

# Good, Better, Best: Should We Improve Ourselves Through Biological Engineering?

*Arsht Distinguished Speaker Series*

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Is it really unethical to seek a  
longer, better life?



# Quality of Life?

Gil Gutknecht of Minnesota teamed up Rep. Steve King of Iowa to push a bill that prohibits the government from subsidizing “recreational sex drugs” such as Viagra, Cialis and Levitra.

# Quality of Life?

“We cannot send abstinence messages to our young people and continue to tax them at the expense of grandpa’s after-dark escapades”

- Rep. Steve King of Iowa



# Quality of Life?

Backers of the bill, the Medicare Prescription Drug Sensibility Act, said the government should pay only for “lifesaving” drugs, not drugs that enhance one’s lifestyle or quality of life.” I think [Viagra] is one that’s pretty hard to defend. ... It certainly is not necessary to save lives,” said Gutknecht



# But Why Not Quality of Life?

- When asked, men say that sexual activity is very important to them – rate it 2nd or 3rd on list of activities they consider important
- They spend lots of money on sex, which backs up this claim
- Many men faced with loss of sexual function due to medical side-effects will not treat their prostate cancer



# Why Not Quality of Life?

- Extending life is not always the right thing to do – trapped by technology – Schiavo
- Pain control and hospice v. life extension
- Rehabilitation and ADL post injuries and trauma
- Face and limb transplants
- Recreation, fun, functioning, enjoyment make life worthwhile!



# THE NEW PURITANISM

- HATES living longer
- HATES living younger
- HATES enhancement





# The New Puritans: Who are they?

- Mr. Yucks on the right: Leon Kass, Frank Fukuyama, Dan Callahan, Charles Krauthammer, William Kristol, Eli Cohen, Carl Elliott, Richard John Neuhaus
- Just ‘say no’s on the left: Jeremy Rifkin, Bill McKibben, Ruth Hubbard, Michael Sandel



New Puritans contend it is unethical  
to seek to live longer and better.

Why????

- It is revolting, disgusting, indulgent
- It is dehumanizing, depersonalizing
- It is vain and arrogant
- It is too costly



# The New Puritans Hate Enhancement

- Cosmetic Surgery
- Laser eye surgery leaves you 20/10
- Provigil and Ambien
- Steroids, blood doping and oxygen tents
- Repress bad memories, improve memories



# Is it Unethical to Enhance?

- Duty to oneself – strive to improve
- Duty to one's children – improve their lot, make a better life
- Risk for enhancement vs. therapy or prevention
- Unfair
- Unnatural



# Are the New Puritans right about living longer?

## **Bad Arguments:**

- Why Live longer if you become decrepit?
  - A false description – better, not just longer
- It has a morally suspect history of hype, hucksterism and false hope exploiting people
  - Monkey gland injections, yogurt diets, Hormone replacement, frozen heads
  - True but so what?
- Those who know best, the elderly, don't want it
  - This is not a poll, it is a choice! And where is the data?

# Is it Unethical to Seek to Live Longer?

## **Better Arguments:**

- Violates the Natural Order of Things
- Robs us of finitude and Imperfection and thus joy, pleasure, striving
- Artificial not natural
- Makes us prisoners of corporate America

# Is it Unethical to Seek to Live Longer: Better Reasons

- What is the Natural Order?
  - old make way for the new
  - but nothing in evolution supports that view
  - different life spans
  - contingent life spans

# Is it Unethical to Seek to Live Longer: Better Reasons

- Religious views of aging
- Punishment for sin
  - But not all religions believe this
  - And Mortality would still exist even with longer life
  - We have extended our lives far longer than those enjoyed by the Romans, Hittites and Egyptians, and God seems OK with that.



# Is it Unethical to Seek to Live Longer: Better Reasons

- Robs us of finitude and thus of challenges and striving
- Well, not all that makes life worthwhile requires challenge and striving – winning the lottery is OK, too
- There will be plenty of challenges for those with longer lives!

# Is it Unethical to Seek to Live Longer: Better Reasons

- Artificial not natural – what does this mean?
- Is it really OK to live longer by better diet and more exercise but not through genetic engineering or the use of drugs?
- What is bad about the artificial *in principle*, especially since most of us flew or drove to this meeting using artificial means?
- Is there a natural lifespan (essential lifespan)

# Is it Unethical to Seek to Live Longer?

## **Best Arguments:**

- Costs too much – research to get there, social burden
- It is pure vanity
- It is not safe--the risk to try is enormous
- It is inherently unfair unless all can do so

# Costs Too Much

- Costs pale relative to other costs – war
- Costs too much, or it is worth it?
- Costs too much return will go to future generations (ESR)
- Social burden
- The need to invent childhood, adult education, multiple careers

# Vanity

- Live for yourself – is that bad?
- Live longer for others
- Live longer to improve society
- Dying as redemptive, suffering as ennobling
  - It is vain to forgo these defining human moments

# Not Safe

- But that is not a reason not to try
- Need to police/regulate hype
- Regulation is business' best friend

# Unfair

- Life is not fair
- Access is not an argument against improvement
- We should commit to access in public policy now

# Battle of the coming decade!

- It is ethical to try to live longer, improve your appearance, live better, improve your quality of life?
- Need to be ready to challenge the New Puritanism
- Need to be ready to defend quality of life as fundamentally important to health care





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