

Nietzsche and Transhumanism: Much Ado About Nothing?

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Abstract

Friedrich Nietzsche's importance as an antecedent thinker in the history of transhumanist ideas has been the subject of much lively scholarly debate. More publications have been dedicated to contesting the significance of this potential proto-transhumanist than any other. Key points made in the early years of the Nietzsche/transhumanism debates are renewed in chapter four of Stefan Lorenz Sorgner's recent book *On Transhumanism*, which is the focus of this special issue of *DELIBERATIO*. But in spite of Sorgner's (2016/2020) claim that "decisive similarities exist on a fundamental level" (p.57) between Nietzschean and transhumanist thinking, a scholarly consensus has not been reached on this point. In this paper, I analyze what I consider to be the most pertinent points in the ongoing academic debates over Nietzsche's significance in transhumanist history and prehistory. I begin by offering an explanation for why Nietzsche's ideas have been discussed at such length in relation to modern transhumanism, despite the fact that there appear to be few strong conceptual linkages. I then seek to resolve the ongoing Nietzsche/transhumanism debates by demonstrating that the positions of scholars on both sides of the issue can be fruitfully reconciled in pursuit of a normative reading of Nietzsche as a weak proto-transhumanist.

Keywords: Nietzsche, transhumanism, Superman, Overhuman, proto-transhumanist, posthuman

1. Nietzsche and Transhumanism: Much Ado About Nothing?

Friedrich Nietzsche is a widely debated figure in both philosophical and transhumanist circles. The leading transhumanist Max More strongly identifies with Nietzsche's sensibilities and cites the German philosopher as a formative influence on the development of his brand of transhumanist thought (1990b). In addition, the philosopher Stefan Lorenz Sorgner argues that "when examining transhumanism in depth, the similarity between transhumanist principles and those of Nietzsche's philosophy immediately becomes apparent." In Sorgner's (2016/2020) view, particular similarities can be drawn between the concept of "the posthuman and Nietzsche's overhuman" (p. 57).

Yet debate rages within and beyond the transhumanist community over *how significantly* Nietzsche's ideas presage those of contemporary transhumanists. It is only after thoroughly immersing myself in the published debates on the subject that I have concluded that, for the most part, the controversy is much ado about nothing.

As a historian, I first engaged with the Nietzsche/transhumanism debates when writing my doctoral thesis on the history of transhumanism (Bohan, 2018). It is not my aim to contribute another subjective reading of Nietzsche's primary texts here. Instead, I intend to show why a number of key points in the debates are worth emphasizing, and ultimately reconciling, in the pursuit of a normative view of Nietzsche's place in transhumanist history.

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My central claim is that we can fruitfully reconcile the positions of those who argue that there is a connection between Nietzsche and modern transhumanism and those who argue that there is not. Those who argue in the affirmative, like Max More (2010) and Stefan Lorenz Sorgner (2009; 2010; 2016/2020), are adamant that a connection can be traced. Yet they simultaneously concede that the connection is a fairly weak one, based on general conceptual similarities rather than direct ideological parallels. Meanwhile, scholars like Michael Hauskeller (2010) argue that there are marked differences between Nietzsche's ideas and those of modern transhumanists. Yet he concedes that some superficial similarities can be traced.

Seconding the transhumanist philosopher Nick Bostrom, I detect little more than "surface-level similarities" (2005a) between Nietzsche's core ideas and images and those of modern transhumanists. As even More (2010, p.3) and Sorgner (2009, p.38) concede, Nietzsche's evolutionary concepts like the Superman (the older translation of *Übermensch* that I will use throughout this essay) are not clearly linked to science or technology as a means of overcoming the human condition. But advocating upgrading the human condition *by way of technological enhancement* is an intrinsic (indeed, indispensable) part of a transhumanist worldview. According to the widely-cited definition in "The Transhumanist FAQ," transhumanism is:

The intellectual and cultural movement that affirms the possibility and desirability of fundamentally improving the human condition through applied reason, especially by developing and making widely available technologies to eliminate aging and to greatly enhance human intellectual, physical, and psychological capacities. (Bostrom, 2003, p. 4)

Sorgner (2009) owns that "Nietzsche does not refer to technological means of improvement," (p. 38) in his writings on the Superman, but attempts (drawing rather a long bow) to reconcile Nietzschean thinking with modern transhumanism by stating that "Nietzsche does not exclude the additional possibility of technological enhancement either" (p. 38). He also states "that it is possible that genetic engineering would have also been embraced by Nietzsche" had he lived in the age of such technologies (Sorgner, 2016/2020, p. 64). It is certainly possible that a person who died before a technology was invented might have approved of it had they lived to see it. But a heavy burden of proof falls on Sorgner here, who furnishes us with no strong evidence to indicate that Nietzsche did, or would have, championed any ideas that clearly foreshadow modern transhumanist principles or aims.

