



Nietzsche, the Overhuman and the Posthuman: A Reply to Stefan Sorgner

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Sorgner (2009, 29) has argued that Bostrom (2005, 4) was wrong to maintain that there are only surface-level similarities between Nietzsche's vision of the overman, or overhuman, and the transhumanist conception of the posthuman. Rather, he claims, the similarities are "significant" and can be found "on a fundamental level". However, I think that Bostrom was in fact quite right to dismiss Nietzsche as a major inspiration for transhumanism. There may be some common ground, but there are also essential differences, some of which I am going to point out in this brief reply.

Beyond good and evil

First of all, transhumanists believe that it is both possible and desirable to improve human nature by means of technology (More 2009). They tend to assume that by "making better people" we will, as John Harris (2007, 3) puts it, make "the world a better place". Posthumans will allegedly lead happier, more fulfilling lives than we do now. This assumption is the main reason why transhumanists demand that we pave the way for posthumanity. In other words, there is a moral imperative at the heart of the transhumanist agenda. David Pearce calls it the "hedonistic imperative" (lifelong well-being as a basic human right), Julian Savulescu (2001) the "principle of procreative beneficence", which, if adhered to, naturally leads to the embrace of radical human enhancement and, by implication, posthumanity.

Nietzsche, on the other hand, had nothing but contempt for those who sought to improve the human condition, such as John Stuart Mill whom he denounced as a "blockhead" (*Flachkopf*) because Mill still believed in good and evil (both natural and moral) and felt that one should make it one's duty to bring about the victory of the former and the destruction of the latter (E, VIII, 665). According to Nietzsche, the philosopher needs to position himself "beyond good and evil," because there are no moral facts and nothing that is truly better or worse than anything else. Happiness for instance is not to be considered better than suffering. To believe otherwise indicates a grave error of judgement. And more than that: trying to improve humanity is actually an attempt to "suck the blood out of life," an act of "vampirism" (EH, VII, 1158). Consequently, Nietzsche fervently denied that he himself intended any such thing: "The last *I* would promise is to better humanity." (EH, VII, 1065).

Revaluation of all values

Transhumanists may want to reevaluate certain aspects of our existence, but they certainly do not, as Nietzsche did, advocate the revaluation of *all* present values. On the contrary, they emphasise the continuity between (past and present) humanist, (present) transhumanist, and (future) posthuman values and see themselves as defenders of the Enlightenment's legacy against its modern (bioconservative) enemies. "The posthuman values," writes Bostrom (2005b, 5), "can be our current values". Of course, a few things that are supposed to be valuable by some, such as "the natural," are discarded, but on the whole a transhumanist would regard as good and valuable what is commonly regarded as good and valuable, e.g., a long, healthy and happy life, intellectual curiosity and proficiency, the ability to form deep and lasting relationship, etc.

Nietzsche, on the other hand, wanted to turn our whole system of values upside down, or rather rip it apart. He prided himself to be the "first immoralist" and hence "destroyer par excellence" (EH, WII, 1153). What was commonly regarded as evil needed to be recognized as the highest good. "Evil is man's best power [...] necessary for the best of the overhuman" (TSZ, WII, 524). He wondered whether not all great humans were in fact evil (E, WIII, 449), and he specifically and repeatedly mentions Cesar Borgia as "a kind of overhuman" (TI, W2, 1012), whom he admiringly describes as a "human predator" (*Raubmensch*) (BGE, WII, 653). Compassion, charity, loving one's neighbour – traditional Christian values, but not alien to transhumanists either – are scoffed at as symptoms of decadence. According to Nietzsche, universal altruism would take the greatness from existence and effectively castrate humanity (EH, WII, 1155). Consequently, what puts Nietzsche's (or more precisely Zarathustra's) overhuman *over* the merely human is precisely his indifference to common moral concerns: "the good and just would call his overhuman *devil*" (EH, WII, 1156). Surely, transhumanists would not want to hold that the posthuman is *post* in this respect.

The non-existence of the mind

Transhumanists continue the logocentric tradition of Western philosophy. By and large they believe that what makes us human, and what is most valuable about our humanity, is the particularity of our *minds*. We are thinking beings, conscious of ourselves and the world, rational agents that use our environment including our own bodies to pursue our own freely chosen ends. And because our essence consists in our thinking, it is at least conceivable that we may one day be able to transfer ("upload") our very being to a computer (or another biological brain) and thus achieve some kind of personal immortality. Generally, the organic body is held to be replaceable.

