



The Overhuman in the Transhuman

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Abstract

Stefan Sorgner (2009) says that on becoming familiar with transhumanism, he “immediately thought that there were many fundamental similarities between transhumanism and Nietzsche’s philosophy, especially concerning the concept of the posthuman and that of Nietzsche’s overhuman.” In contrast to Bostrom (2005), Sorgner sees significant and fundamental similarities between the posthuman and the overhuman. (I will adopt his use of “overhuman” in place of “overman” or *Übermensch*.) This overall view seems to me highly plausible. I agree with most of Sorgner’s comments in this respect. My intent is to give further support to the conceptual parallels. In addition, I argue that these are not merely parallels: transhumanist ideas were directly influenced by Nietzsche.

Introduction

Should transhumanists look upon Friedrich Nietzsche’s thought as an embarrassment – just as Nietzsche suggested the ape was to man? Is there an abyss between his “philosophy with a hammer” and the philosophy of transhumanism? Stefan Sorgner (2009) says that on becoming familiar with transhumanism, he “immediately thought that there were many fundamental similarities between transhumanism and Nietzsche’s philosophy, especially concerning the concept of the posthuman and that of Nietzsche’s overhuman.” In contrast to Bostrom (2005), Sorgner sees significant and fundamental similarities between the posthuman and the overhuman. (I will adopt his use of “overhuman” in place of “overman” or *Übermensch*.) This overall view seems to me highly plausible. I agree with most of Sorgner’s comments in this respect. My intent is to give further support to the conceptual parallels. In addition, I argue that these are not *merely* parallels: transhumanist ideas were directly *influenced* by Nietzsche.

First, it is necessary to note that an enormous range of ideas can be found in Nietzsche’s writing, some of which – especially comparing different periods of his work – may be inconsistent. Although there are clear parallels between Nietzsche’s thinking and some core transhumanist ideas, the latter are inspired *very selectively* by the former. Perhaps the most salient example of a Nietzschean idea alien to transhumanism is his “eternal recurrence.” Nietzsche thought this idea inseparable from that of the overman (or overhuman).

Many scholars have been puzzled at this connection and have often rejected eternal recurrence. Nietzsche's attachment to the concept probably results from his seeing it as the ultimate affirmation of the real world as against the Christian (and Platonic) denial of the primacy of the actual, physical reality. Not only is eternal recurrence a bizarre piece of metaphysics in itself, it was part of Nietzsche's denial of the idea of progress. Both for its inherent implausibility and for its opposition to progress, this concept cannot be reconciled with transhumanism. Nevertheless, several other concepts can be so reconciled. As a strong opponent of philosophical systems, Nietzsche could hardly object to transhumanism's picking and choosing from among his thoughts.

Direct influence

Sorgner's essay establishes parallels between transhumanism and Nietzsche's thought, but does not address the question of whether transhumanist ideas were directly *influenced* by Nietzsche. I can state with complete confidence that such an influence does indeed exist. I know that because his ideas influenced my own thinking. That thinking led to my introduction of the term "transhumanism" (only later did I discover Huxley's prior use of the term), to the publication of my essay, "Transhumanism: Towards a Futurist Philosophy" (More 1990), and to my original transhumanist statement, "The Extropian Principles" (later "The Principles of Extropy", More 1990b). While these essays are far from the only sources of contemporary transhumanism, these seminal writings have been influential. Since they were themselves influenced by some of Nietzsche's core ideas, the direct connection between transhumanism and Nietzsche is established.

In "Transhumanism: Towards a Futurist Philosophy," for instance, I wrote that "The religionist has no answer to the extropic challenge put by Nietzsche's Zarathustra: 'I teach you the overman. Man is something that is to be overcome. What have you done to overcome him?'" Sorgner notes, "The overhuman represents the meaning of the earth. The overhuman is supposed to represent the meaning-giving concept within Nietzsche's worldview which is supposed to replace the basically Christian worldview." He also states that "Nietzsche upheld that the concept of the overhuman is the meaning of the earth. I think that the relevance of the posthuman can only be fully appreciated if one acknowledges that its ultimate foundation is that it gives meaning to scientifically minded people." This again agrees closely with my "Transhumanism" essay in which I wrote: "I agree with Nietzsche (in *The Will to Power*) that nihilism is only a transitional stage resulting from the breakdown of an erroneous interpretation of the world. We now have plenty of resources to leave nihilism behind, affirming a positive (but continually evolving) value-perspective."

