



Book review: *Nietzsche and Transhumanism: Precursor or Enemy?*, ed. Yunus Tuncel

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Journal of Evolution and Technology - Vol. 27 Issue 2 – August 2017 - pgs 1-3

There is a science fiction novella, authored in 1989 by Robert Silverberg, which summarizes perfectly the state of the current debate about Nietzsche and transhumanism: “Enter a Soldier. Later: Enter Another.” Set in the twenty-second century, the story revolves around some technological wizards who, using Artificial Intelligence and historical documents, manage to reconstruct the personalities of two historical characters, Socrates and Francisco Pizarro, in order to have them debate about philosophical and ethical issues. This idea would probably appeal to transhumanists, as they are well known-supporters of the so-called “avatars,” virtual copies of living or dead people. This would also be the only way to settle definitively the debate at the center of *Nietzsche and Transhumanism: Precursor or Enemy?*, edited by Yunus Tuncel (Cambridge Scholars, 2017).

This stimulating philosophical anthology collects contributions from well-known transhumanist thinkers and respected Nietzsche scholars, in an attempt to answer a straightforward (yet controversial) question: What would Nietzsche have thought of the transhumanist endeavor? Would he have considered the transhumanist “posthuman,” an incarnation of his own “overhuman” or not? The title of the book mentions the concept of “precursor” which, from a historiographical viewpoint, is highly dubious: it assumes a crypto-Marxist or crypto-Hegelian idea of historical process seen as necessary, non-contingent. In other words: history would be made by fixed, necessary steps, one following necessarily the other, and that’s exactly why something can be said to be the “precursor” of something else.

The main protagonist of this debate is Stefan Lorenz Sorgner, a German philosopher and the author of an original approach that combines transhumanism and posthumanism, in what he has christened “metahumanism.” In his opening essay, “Nietzsche, the Overhuman, and Transhumanism,” Sorgner attempts to show that Nietzsche would have endorsed the transhumanist concept of the posthuman, and that there is a structural similarity between the Nietzschean concept of education and the transhumanist idea of enhancement. This effort is supported, in his own short essay, by Max More, who states that he was consciously influenced by Nietzsche in developing transhumanist thought.

As pointed out by one of the contributors, the Australian philosopher Russell Blackford, transhumanism is a broad intellectual movement with no body of codified beliefs and no agreed agenda for change; it is a cluster of philosophies, based on few assumptions (human beings are in a state of transition, change is desirable and it will happen through technological means, and so forth).

Transhumanism is a grassroots movement, composed and aggregated of loosely tied ideas, concerning the possibility of enhancing human capabilities through technological means, the radical extension of human life, youth, and health, and of course the opportunity and desirability of self-directed human evolution – that is, the opportunity for our species to take human evolution in our own hands. Accordingly, transhumanism is compatible with *any* ideology, religion, or philosophy willing to accept or at least not oppose these goals. This is why we can find blends of transhumanism with liberalism, anarchism, socialism, communism, fascism, atheism, Christianity, Mormonism and so forth. Similarly, we can blend transhumanism with any philosophical view of reality, for example with materialistic reductionism, naïve realism, posthumanism, and of course with the thought of Friedrich Nietzsche – as attempted by Ted Chu in his 2014 book *Human Purpose and Transhuman Potential* (Origin Press).

The core of Tuncel’s book is of course the – complicated? troubling? ambiguous? – relationship between Nietzsche and transhumanism, from the viewpoint of the Nietzschean concept of *Übermensch*. The anthology mirrors all the main knots we can find in Nietzsche scholarship *tout court*: for example, the relationship between the *Übermensch* and the eternal recurrence, the correct interpretation of the latter (ironic device or cosmological-metaphysical reality?), the “real” Nietzschean attitude toward life (acceptance and affirmation or passing into an overhuman condition?), and the knot of Nietzsche’s coherence (was his thought systematic from the very beginning until the end, or is his work contradictory?), and so forth.

Understanding why transhumanists want to distance themselves from the German philosopher is easy; after all, Nietzsche has been saluted by the national socialists as one of their own, and nobody wants to be associated with the ideology of Adolf Hitler. Moreover, the debate is quite technical; this means that, if you have even a little training in philosophy, you can definitely benefit from these contributions, and maybe mature your own position. If, on the other hand, you want to join fully into the debate, and you want to mature a personal educated position on this topic, I am afraid you will need to develop a deep Nietzschean background and understanding.

It is difficult to summarize the dense philosophical content of the book; so permit me to mention a few interesting suggestions that the reader can find and benefit from.

Ashley Woodward compares and confronts the concept of education in Nietzsche – which he identifies with the “Technologies of Self” mentioned by Foucault, such as reading, writing, meditation, dietary regimes, physical practices – with the technologies that transhumanists are very fond of, the “GRIN” technologies of genetics, robotics, information technology, and nanotechnology. Woodward hints at a future in which these two expressions of the human spirit might interact and interlace.

Paul S. Loeb gives us an interesting take on the topic of the overman/posthuman and its relationship with time. Far from being a prison, the eternal recurrence represents – when taken as a real feature of the world, and not as an ironic device – a powerful ontological tool, a way for the overman to will backward in circular time, an eternal recurrence-enabled mnemonic control of the past. The overman is thus able to defeat the contingency that informs our lives, gain complete control over time, autonomy, self-affirmation, and self-knowledge. After all, if you are able to will backward and turn your past, including any minimal detail, into a personal choice, you can know absolutely everything about yourself, your life, your relationship with your social and cultural context. This entails absolute self-knowledge and absolute

autonomy (and freedom from any form of contingency, any type of external causation). This is quite an evolutionary jump, for the Nietzschean overman!

Nietzsche has been one of the greatest thinkers in the history of philosophy, and innumerable scholars have dissected his works in order to understand the depths of his thought. Notwithstanding their efforts of explication, his philosophy seems to be an inexhaustible source of new insights into the philosophical assumptions of our contemporary world. So, we should welcome this new anthology with curiosity and fascination. Top-notch Nietzsche scholars and prominent transhumanists cover this difficult topic in an accessible and yet rigorous way, to outline the main core concepts of Nietzsche's thought, the principal ideas of the transhumanist movement, and their possible connections. The reader will benefit from a lively and well-argued debate on a topic that, far from being dry and "too scholarly," concerns the transformations that our lives will go through in the near future.