More's claim that Nietzsche's writings directly influenced his thinking when he was an early transhumanist thought leader carries some weight. But as this is the only direct line of influence between Nietzsche and transhumanism that has been firmly established—and as More's thinking on this issue cannot be taken as broadly representative of the views of the transhumanist community as a whole—I argue that the only sound conclusion is to dub Nietzsche a weak proto-transhumanist. He is peripherally relevant to historical discussions about the intellectual antecedents of transhumanism and without doubt he should be acknowledged in histories of transhumanism, but only briefly.

2. Why All the Fuss About Nietzsche?

Why has Nietzsche's relationship to modern transhumanism been the subject of such prolific academic debate? It is not because Nietzsche stands out as a thinker with obvious proto-transhumanist sensibilities. If the connection "between transhumanist principles and those of Nietzsche's philosophy immediately becomes apparent" to readers acquainted with both subjects, as Sorgner claims in *On Transhumanism* (2016/2020, p. 57) there would be very little fodder for debate. As it stands, no strong evidence has ever been cited to demonstrate that Nietzsche devised or championed any major ideas that are prototypically transhumanist, whether

it be: materialism, life-extension, cryonic preservation, or the belief that science and technology can, or should, facilitate radical human augmentations—of the kind that may extend the reach of our minds and bodies far beyond the capabilities of humanity, as we know it.¹ Even More (2013) concedes that while Nietzsche, “declared that humans are something to be overcome,” he “seemed not to see a role for technology in this transformation” (p. 10). Yet at least eighteen book chapters and journal articles have been published on the subject of Nietzsche’s role as a possible transhumanist precursor.²

When trying to explain this abundance of published material on this subject, it is helpful to remember how strong a pull Nietzsche’s writings exert upon readers and commentators. He is an esoteric, controversial, and popular figure in Western scholarship and philosophy. Western academics love to study him and a great many do, hence there are many scholars who are *predisposed* to write about Nietzsche and to discuss him in the context of the prominent ideas and issues of the day. With the emerging philosophy of transhumanism now becoming a hot topic in academia and beyond, it is natural that many Nietzsche scholars are engaging with this philosophical and social movement by addressing claims, both within and beyond the transhumanist community, that Nietzsche is a proto-transhumanist.

Another reason for the profusion of articles on the subject may be that, as with Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, pondering the many ambiguities of Nietzsche’s works and reading them in new ways never gets old. The more ambiguity in the text, the more scope there is to project one’s own ideals onto it. The text can then always be made to seem, and therefore be deemed, relevant. Extreme polar views are also more likely to emerge where there is significant textual ambiguity, and polarization invariably sets the stage for very lively and polemical debates (see Babich, 2011), which, in turn, often incite further commentary. Nietzsche himself touched on the virtues of complex texts that are resistant to interpretation in *Ecce Homo*, writing, “Is Hamlet understood? It is not doubt, but certitude that drives one mad” (2007, p. 194).

Like *Hamlet*, Nietzsche’s works defy fixed interpretation and it is extremely difficult to reconcile the abundant contradictions in Nietzsche’s writings, or to establish with any certainty what he actually believed about many issues. It is also worth highlighting that in many of the articles published on Nietzsche and transhumanism so far, the author relies heavily on very selective primary textual analysis of Nietzsche’s works and hinges their argument on subjective statements about what Nietzsche supposedly believed. For instance, More (2010) and Loeb (2011) argue that the Superman and the concept of eternal recurrence are intrinsically linked, while Sorgner (2010) and Hauskeller (2010) maintain that they can be separated. Ilia Stambler argues that Nietzsche leaned towards the literary over the scientific (2010), while Sorgner (2010) argues the opposite.

