

The Culture and Ethics of Body Modifications

Course Description: There is a long history of bodily modification throughout time and across many kinds of societies. Modifications can be for functional restoration, augmentation, enhancement, or aesthetic purposes. This course will explore the ways that bodily modifications and the development of body-altering technologies co-evolve with social and technical understandings of appearance, function and perception.

Industrialized societies are experiencing dramatic variations in individuals' body size and appearance, due to changes in nutritional and consumption patterns, changing cultural views of the body, and the emergence of technologies that change the physical appearance and functioning of both healthy and disabled bodies. At the same time, innovations in biomedicine and bioengineering are leading to novel forms of designed bodies. But just what is a "properly functioning" body in light of emerging biology-altering technologies and what is its relation to body image and perception? Alternate body forms, including those that dramatically change appearance, or may incorporate synthetic parts could make a body "more normal" or could potentially create improved features. Yet there are social and ethical implications for such transformations. What do we consider to be "deficient" or "normal" and why? Also, some kinds of modifications of appearance or function may be understood by some as "pathological" or "unnatural," while others are viewed positively, as "therapeutic" or "empowering." How do we make sense of these changes? The course will create an opportunity for students to explore the relations of biological, cultural, and technological aspects of bodily modifications. Students will learn about issues of identity and subjectivity as related to physical appearance and functioning, the ethical use of body modification technologies, and public health and policy frameworks and implications. The course will appeal to all social science students, as well as students seeking careers in the medical professions, psychology, ethics, and health policy. Open to upper level undergraduates; graduate students welcome.

1. Introduction: What's "normal?" What's an "able" body?
2. Dysmorphias, Body size/shape, body image, body building: politics, ethics, consumer culture
3. Prosthetics, Replacements, Augmentations and Aesthetics in rich and poor countries: Subjectivity and objectivity
4. Engineered biology: techno-biological substitutes for tissue and organs

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526 - 3 Units: Social Studies: Counts for LAS credit (L&S); Intermediate

726 – 1 Unit: Graduate; Basic (Graduate students must register for both 526 & 726)