Critical rationalism

Reflecting its humanist and Enlightenment roots, transhumanism places an extremely high value on rationality. Especially popular among transhumanists is critical rationalism. This form of rationalism differs from the foundationalist certitude of Descartes. In its most consistent form it becomes pancritical rationalism (Bartley 1984). As Sorgner points out, Nietzsche, too, had an immense respect for critical thinking and valued scientific inquiry highly.

In my 1994 talk on pancritical rationalism at the first Extropy Institute conference (More 1994), I started by citing Nietzsche's statement: "A very popular error: having the courage of one's convictions; rather it is a matter of having the courage for an attack on one's convictions!" I might just as easily have cited another passage: "Convictions are more dangerous foes of truth than lies." Or the passage from *The Gay Science* (Nietzsche 1882): "*Not to question*, not to tremble with the craving and joy of questioning ... that is what I feel to be *contemptible*, and this feeling is the first thing I seek in everyone: some foolishness persuades me ever and again that every human being has this feeling, as a human being. It is my kind of injustice." Although Nietzsche is not essential to critical rationalism, he does provide inspiration for what might otherwise seem a dry epistemology.

Self-Transformation

One of the core transhumanist principles of extropy has been that of Self-Transformation. In a later version of the Principles, this was complemented by the principle of Self-Direction. Both of these are highly compatible with Nietzsche's thinking. They are also influenced by his work, along with that of many other thinkers. Most centrally, I would point to Zarathustra's declaration (Nietzsche 1885): "And life itself confided this secret to me: 'Behold,' it said, 'I am *that which must always overcome itself*.'"

From both the individual and species perspective, the concept of self-overcoming resonates strongly with extropic, transhumanist ideals and goals. Although Nietzsche had little to say about technology as a means of self-overcoming, neither did he rule it out. And, as a champion of what he saw as a coming age of science, it is not difficult to see technology as part of the process of self-overcoming, so long as it is integrated firmly with will and self-assertion. Self-assertion in this case, of course, being not assertion of an existing self to preserve itself, but a striving to "become who you are". New technologies allow us new means of becoming who we are – another step toward posthuman ideals – and new ways of "giving style" to our character. As Nietzsche put it: "a great and rare art!"

Utilitarianism, slave-morality, and heroic transhumanism

The sole reason Bostrom (2005) gives for saying that transhumanism has merely "some surface-level similarities with the Nietzschean vision" is that transhumanism – thanks to its Enlightenment roots – has an emphasis on individual liberties and a "concern for the welfare of all humans (and other sentient beings)." Bostrom is correct about this emphasis, as reflected, for instance, in the principle of Self-Direction in the Principles of Extropy. Bostrom concludes that transhumanism therefore "probably has as much or more in common with Nietzsche's contemporary J.S. Mill, the English liberal thinker and utilitarian."

Nietzsche famously had nothing positive to say about the utilitarians. When he mentioned them, it was to say something caustically critical, such as: "Man does not strive for pleasure; only the Englishman does" (Nietzsche 1889). Should we infer from Nietzsche's distaste for the slave-morality of utilitarianism (which turns every moral agent into a slave yoked to the task of maximizing the greatest good of the greatest number) that transhumanism has little in common with Nietzsche's thinking? I think not.

What we can infer is that differing variants of transhumanism are possible. Certainly there is no inconsistency between transhumanism and a utilitarian morality. But neither is there any inconsistency between transhumanism and a more Nietzschean view of morality. While Nietzsche viewed morality as essentially perspectival, we can easily enough fit him loosely within the virtue ethics approach classically represented by Aristotle. Yes, transhumanism can be sanitized and made safe so that it fits comfortably with utilitarian thinking. Or we can take seriously Nietzsche's determination to undertake a "revaluation of all values."

This not need imply any kind of illiberal social or political system. It may simply lead to a version of transhumanism that champions the self-overcoming of the individual without an *obligation* to "the masses." Many sound pragmatic reasons exist for each of us to want to uplift everyone – at least for those of us who reject the idea of society and economy as a zero-sum game. Pragmatic considerations are not the only reason a Nietzschean transhumanist may have for benevolence of this kind. Unlike a utilitarian transhumanist who must regard uplifting others as an obligation, a Nietzschean transhumanist would look upon the prospect of uplifting the masses as an expression of overflowing personal power or well-being or health.

Neither a utilitarian nor a Nietzschean transhumanism can plausibly claim to be the true transhumanism. Both share the central elements of the radical transhumanist worldview. My goal has not been to show that transhumanism *must* be Nietzschean. It has been to show that central elements of Nietzsche's philosophy are not only compatible with transhumanism, but have historically had a considerable direct influence on major strands of this philosophy of life.

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