I posit that selection bias is more of a handicap in the analysis of Nietzsche’s works than it is in other bodies of work that espouse a clear and consistent thesis throughout. On almost every subject that Nietzsche wrote about, from Darwin and evolution, to religion, science and art, we can find one group of Nietzsche scholars who use textual evidence to argue that he believed one thing, and another group who argue just as convincingly that he believed the opposite. While Nietzsche’s thinking probably changed on many issues throughout his life (to cite one well known example, he was an avid admirer of Wagner in his youth, only to become a virulent detractor of the composer some years later), it is essential to remember that Nietzsche was a writer who dabbled in “many styles and masks” (Davey, 1997, p. xxix). His writings are profoundly ambiguous, his sentiments appear to vacillate across his major works, and some of

¹ See: “The Extropian Principles,” and “The Transhumanist FAQ” for the two most prominent historical outlines of core transhumanist principles.

² Many of the articles and chapters in question appear in: the *Journal of Evolution and Technology* 21(1); *The Agonist* 4(2); and Tuncel (2017).

his works even appear to be internally inconsistent. As Kristen Brown notes, “among the tales he tells, Nietzsche seems to offer none as his official story” (2006, p. 3).

Over-reliance on textual evidence is a methodological weakness that I will try to avoid here. I use the many ambiguities, both in Nietzsche’s texts and in secondary readings of them, to show that, when scores of Nietzsche experts cannot agree about fundamental questions, the only sound conclusion to draw is that Nietzsche’s works are far too ambiguous to be closely linked with modern transhumanist sentiments. If there were clearer precursor ideas in Nietzsche’s writings, in the form of direct quotes overtly championing science, technology and technological transcendence, the selection bias would be less important as these quotes would be still worth discussing, even if counter-sentiments could be found. But in the absence of *any* overt and unambiguous proto-transhumanist sentiments, *even inconsistent ones*, there is no reason to try and force a connection through a subjective reading of cherry-picked quotes.

In the instances where I quote Nietzsche directly, it is always with the implied caveat that the quote has been plucked from a sea of ambiguous and contradictory musings. The quote does not definitively prove that Nietzsche was any one thing in particular. All any quote really shows, as per my central argument, is how easy it is to pick and choose from a plethora of ambiguous passages and quotable aphorisms.

3. The Nietzsche/Transhumanism Debates

The Nietzsche/transhumanism debates began in 2009 when the leading transhumanist publication, the *Journal of Evolution and Technology* (JET), published an article by the philosopher Stefan Lorenz Sorgner, titled, “Nietzsche, the Overhuman, and Transhumanism”. Responding to Bostrom’s (2005a) comment that modern transhumanism only has “some surface-level similarities with the Nietzschean vision” (p. 4), Sorgner argued that there are strong parallels between Nietzsche’s concept of the Superman and the transhumanist concept of posthumanity—at least in some of the versions espoused by transhumanists. The similarities, in Sorgner’s view, lie in the shared emphasis on humanity as an evolutionary state that is unfinished and will continue to evolve.

Sorgner’s (2010) position rests on the claim that Nietzsche’s ideas, though not directly suggestive of transhumanist aims or principles, are “structurally analogous” (p.2), as they are backed by a similar underlying logic. He argues that in general terms, Nietzsche and transhumanists each “hold a dynamic view of nature and values” (2009, p.30) and embrace the potential for change. Sorgner also suggests that the transhumanist concept of the posthuman, like Nietzsche’s concept of the Superman, represents an emergent future being in the great evolutionary chain of becoming, which will surpass, and perhaps ultimately supersede, humanity, as we know it.

Yet Sorgner (2009) concedes that these are very general similarities and he acknowledges that “Nietzsche does not specify” the means by which his Superman ideal ought to be created (p.37). Indeed, he does not. But more than this, it is not clear that Nietzsche believed a Superman *should* be created. Transhumanists, on the other hand, explicitly emphasize that desirable forms of posthumanity should be brought about by actively pursuing advances in modern science and technology, particularly in the fields of nanotechnology, biotechnology, information technology and cognitive science (NBIC) (Bostrom, 2005b, pp. 3-4).

The “structural similarities” Sorgner (2009) detects between Nietzschean thinking and transhumanist philosophy are based on the very loose (perhaps humanistic, but not obviously *transhumanistic*) idea of meliorism. He argues that Nietzsche’s belief in education as a means of human improvement would also have likely rendered him open to the general principle of human improvement through modern scientific and technological modification. It is not at all clear why this would be the case, though this assertion is reiterated in *On Transhumanism* (pp. 61-64).

Nietzsche never envisioned genetic engineering, biohacking, intelligence augmentation, or radical life extension. Sorgner appears to force a connection by suggesting that Nietzsche *may* have approved of something like genetic engineering, had he heard of it, because it is essentially a more radical extension of the idea of human improvement, which Nietzsche explicitly advocated when championing educational reforms (2010, pp.2-4).

