

What's the Point in Caring? Bioethical Concerns in Roald Dahl's Short Stories

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Abstract: Rapid technological advancements in medicine may exclusively be a scientific feat, but the bioethics of healing and patient care brings it into the field of humanities. This tripartite division of reason, logic and ethics is what separates the human subject from being reduced to a mere object of scientific query. Roald Dahl's stories like "William and Mary" that deal with subjects that are reduced by circumstances and age into non-functional captives of their own bodies evoke the ethics of patient care while stories like "Royal Jelly" deal with mutative aspects of experimental medicine. Transhumanists like Nick Bostrom believe that technological advancements and many benefits they entail should be considered a practice of self-actualization while the bioconservatives like Francis Fukuyama believe that these experiments are dangerous and in contradiction with the concept of human dignity. This paper explores how Dahl's imaginative recreation of the human contributes to this debate. The profoundly dehumanizing tendency of the short stories in their handling of subjects with cognitive and corporeal disabilities reveals a bioconservative stance. It aims to delve into the philosophical implications of caring for the castigated individuals as opposed to the evolutionary instinct to either transform or forsake them. I argue that Dahl's short stories provide a preamble to the posthuman angst through a bleak overview of posthuman dignity.

Keywords: Roald Dahl, Short Stories, Human Dignity, Bioethics, transhuman/posthuman, care.

Martin G. Weiss in "Posthuman Dignity" attempts to define the term 'dignity' by taking recourse to the ideas of Immanuel Kant "who has developed the most influential view of human dignity, distinguished between two types of things in the world: things with a price and things with a dignity" (321). Dignity according to Kant is an inherent human quality that comes from rationality, which in turn, comes as a result of "emancipation from nature"(321), as a man evolves into a rational animal. For Weiss however, dignity is intrinsically linked to the body, more so the 'natural' body. Weiss believes that since the proliferation of medical and technological enhancements to the human body, the "essence" of humanity has been lost (321). Whether these augmentations and alterations of the body really impact the 'dignity' of the human being and whether it is ethical to allow these experiments since their ends justify the means are topics of contemporary bioethical debate. This paper deals with this debate in an attempt to explore the idea of the human body and dignity in an age of identity changing biological interventions.

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It is a transhumanist belief that augmentation of the human body through scientific and artificial means should be permissible and the individuals involved should be given absolute morphological and reproductive freedom. In fact, it is a core belief of transhumanism that only by “vigorously defending morphological and reproductive freedoms against any would-be world controllers” (Bostrom 206) would humanity be truly safe from a science fiction-like dystopias such as that in *Brave New World* (Bostrom 203). The transhumanists also insist that “dignity, in its modern sense, consists in what we are and what we have the potential to become, not in our pedigree or our casual origin” (Bostrom 213). The formation of the posthuman may be a byproduct of these experiments. These may have “indefinite health-spans, much greater intellectual faculties than any current human being – and perhaps entirely new sensibilities or modalities” (Bostrom 203). In other words, there is really no way of knowing what characteristics the posthuman will possess.

To this end, Francis Fukuyama directs readers towards Nietzsche and his concept of the *Übermensch* in his discussion of the transhuman. He states that, while it is a desirable state to which one might aspire, one must also exercise caution while venturing into undiscovered territory (qtd. in Bostrom 209). Further warnings have been provided by the bioethical writings of Leon Kass which act as an admonitory treatise on what may befall if one constantly abuses nature’s gifts without completely understanding them:

Cockroaches and humans are equally bestowed, but differently natured. To turn a man into a cockroach would be dehumanizing. To try and turn a man into more than a man might be so as well. To avoid this, we need more than generalized appreciation for nature’s gifts. (Kass “Biotechnology” 19)

This stance of cautionary skepticism has been supported by Fabrice Jotterand, Francis Fukuyama. It has received qualified endorsement from Habermas. These individuals take a bioconservative position as they believe that it is through a natural process of evolution over

thousands of years that man is bestowed with what we now know as humanity¹ (Weiss 320-1). While Jotterand and Habermas argue for the essential incompatibility between the idea of a transhuman individual and human dignity (Sandler and Basl 63; and Weiss 325), Bostrom argues that human dignity is merely “a polemical substitute for clear ideas” (Bostrom 209) and as such admits degrees, some of which can be possessed by the posthuman.

