Preface and Acknowledgements

This volume is based partly on papers presented at the Berendel Foundation’s second annual conference held at Queen’s College, Oxford between 8 and 10 September 2011. The conference benefitted from the generous financial support of the Berendel Foundation and the Wellcome Trust (Grant no. 096561). I am grateful to these two institutions and to the participants for making the conference the success that was.

‘Crafting humans’ – and its corollary human enhancement – is a contested topic, both in medical sciences and the humanities. With continuing advances in science and technology, scientists and the general public alike are aware that the basic foundations of the human condition are now at stake. This is amply evidenced in the ‘Superhuman’ exhibition (19 July – 16 October 2012) at the Wellcome Collection in London. One important message of this exhibition is that the human body could be changed and transformed through the enhancement of basic physical and mental capacities. Yet, the current discussion of human enhancement – as illustrated by the specialists invited to contribute and whose opinions have been recorded for the exhibition – has largely ignored the (pre-)history of theories of social and biological improvement. The biological malleability of the ‘human’ is something that is now taken for granted but this volume questions this aptitude to change and improve humans, highlighting three critical aspects: the role of religion; the importance of historical time and the corporeality of historical subjects, like races, nations and societies. Despite the rapid growth of interest in the interconnectedness of technological progress, biomedical sciences and ethics, alongside the health benefits of recent discoveries in genetics and genomics, discussing current theories of human enhancement within their historical, religious, philosophical, and cultural contexts, from Antiquity onwards, remains yet to be achieved. In the decisive debates over the excesses and disastrous effects of human dreams of perfectibility (particularly since the Holocaust), the problematic connotations of ‘crafting humans’ are ever present. And if this prompts us to be more careful when discussing the intellectual sources of contemporary technologies of human
improvement, than it is crucial that we take such claims seriously. Understanding the human must, therefore, be as much a form of moral introspection and historical responsibility as a quest for scientific knowledge and adaptability to technological progress.

This volume is but a modest contribution to this growing body of work. To some extent, it complements the Wellcome exhibition on the ‘Superhuman’ by considering the historical, ethical, and philosophical questions raised by the project of crafting and enhancement. The chapters included here offer insights into some of the reflections and imaginaries that have inspired and legitimated both theoretical and practical programmes for ‘crafting’ humans, ranging from the religious/spiritualist and the philosophical/cultural, to the secular and the scientific/scientistic; from the mystical quest for human perfection, to the biopolitical eugenic state of the twentieth century, and current genetic theories of human enhancement. While vast bodies of scholarship have been devoted to each of these individual topics, this volume discusses them in a synchronized way, as interrelated variants of the most central story in history, that of human perfectibility.

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Above and beyond these general comments, there are some specific acknowledgements that I would like to make. Firstly, for permission to reproduce the photo on the cover, I am grateful to the Wellcome Library, London. Secondly, due to unforeseen circumstances Sorin Antohi could not join me in editing this volume. However, my discussions with him about ‘crafting humans’ have been inspiring and he has left a last inprint upon this volume. As such, I am grateful for his unfailing support and encouragement. Thirdly, this volume would not exist without the editorial support and occasional stylistic veto of Stephen Byrne. This is certainly a better book as a result of our collaboration. Finally, the volume is dedicated to Yehuda Elkana, who unfortunately passed away as this volume was prepared for publication. His illness precluded him from submitting his contribution but his complicitous humor and critical acumen, displayed so vividly during the conference, are not forgotten. He was a great scholar and a true friend.

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Marius Turda