After Sorgner's initial paper was published, the *JET* editors deemed the subject worthy of further debate and solicited articles in response for a special issue of the journal in 2010. The debate then carried over into a special issue of the Nietzsche Circle journal, *The Agonist*, in 2011. There, Sorgner's claims were introduced and analysed by three non-transhumanist philosophers, accompanied by Sorgner's reply. In 2017, the articles from both special issues were reprinted in the edited volume *Nietzsche and Transhumanism: Precursor or Enemy?* (Tuncel, 2017) and six new essays on the subject were solicited for the final section of the book.

Below, I'll explore the key arguments in favor of the proposition that Nietzsche is an important proto-transhumanist, followed by those against. I primarily focus on the arguments made in favor by Max More, which dovetail in part with Sorgner's. More is the only leading transhumanist to make such an argument and his essay offers unique perspective and insight on the issue of Nietzsche's role in transhumanist history. When discussing counter-arguments I primarily focus on the points raised by the philosopher Michael Hauskeller.

I also refer peripherally to a number of other essays, which can be found in *Nietzsche and Transhumanism*.³ But as many of them get bogged down in semantic, ideological, or other peripheral debates, I have deemed More's points and Hauskeller's counterpoints to be the most relevant in framing the overarching question: *Is Nietzsche a major intellectual forebear of transhumanism?*

4. In Favor of Nietzsche

One of Nietzsche's most prominent transhumanist admirers is Max More. More co-founded the first large and influential transhumanist movement in the late 1980s, called 'extropianism.' Sorgner (2009) argues that parallels can be drawn between Nietzsche's concept of the Superman and the transhumanist concept of the posthuman, but More goes further, declaring that "transhumanist ideas were directly *influenced* by Nietzsche." He backs this claim with the declaration, "I can state with complete confidence that such an influence does indeed exist. I know that because his ideas influenced my own thinking" (2010).

More states that his foundational 1990 essay, "Transhumanism: Towards a Futurist Philosophy," was directly influenced by Nietzschean ideas. He also affirms that Nietzsche's thinking shaped his original transhumanist statement, "The Extropian Principles," (More 1990a) in which the first formal principles of extropian transhumanism were outlined. While he concedes that "these essays are far from the only sources of contemporary transhumanism," More (2010) maintains that, "these seminal writings have been influential" in transhumanist culture (p. 2). After testifying that Nietzschean ideas directly influenced him when he composed these foundational texts, More (2010) affirms that, "the direct connection between transhumanism and Nietzsche is established" (p.2).

So, how exactly did Nietzsche influence More's ideas? In the 1990s, extropian transhumanists, under More's leadership, adopted a style reminiscent of Nietzsche's literary bravado and contrarian chutzpah. In *Twilight of the Idols*, Nietzsche wrote 'Maxims and Missiles,' which were simultaneously bold, cutting and poetic. In one example, he wrote, "I distrust all systematisers, and avoid them. The will to a system shows a lack of honesty" (2007, p. 8). While

³ Three articles from *JET* 21.1 by David Roden (2010), William Sims Bainbridge (2010) and Ilia Stambler (2010) are not included in this edited collection but can be found online at <http://jetpress.org/>

extropianism was itself a system, extropians, like Nietzsche, identified strongly with the rejection of orthodox systems. In another maxim, Nietzsche declared, “What matters it whether I am acknowledged to be right! I am much too right. And he who laughs best today, will also laugh last” (2007, p. 10). There are striking similarities between Nietzsche’s brazen and confident tone in many of his writings and the provocative and “bold language” (More, 2013) that was characteristic of extropian literature.

Nietzsche’s language was often derisive and unabashedly critical. When lampooning the German state and the German education system, he stridently condemned the intellectual culture among the university students of the day, declaring: “what barrenness! and what self-satisfied and lukewarm intellectuality!” (2007, pp. 42-43). He viewed universities as state run “involuntary forcing houses for this kind of withering-up of the instincts of intellectuality” and boldly proclaimed, “culture and the state—let no-one be deceived on this point—are antagonists” (2007, p.43). Extropians were also extremely hostile towards the state and were “almost always highly libertarian” (More, 1991/92, p. 20).