Nick Bostrom avers that the fear of being posthuman stems from first, a fear of altering the conditions of what makes a human being, and second, the fear of the posthuman rendering “ordinary” human beings obsolete (Bostrom 204). To this, Weiss adds a third fear which is the loss of autonomy (Weiss 325). “For Kant the basis of human dignity is human autonomy” (Weiss 323). Simply put, Kant believes that the human ability to choose and make morally motivated decisions based on the faculty of reason is what constitutes dignity.

The bioconservatives believe that the posthuman is incapable of this autonomy because the process of creating a posthuman essentially alters human nature. On the other hand, the transhumanists believe that nature is far from a reliable guide to progress. Bostrom for one says that “Had Mother Nature been a real parent, she would have been in jail for child abuse and murder” (Bostrom 211). Bostrom mocks those who uphold nature as the cornerstone for human progress and asserts that leaving nature to determine the course of human life can only lead to disaster:

The horrors of nature in general and of our nature in particular are so well documented that it is astonishing that somebody as distinguished as Leon Kass should still in this day and age be tempted to rely on the natural as a guide to what is desirable and normatively right. (Bostrom 205)

While the question about what is morally correct and what is not is still open to debate, it is clear from Bostrom’s argument that nature is not the ideal yardstick for human ethics and ability. Today, the idea of what it means to be human is more tentative than fixed. The debate for and against human augmentation through artificial means, therefore, is bound to feature gaps that reflect the gaps in human understanding. Writers like Roald Dahl bridge this gap though an

¹ Fukuyama and Habermas believe in an inherent idea of human dignity present in the unmodified, unenhanced human being (Weiss 320-321). However unlike Fukuyama’s approach, which is purely that of a naturalist, Habermas is more concerned about how the eugenics will impact existing social structures (Weiss 324).

imaginative leap and explore the social and psychological implication of transhumanism through a creative construction of a would-be world where whimsical augmentations are possible.

From children being shrunk and stretched in *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* to them being transformed into mice in *The Witches*, Dahl's oeuvre is brimful of unnatural alterations of the human body. It has been recorded in various anthologies, interviews and even in the authorized biography of Roald Dahl that he would have become a doctor had he not become a writer (Warriner 1261).² Dahl's preoccupation with medicine and the subsequent penchant for imagining a vivid array of morbid deaths and diseases have their roots within his experience with personal loss³ (Sturrock 368-69). In fact, according to Treglown, Dahl was so driven by despair that he longed for nothing more than to be "powerful enough to be able to conquer illness and other misfortunes" (Treglown 136). To this end, Dahl struggled through various real channels to ensure the medical facilities denied to his generation would be readily available to the next.

Dahl's *George's Marvellous Medicine* deals with the revenge that a child extracts on his foul-mannered grandmother. This revenge involves the child concocting his own formula of a 'magic medicine' that trumps traditional remedies⁴. In it lies Dahl's own desire to discover a "polypill" (Warriner 1261) that cures all physical and psychological ailments. The trope of medicine and the interest in manipulating human physiology did not however, originate from this book. The archetype for Dahl's exploration of pharmaceutical experiments and mishaps can be found in a large number of his short stories. With bioethics being recognized as a pressing concern in the field of medical humanities, Dahl's short stories help historicize the concept and provide an interesting study of human dignity in the face of undignified technological or medical mutation.

²His work in the field of philanthropy and medicine has been recorded by Warriner in a newspaper article. This article also examines the role of medicine and healing in Dahl's book for children, *George's Marvellous Medicines*.

