



Editorial: Nietzsche and European Posthumanisms

Russell Blackford

Editor-in-Chief, *Journal of Evolution and Technology*

russellblackford@bigpond.com

Journal of Evolution and Technology - Vol. 21 Issue 1 – January 2010 - pgs i-iii
<http://jetpress.org/v21/blackford.htm>

In issue 20(1) of *The Journal of Evolution and Technology*, we published “Nietzsche, the Overhuman, and Transhumanism” by Stefan Lorenz Sorgner (March 2009). In this intriguing article, Sorgner argues that there are significant similarities between the concept of the posthuman (as typically deployed in transhumanist thought) and Nietzsche’s celebrated notion of the overhuman (often referred to, perhaps misleadingly, as “the Superman”). Sorgner does not claim that late twentieth-century and contemporary transhumanist thinkers were knowingly influenced by Nietzsche: this is a question that he explicitly leaves open. Nor does he depict transhumanism as monolithic, or the concept of the posthuman as unambiguous. For all that, he suggests that the similarity between the two concepts – overhuman and posthuman – is not merely superficial: it lies at a fundamental level.

Sorgner compares the posthuman and overhuman concepts in a way that is calculated to bring out a deep similarity. He discusses, for example, how the relevant systems of thought are alike in viewing humanity as merely a work in progress, with only limited potential in the absence of a radical transformation. Humanity is, in other words, not an evolutionary culmination but something that cries out for improvement. Sorgner adds, however, that the idea of the overhuman provides Nietzsche with a grounding for values that appears to be missing in transhumanist thought.

As Sorgner develops his thesis, Nietzsche rejects any concept of transcendent meaning, but finds value in the interest of “higher humans” in permanently and continually “overcoming” themselves. On this approach, the ultimate “overcoming” consists in surpassing the human species itself. The prospect of success in creation of the overhuman is thus supposed to give meaning to human beings who are immersed in the efforts of self-overcoming. For individuals with a scientific materialist view of the world, or a scientific “spirit,” and who have rejected the epistemic and moral authority claimed by Christianity, this is supposed to provide an alternative source of meaning. Sorgner’s thesis, then, is that Nietzsche’s thought contains an important value dimension. Further, he suggests, this is missing from the transhumanist movement, which would do well to incorporate it. As Sorgner puts the matter:

Transhumanists, at least in the articles which I have consulted, have not explained why they hold the values they have, and why they want to bring about posthumans. Nietzsche, on the other hand, explains the relevance of the overhuman for his philosophy. The overhuman may even be the ultimate foundation for his worldview.

Is this correct? The intellectual focus for this journal – its own foundation for being – is the increasingly familiar idea that the human species is about to commence, or has perhaps has already commenced, a new

form of evolution that is powered by technology. Of course, we acknowledge the facts of biological evolution, as described in contemporary, well-evidenced neo-Darwinian formulations (see, for example, my review of Coyne's *Why Evolution Is True* in issue 20(2)). There is no legitimate controversy about this. Our role, however, is to present and examine genuinely the controversial idea of a transformation of humanity through means far more rapid than the mechanisms of survival, reproduction, and adaptation, or other evolutionary mechanisms recognized in the current synthesis, such as genetic drift.

On geological timescales, the various biological mechanisms can produce vast diversity in life forms and the appearance of intricate design. Biological evolution postulates no intelligent designer or teleological causation. By contrast, the new form of evolution, imagined by transhumanists and many others, would be far more rapid and driven by very different mechanisms. It would be, at least to an extent, deliberate, and powered by new technologies (products of intelligence) that increasingly work their way into the human body.

It is unclear what Nietzsche would make of such a technologically-mediated form of evolution in human psychology, capacities, and (perhaps) morphology. Nonetheless, he advocated a program for overcoming the human that is at least *superficially* similar to the calls of transhumanists to enhance human capacities through technological interventions. How deep, then, does the resemblance go?

With Stefan Sorgner's paper in hand, we thought it worthwhile to seek further insights and reactions. To what extent does transhumanist thought resemble that of Nietzsche? Is there any direct (or even indirect) line of influence? Beyond Nietzsche, what about other European (and perhaps other) thinkers who postulated an imperative to overcome human limitations and surpass what we have experienced, to date, as "the human"?

Accordingly, we called for papers responding to the issues raised by Sorgner, or to issues that arise naturally from his discussion. We announced that we were looking for papers of two kinds: (1) short responses (under 2000 words; these would not be peer-reviewed, but selected by the editors on the basis of merit); and (2) full-length articles (which would be peer-reviewed in the normal way).

We've received a pleasing range of responses, and will be publishing them in this issue of the journal, beginning with the shorter responses, which will be included under the heading "Peer Commentaries," then going on to the full-length articles. As has become our practice, we will generally publish papers as they are ready, and will certainly not wait for an entire issue to be uploaded on line at once. Hence, this issue will be a work in progress for the next few months. We've also invited Sorgner to reply to the papers, including this editorial, once they are all published. We are looking forward to this – knowing already how much variety will confront him.

Even after the current issue of the journal takes its final form, we expect the debate to continue. Does modern transhumanism contain adequate resources for a meaningful life, as Nietzsche evidently thought he was providing in his body of philosophical work? Should it even attempt to do so – or should it aim at something more modest, perhaps at accurate prediction, or at flexible thinking about the future, or some circumscribed utilitarian goals? What, after all, is the *point* of the transhumanist movement? If the vision of posthuman beings, with capacities greatly exceeding our own, is realistic at all, what moral responsibility do we have, collectively or as individuals, to bring such beings about (or perhaps to avoid doing so)? Overall, is a vision of the coming "posthuman" an adequate source for meaningfulness in our lives? Why, or why not?

As always in JET, no intrusive editorial "line" will be imposed in the development of the current issue. At most, there is a bias against blatantly irrationalist approaches to the ethics and regulation of emerging technologies. As I have said before, we are not *The New Atlantis*, and we never will be – but that leaves room for extensive disagreement among our contributors, for a compelling ferment of ideas.

Please join us as our special Nietzsche and European Posthumanisms issue takes form online. And stay with us beyond the next few months as the discussion of these issues continues and evolves ... into our unknown future.