Nietzsche, however, opposed what he thought of as the Christian devaluation of the body and the bodily instincts. The mind, as an entity distinct from the body, was a clever invention, in other words a lie (EH, WII, 1157). It doesn't exist. Because the invented mind used to be taken as a proof of humanity's divine origin, one could only hope to reach human *perfection* by retracting, tortoise-like, one's senses into oneself, relinquishing all commerce with earthly things, discarding one's mortal shell, and thus retaining only what was essential to our humanity: pure spirit. For Nietzsche, however, "pure spirit" was "pure folly," and consciousness in general a "symptom of imperfection" (A, WII, 1174). Nietzsche's will to power, which is the essence of all life, and in fact the essence of all being, is preconscious and non-rational, although it has its own, superior, reason. One characteristic of the overhuman is that he knows himself to be "entirely body and nothing else" (TSZ, WII, 300).

The big lie of personal immortality

Transhumanism "stresses the moral urgency of saving lives", which makes anti-aging medicine "a key transhumanist priority" (Bostrom 2005b, 9). The indefinite extension of our

life spans is believed to be an obvious good. Nobody wants to die, death is an evil, and life generally (though not necessarily under any circumstances) a good. Hence, if we could achieve personal immortality, we should not hesitate, but seize it. For Nietzsche, however, the promise of personal immortality is nothing but a “big lie” (A, WII, 1205). Not so much because he thought it was impossible for us to ever become immortal, but rather because he believed that most of us are far too insignificant and worthless to *deserve* immortality.

Promising immortality (or indefinite life extension) to *everybody* only boosts the widespread delusion that the world revolves around every single one of us, whereas in fact most of us should never have been born in the first place. Most people actually die too late, not too early, because they have never learnt to live (TSZ, WII, 333). “‘Immortality’, granted to every Peter and Paul, has been the biggest, most vicious attack against *noble* humanity to date” (A, WII, 1205). The promise of personal immortality pretends that we are all equal. It denies difference and rank. Moreover, it is based on an erroneous reification (*Versubstanzialisierung*) and atomisation of the individual self. The ego is wrongly differentiated from the non-ego, which are in fact inseparable in the eternal process of becoming (E, WIII, 612). By wishing for personal immortality I cut myself off from this process, believe myself to be more important than the rest of the world, which, for all I care, may perish if only I will be safe (HATH, WI, 753). That is not an affirmation of power, but on the contrary an indication of impotence. That is why, just like the human, the self or the “I is something that needs to be overcome” (TSZ, WII, 303). Instead of doing everything to escape death we ought to practice the art of going at the right time and *celebrate* our dying as something that we freely embrace (TSZ, WII, 334), in order to plunge again into the great “ocean of becoming” (D, WI, 1193), in which we belong. The overhuman understands how to live *and* how to die. The transhumanist, in Nietzsche’s view, understands neither.

What is the Overhuman?

If the overhuman is not an improved version of the human, what is he? There are of course statements in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, especially in the first sections, that sound as if Nietzsche was indeed advocating the transformation of the human into some kind of posthuman. “Man is something that needs to be overcome” (TSZ, WII, 279). The overhuman is “the meaning of the earth” (TSZ, WII, 280), and man merely a “rope tied between animal and overhuman” (TSZ, WII, 281). But Nietzsche has no clear concept of the overhuman and produces at best vague intimations of what he has in mind (Shapiro 1980, 171). There is a chance that his overhuman is merely an ironic device, never meant to be taken seriously as an ideal human (Ansell-Pearson 1992, 310). After all, we shouldn’t forget that the overhuman was preached by Zarathustra, not Nietzsche himself, and may well be understood as a provisional concept in the ongoing movement of understanding (Lampert 1987, 258), as one possible perspective on the way things are, but not necessarily a true one, let alone *the* true one (Ansell-Pearson 1992, 314).

Nietzsche himself warned of misunderstanding the overhuman as some kind of higher human. Zarathustra, he reminds us, is the destroyer of all morality, not half saint, half genius, not an idealist type of higher human, not a Parsifal, but a Borgia (EH, WII, 1101). He is mainly characterised by contempt: of personal happiness and of reason (TSZ, WII, 280). The overhuman is not thought of as an exemplar of a future human or posthuman race, but as the “exceptional human” (*Ausnahme-Mensch*) (EC, WII, 1155), and there have always been such exceptional humans who were “in relation to the whole of humanity a kind of overhuman” (A, WII, 1166). Even though Nietzsche sometimes talks as if a whole race of overhumans were possible, the overhuman can in fact only exist in the singular, that is, set apart from others. Overhuman is who is strong enough to take reality *as it is*, in all its fearfulness (EC, WII, 1156), with all its pain and suffering, who does not want *anything* different, to the point that he would welcome the opportunity to live it all again, just as it was. The eternal recurrence of the same, the idea of which is the true centre of the *Zarathustra*, is counter to

the dynamic optimism that characterises transhumanist thought, and its non-selective affirmation by the overhuman counter to transhumanism's morally toned selectivity.

All this makes it very unlikely that Nietzsche would, as Sorgner (2009, 34) claims, "have been in favour of genetic engineering" or indeed the transhumanist movement as a whole.

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