³Treglown records that Dahl's father lost an arm when Dahl was fairly young; his sister died at the age of seven, and Dahl's father Harold soon followed suit, succumbing to pneumonia a while later. Dahl continued to suffer loss in his later years: his son Theo was hit by a car when he was only four months old, causing him to suffer lasting neurological damage. This unfortunate accident inspired Dahl to explore the scientific world of medicine and remedy:

. . . he founded a charity that provides funding for specialist pediatric nurses; and after his son Theo was injured in a car crash he developed, with a hydraulic engineer and a neurosurgeon, the Wade-Till-Dahl valve for use as a cerebral shunt in cases of traumatic hydrocephalus. (Warriner 1261)

⁴ The 'Marvellous' Medicine coincidentally makes George's grandmother blow up into a balloon and later, vanish entirely.

Through a study of Dahl's short stories, I hope to explore such issues as the posthuman condition, bioethics of using experimental medical treatments, as well as the idea of human 'dignity' within the parameters of illness and treatment. These stories question the essential humanity of the protagonists by portraying them as mutated individuals who bear close resemblance to an animal or an insect. This paper explores the field of experimental medicine and the idea of saving or improving human life at the cost of human dignity.

In the three stories under consideration in the paper, the protagonists undergo various transmutative processes and subsequently suffer loss either in terms of self-harm or in their interpersonal relationships. I believe that Dahl's stories illustrate a bioconservative stance in denying his genetically modified protagonist any dignity. This fear is clearly visible in stories like "Royal Jelly", "Bitch" and "William and Mary" where biotechnology seems to work regressively upon the humanity of the individuals involved, taking from them their autonomy, and subsequently, their dignity. It does not always manifest itself in the subjects of the mutation but rather makes itself palpable to the reader through the reaction of others around them. Dahl's short stories can therefore be studied as an embodiment of the debate⁵ between free will to embrace this 'better' or 'enhanced' life and the curse of leading that life as something less than human.

The short story "Bitch," for instance, deals with the science of augmentation of human senses, but the ultimate result is not self-actualization, but rather dehumanization. The story revolves around a scientist Henri Biotte who is gifted with a very strong sense of smell and is on a quest to create a chemical compound which, when inhaled, unleashes the primal, libidinal drive in man that evolution has since mitigated. By taking mankind back to the "the period of post-glacial drift" (Dahl CSS418) where he was more susceptible to influence from his animalistic ancestry, Henri hopes to make significant financial profits.

The mutative effect of the chemical compound begs certain fundamental questions about bioethics as adumbrated by Maier and Shibles: "The real moral question is what kind of a self is being furthered and formed" (Maier and Shibles 137). Dahl seems to imply that intention may be very different from execution as far as technology is concerned. As already mentioned, Bostrom believes that the concept of dignity is not fixed, and as such may allow for a posthuman dignity.

⁵ Martin G. Weiss calls it the "enhancement debate" (319).

The augmentation in “Bitch” which makes a person slave to his or her primal urges would prove otherwise. There is no autonomy that can be salvaged once one takes a whiff of the formula. Henri Biotte for instance has no control over his actions when he is under the influence of the formula: “I went completely wild! I was like a wild beast, an animal! I was not human! The civilizing influences of centuries simply dropped away!” (Dahl CSS424)⁶

This story brings up several questions about bioethics and the ability of medicine to undo thousands of years of evolutionary molding whether intentionally or by accident. The idea of dehumanizing the individual through the process of ‘enhancement’ is highlighted by constantly comparing the effects of the formula with that of a dog sniffing out a mate. Henri Biotte, having a weak heart condition dies of heart attack when exposed to the substance –“killed in action as they say” (DahlCSS 432). His friend and sponsor Oswald also ends up in an extremely unfavorable situation when the vial containing the chemical spills in the company of an extremely unattractive woman. Through Dahl’s handling of the individuals involved in the story, it stands to reason that while transhumanism aims at taking steps forward on the evolutionary ladder, it is impossible to discern exactly in which direction it will lead. The dispute of course, remains whether the risks are worth the benefits.

