 11 July 2011

[Foc.us: The first commercial tDCS headset that lets you safely overclock your brain](#) , by Sebastian Anthony, ExtremeTech 30 July 2013

[Scientists have discovered a new body part](#) , by Heather Saul, Independent 6 Nov 2013

[A manifesto for playing god with human evolution](#) , by Carl Elliott, New Scientist 08 September 2014

[And the lame shall walk](#) , Brendan O'Neill, spiked 22 October 2014

[GPs to be paid £55 for each dementia diagnosis](#) , BBC News 22 October 2014

[Saatchi Bill](#) articles in The Telegraph

[Stop the Saatchi Bill](#) campaign website

Venue and Time



In the main hall of [Cross Street Chapel](#) , Cross Street, Manchester [M2 1NL](#) . If you're familiar with the area, it's diagonally opposite the Royal Exchange Stage Door. Please arrive around 6:30pm for a prompt 6:45pm start - expected to finish before 8:30pm.

Tickets are £5

(£4 concessions) payable in advance, and should be booked online via

[Eventbrite](#)

, or by Emailing

events@manchestersalon.org.uk

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This discussion, including audience comments, will be filmed and made available online as a reference resource.

Discussion Partners

This discussion, including audience comments, and will be recorded, hopefully filmed, to be made available shortly after the discussion online as a reference resource.



The Manchester Salon is joining the fabulous [Manchester Science Festival](#) for the fifth year running, itself celebrating its seventh year. With over 200 events for families and adults, you can expect an exciting nine days of cutting-edge research, the brightest minds and amazing events. You'll have the chance to delve into immersive experiences, explore the science of the city by foot, join in the debate, enjoy hands-on activities, see awe-inspiring films and much more. Watch out for trailblazers throughout the year and join us at events throughout Greater Manchester during 23 October - 2 November 2014.



This discussion is a satellite event of the prestigious [Battle of Ideas](#) 2014 weekend festival of ideas being held on 18 and 19 October 2014, hosted by the Barbican, London. Now in its tenth year, the Battle of Ideas festival comprises 350 speakers at 75 debates and satellite discussions confronting society's big issues and unresolved questions. It affords the opportunity for some clear thinking, rational debate and agenda-setting - above all, it's future-orientated, whilst retaining a healthy regard for the past achievements of humanity.

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