The most extensive study of this debate is found in the short story “Royal Jelly, which testifies to Dahl’s preoccupation with the issue and his remarkable prescience.” This story deals with the concept of experimental medicine and its ability to potentially save lives, and create a future generation of super-humans; it also reflects on the idea of dignity and free will with respect to both morphological and reproductive freedom. In Dahl’s story, complete morphological freedom miscarries and creates a subsection of grotesque individuals whose appearances raise repulsion rather than awe. The protagonist of the short story, Albert Taylor, has an unusual fascination for bees. This he turns into a vocation by building his own bee hives and selling honey. He later becomes obsessed with the ‘royal jelly’ which is a biochemical secretion produced by the nurse bees to nurture the larvae. The worker bee larvae are fed concentrated royal jelly for only three days, and they grow at an exponential rate during this time. After this, they are fed the same formula, but diluted with other substances like pollen and

⁶ This also brings up bioethical concerns of care-giving with respect to individuals who are no longer in complete control of their faculty. Is memory then, what constitutes a human being? What does this mean for instance for a patient with Alzheimer’s disease who has no autonomy over his actions or words?

honey. The larvae that ultimately become the queen bee however, are fed royal jelly in its concentrated form throughout their lives. This, according to the story, is what leads to their increased size, weight and virility.

Albert has little or no faith in doctors and medicines: “Did those doctors really know what they were talking about?” (Dahl CSS88). Believing that conventional modern medicine had not reached the advancement he required, Albert Taylor turns to experimental medicine. When his wife Mabel has trouble conceiving, he starts to produce and consume concentrated amounts of royal jelly after getting the idea from a similar experiment conducted on a rat. The formula he concocts out of his several bee hives turns out to be a success, curing his sterility; after a few months on the dietary supplement of royal jelly, his wife gives birth to a baby daughter. Dahl’s take on the idea of reproductive freedom is a subversion of the feminist ideology that endows the woman with complete right over foetus and child care. By keeping his wife in ignorance about his ‘medication,’ arguably, this freedom is transferred from the mother to the father in the casual patriarchal manner— Dahl’s signature portrayal of patriarchy and other mainstream ideologies (Valle 2).

Perhaps as a side effect of the biochemical experiment, the baby refuses to eat and keeps losing weight until Albert hits upon an idea. He decides to feed the child “royal jelly” in concentrated quantities to nourish her and help her gain weight and mature faster. Mabel, who has no control over her own impregnation, also has no agency when it comes to keeping her child alive through the same formula. Her growing sense of shock and alienation from both her husband and her baby is the result of the transmutative effects of royal jelly on both of them. Dahl’s story allows for an examination of the idea of mutative freedom in case of experimental medicine whose side effects may be unknown. The philosopher Hans Jonas echoes Dahl’s views on body politic in the posthuman future: “The other side of power of today is the future bondage of the living to the dead”(qtd. in Bostrom 211). By this, he implies that the idea of free will becomes problematic when the actions of an individual lead to repercussions that extend to the next generation. Through the actions of Albert Taylor, the posthuman in the story when viewed through the lens of contemporary trends in the humanities, autonomy is taken away from both his wife and his daughter. He imposes potentially mutative qualities on her that rob her of her future autonomy as well.

Albert Taylor taps into the resources available to the insect kingdom and exercises his morphological freedom. In the process, he saves his daughter's life. However, this freedom, as evidenced from the reaction of the wife, comes at the cost of his dignity. The story ends with the grotesque description of the father and the child:

The big heavy haunted-looking eyes of the woman were moving intently over the man's face and neck. There was no skin showing at all on the neck, not even at the sides below the ears. The whole of it, to a point where it disappeared into the collar of the shirt, was covered all the way round with those shortish hairs, yellowy black. . . The woman's eyes travelled slowly downward and settled on the baby. The baby was lying naked on the table, fat and white and comatose, like some gigantic grub that was approaching the end of its larval life and would soon emerge into the world complete with mandibles and wings. (Dahl CSS 108)

Contra bioconservative belief that technological enhancements will decrease individuality and uniqueness, transhumanism posits the view that at least in the natal state of the posthuman, the essential difference between them and the "organic" humans would only create a greater degree of diversity, which is so important to human dignity (Sandler and Basl 64). The uniqueness in the Dahl story, however, only takes away the dignity of the protagonist.

The reader shares the terrified silence of the mother who witnesses her husband and her infant child transforming in front of her eyes. This brings to light Dahl's insistence on exercising great caution before willingly disrupting the 'natural' course of events. In Bostrom's words,

If one rejects nature as a general criterion of the good, as most thoughtful people nowadays do, one can of course still acknowledge that particular ways for modifying human nature would be debasing. Not all change is progress. Not even all well-intended technological intervention in human nature would be on balance beneficial. (205)

Both the "Bitch" and "Royal Jelly" deal with 'well-intended' drugs, but for whose far reaching side effects, the world, or even the creators themselves are not ready. In both the cases, the drugs augment an individual biologically or organoleptically, but ultimately these

posthuman individuals turn out to be devolved versions of their former selves, lacking the autonomy and rationale that characterizes a human being⁷.

Similar ideas of devolution in the quest for progress can be seen in the short story “William and Mary.” This short story, which was Dahl’s answer to the problem of mortality and the universal human quest for longevity, shows a secular take on life after death. Preoccupation with longevity and possible methods of achieving immortality remains a central preoccupation of medical research today. It is the story about a man who, on his death bed, decides to collaborate with a scientist-friend named Landy to undertake a unique experiment. The basis of the experiment is also the fundamental basis of the entire branch of cryogenics⁸, which is simply that the brain outlives the body, and if preserved and kept separately can remain essentially alive even after the body’s death. The story shows human consciousness as removed from and independent of, its bio-certifiable origins. This idea of preserving the brain is initially rejected by William who finds the idea “repulsive”, “pointless” and even “unpleasant” (Dahl CSS18). However, being a man of cold, hard reason, William accepts Landy’s argument that attempting to preserve his consciousness was a logically sound decision. Bryan Appleyard comment in *How to Live Forever or Die Trying: on the New Immortality* is pertinent here:

We all know we must die. But that, say the immortalists is no longer true Science has progressed so far that we are morally bound to seek solutions, just as we would be morally bound to prevent a real tsunami if we knew how (Appleyard 22-23)⁹

Incidentally, Landy, the scientist who discovers the method of preservation of consciousness after death, gets the idea from watching an experiment conducted on a dog. This invites obvious comparisons to “Bitch.” In both the stories, the subjects of the experiments are made to resemble an animal even though the process was one of augmentation. To add to the existing discomfort of the reader, Dahl delves into a distastefully graphic description of the experiment that was to follow:

⁷ Arguably, technological advancements that cripple intellectual capabilities are “the exact antithesis of the transhumanist proposal” (Bostrom 206). However, one of the anxieties shared by the bio-conservatives is the unforeseen side-effects of technology that is meant to better mankind’s future.

⁸ Cryogenics is a branch of science where the brain is frozen in low temperatures after death till technology is available to revive the human consciousness. It is a branch of science devoted to the idea of eternal life and preservation of the body after death in case such a theory ever reaches fruition

⁹ The title of Appleyard’s book *How to Live Forever or Die Trying* is from a black comedy about the Second World War: Joseph Heller’s *Catch-22*.

So when I get you on the table I will take a saw, a small oscillating saw, and with this I shall proceed to remove the whole vault of your skull. You'd still be unconscious at that point so I wouldn't have to bother with anesthetic. . . (DahlCSS21)

The bioconservative fear that technological enhancements would lead to a subsection of individuals to “lose some of the moral status that they currently possess” (Bostrom 209) has been highlighted through the character of William who was already lacking in emotion and sympathy before the medical procedure. William, being a man governed by reason, has complete autonomy over the decision to undergo the surgical process. However, Dahl makes the experiment sound extremely unpalatable in order to indicate that this autonomy may be temporary.

The twist of the story lies in the revelation that eternal life for William would be quite unlike the one he had imagined. Reduced to the comically minimalistic physical units of the brain and an eyeball, William lies catatonic in a basin of cerebral fluid, maimed and yet fully sentient. This breaking down of the individual into constitutive parts brings in the metaphorical debate about mereological essentialism¹⁰.

Landy predicts that the brain and eyeball in the basin will exist in a transcendental state where “You can't have frustration without desire, and you couldn't possibly have any desire” without a body (DahlCSS 26). Contrary to the premise, the eye that floats in the basin expresses “absolute fury” and possibly even despair when his wife informs him that she would extract revenge for years of subjugation by making him “do just exactly what Mary tells you” (Dahl CSS35-36).

The story's conclusion seems to bear out Kass' prediction in *Life, Liberty, and Defense of Dignity: The Challenge for Bioethics*, seems to have come true:

The final technical conquest of his own nature would almost certainly leave mankind utterly enfeebled. This form of mastery would be identical with utter dehumanization. Read Huxley's *Brave New World*, read C.S. Lewis's *Abolition of Man*, read Nietzsche's account of the last man, and then read the newspapers. Homogenization, mediocrity,

¹⁰ This complex metaphysical concept deals with the historically specific and sometimes even relationship between the parts and the whole. In the words of Alvin Plantinga, “If I replace a tire on my automobile, we think the same automobile persists through the change, acquiring a new part. But if I replace the automobile on my tire, then the whole that contains my tire is not the whole I began with – human bodies, for example – persist through small mereological changes: for example, haircuts” (470-471). Is the ethics of care-giving solely dependent on the conception of duties that are based on this idea of human body?

pacification, drug induced contentment, debasement of taste, souls without loves and longings – these are the inevitable results of making the essence of human nature the last project of technical mastery. In his moment of triumph, Promethean man will become a contented cow. (Kass LLDD 205)

Throughout the story there are hints that the relationship between William and Mary was far from ideal, with William being a domineering husband who curbed his wife's free will: "All her life they [his eyes] had been watching her" (Dahl CSS13). Ironically after death, he still continues to watch her through the severed optic nerve attached to the brain now floating in a basin.

Jotterand contends that transhuman dignity is only possible when in the process of making an individual transhuman, dignity is not removed from the source (Sandler and Basl 64). Arguably, by being reduced to a figure in constant need of care, William in Dahl's short story has willingly sacrificed that dignity for the sake of longevity. This reaffirms the idea that the ethics of care-giving is based on a generally accepted conception of human body and its functions. William does not have a recognized disability, hence his care is not an ethical concern for the wife or the reader. Adding to his helplessness is his inability to speak. William's silence at the end of the story has deeper philosophical connotations. Wittgenstein linguistic perspectivism seems relevant here: "The limits of my language mean the limits of my world" (qtd. in Maier and Shibles 503). Dahl too seems to imply that human knowledge and consciousness cannot extend beyond human life¹¹. By muting William, Dahl renders his consciousness invalid and as he exists in a perpetual limbo between the living and the dead, in constant need of assistance and care.

The concept of care and the social convention of care-giving is a central concern of the story. Dahl challenges Nel Noddings's assertion about the superiority of feminine care (Maier and Shibles 202). In both "William and Mary" and "Royal Jelly" the wife is either denied or willfully surrenders the roles of care-giver.¹²In the story, William puts blind faith in his wife's

¹¹ Attempts to explore the post-life consciousness have been made in several pieces of literature across the years, most notably, in Emily Dickinson's poem that begins with the line "I heard a fly buzz – when I died" (266) Dickinson: Selected Poems and Commentaries, Helen Vendler, Harvard UP, 2010.

¹²The form of care Albert Taylor provides his infant daughter can be termed 'identity egoism' (Noddings 209) in which the care giver identifies with the object of care. Having undergone the same mutative process and sharing similar visible side effects, it stands to reason that the father would to a large extent identify with the daughter.

devotion, which throughout his life has been “satisfactory” (Dahl CSS 14). He believes that he will be taken care of well as he lives on in a vegetative state for several, if not infinite, years. If one were to agree with Sandler and Basl’s view on the transhuman, the wife should feel no different about her husband just because he is now merely a brain and an eyeball floating in a jar. He is essentially the same person who underwent the procedure “. . . there is in principle no 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.” (Sandler and Basl 66). But that is not how things turn out in the Dahl short story.

These stories raise fundamental questions about human consciousness. They are seen as a social construct that is dependent on societal perception. William much like Albert, is no longer perceived as human by those close to him. The appearance of the transhuman as less than human or even as unlike human encourages what is called ‘the dehumanizing fallacy’ which leads to people treating those with illness or disability as if they were inanimate (Maier and Shibles 211). In “William and Mary”, the image of the brain and eyeball readily invite a comparison to the inanimate and the non-human rather than an advanced superhuman.

To quote Francis Fukuyama, “Nietzsche is a much better guide to what lies down the road than the legion of bioethicists and casual academic Darwinians that today are prone to give us moral advice on this subject. (Qtd. in Bostrom 209)”

The Nietzschean *Übermensch*, then, is a secular idea of the transhuman, “a being whose distance from conventional humanity is greater than the distance between man and beast” (Magnus and Higgins 9). Dahl’s view of the transhuman is, needless to say, not derived from the *Übermensch*. Dahl takes up the role of the ‘casual academic Darwinian’ and illuminates the dark end of the path to progress. His take on the issues of human augmentation through ‘unnatural’ or scientific means indicates a need for judicious and restrictive morphological freedom. Bostrom argues that a larger political body should step in and obstruct such freedom only “in cases where somebody is abusing these freedoms to cause harm to another person” (Bostrom 210). This of course, brings up the question of self-harm as something that should be prevented through an institutionalized body politic as in all three discussed stories, the detriment is self-inflicted and suffered in isolation.

Despite several artistic reimagining of a dystopian posthuman, Roland Sandler and John Basl in their 2010 essay “Transhumanism, Human Dignity, and Moral Status” are concerned about the dangers of simply dismissing advancements that could potentially better human health and life span, based solely on fear. According to them, these forms of technologies are not as antithetical to the idea of dignity and individuality as they are made out to be. In fact, they are a necessary step towards progress as they may lead to “cognitive enhancement . . . in addition to a great capacity for memory or problem solving than non-augmented individuals” (65). Accepting transhumanism and the augmentation that it entails helps humankind realize its latent potential, and can be a step towards self-actualization.

The only possible conclusion that can be derived from this debate is the one stated by made by Maier and Shible— in order to implement a proper ethical stance towards the transhuman, society as a whole has to undergo a major change. To avoid the ultimate neglect of either the posthuman or the ‘original’ human, social structures need to be altered and made inclusive. Bostrom expresses his view in favour of a new structure of social systems to assimilate the enhanced with the unenhanced section of society: “We can work to create more inclusive social structures that accord appropriate moral recognition and legal rights to all who need them be they male or female, black or white, flesh or silicon” (Bostrom 210). By extension, entities, whether they are human or an insect-like sub human, possess a whole corporeal body or merely be a brain and eyeball, all should have equal dignity. Dahl’s stories question the very basic premise of bioethics, which is the right of every individual to be treated with dignity.

The paper limits itself to a modest task – raising several crucial questions about ‘species being’ while highlighting the debate between the bioconservatives and transhumanists. Is human nature a byproduct of genetic composition, or is it simply a result of a variety of environmental factors? Can a technological augmentation of organoleptic properties alter human nature? What role does such a turn have on social structures, interactions and politics? For Dahl, augmentation always leads to a disturbing loss of autonomy that renders the idea of human dignity comical and redundant.

Fictional narratives like Dahl’s short stories adumbrate the issue of human dignity in imagined societies on the cusp of genetic engineering breakthroughs. These narratives lay equal

emphasis on the cognitive and emotive aspects of the problem, enriching the critic's understanding of the issue.

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