I am not arguing that Nietzsche was a libertarian, or that anti-statism is a major point of overlap between his worldview and that of modern transhumanists. Only that Nietzsche and extropians expressed their hostility towards the state through declarations that were similarly bold and provocative in style. In 1990, More wrote forcefully about “the entropic forces of religion and ‘state’” (1990b, p. 6). He then closed the piece with a declaration that is stylistically reminiscent of some of Nietzsche’s aphorisms: “No more gods, no more faith, no more timid holding back. Let us blast out of our old forms, our ignorance, our weakness, and our mortality. The future is ours” (More, 1990b, p. 11).

The frequent use of italics, exclamation marks, and other forms of grammatical emphasis, are also common traits frequently found in Nietzsche’s, and the young Max More’s writings. In one of his many anti-Christian tirades, Nietzsche mused with incredulity at the religious beliefs of his contemporaries, writing: “The error of spirit regarded as a cause, confounded with reality! And made the measure of reality! And called *God!*” (2007, p. 32). Nietzsche simply couldn’t fathom the belief in a supernatural deity. He later proclaimed, “what an *abortion of falsehood* modern man must be, in order to be able *without a blush* still to call himself a Christian!” (2007, p. 128). A similarly emphatic style is evident in More’s 1993 version of the “Extropian Principles,” in which he boldly declared: “Where others see difficulties, we see challenges. Where others give up, we move forward. Where others say *enough is enough*, we say: *Forward! Upward! Outward!* We espouse personal, social, and technological evolution into ever higher forms” (p. 11).

It is also no accident that together, More’s extropian principles spell out the acronym BEST DO IT! The acronym later became BEST DO IT SO! after the principle of *spontaneous order* was added in 1992, and after the order of the principles was reshuffled the following year (More, 1993, p. 13). Like Nietzsche, extropians were extremely fond of pithy quips and controversial statements and did not shy away from blunt and emphatic declarations (Bohan, 2018). Surprisingly, More did not hone in on this connection in the *JET* debates, though he did refer briefly to a stylistic connection between Nietzschean and transhumanist language a few years later (More, 2013).

While Sorgner (2011) remarked that, “one of the most important differences between Nietzsche’s and the transhumanists’ approach to understanding the world” may be the fact that “the styles in which they put forward their positions radically differ from each other” (p.36), he was presumably relying on a narrow reading of twenty-first century transhumanist books and journal articles. Extropian culture and the transhumanist culture of the *very* early twenty-first century had a strong literary streak and a decidedly playful and bold aesthetic, though it is certainly true that this bold style is no longer a defining characteristic of mainstream transhumanists groups or leaders (Bohan, 2018).

Can any further connections be traced between extropianism and Nietzsche? More cites two direct examples in which he drew upon Nietzsche's ideas in his 1990 essay "Transhumanism: Towards a Futurist Philosophy." In one instance, he wrote: "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?'" (More, 2010, p. 2).

In the original essay, More argued that extropian transhumanism is a fundamentally atheistic (indeed, anti-theistic) philosophy and that religion is an inherently entropic (regressive) force. To be *extropic*, or extropian, you must seek to overcome the limits of your present self, which entails constantly re-assessing your core values and aims, and using science, reason and technology to improve your biological state (1990b, pp. 6-11).

In the second instance where More (1990b) quoted Nietzsche, he 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. (p. 9)

As More's statement attests, extropians strongly identified with Nietzsche's idea of the "*Transvaluation of all Values*" (2007, p. 175) and were similarly enthusiastic about overcoming orthodox belief systems. More suggests that we need not succumb to nihilism and despair in the wake of the death of God, because sophisticated modern technology has facilitated the emergence of new and fruitful human aspirations and values, in particular, the transhumanist value of radical self-overcoming. Transhumanism therefore becomes More's solution to Nietzsche's ongoing existential conundrum about what we should do, value, and aspire to become, in a world where truth is relative and orthodox belief systems are built on shaky ground.

Further echoing Nietzsche, and aligning the German philosopher's stance on moral relativity with his own transhumanist declarations about the relative value of being human, a young More (1990b) wrote: "There is no objective value; value is a product of consciousness. Our situation as conscious beings faced with choices demands that we adopt and continually refine and develop moral principles" (p. 10).

In 1994, More again quoted Nietzsche in the opening of a transhumanist conference presentation, proclaiming: "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!" (qtd. in More, 2010, p.2). Though these are Nietzsche's words, More deployed them for a more specific, transhumanist purpose—to emphasize the importance of overcoming the belief that humanity represents the ideal, or most desirable, state of being.

Throughout the 1990s More enthusiastically seconded Nietzsche's staunch rejection of Christianity and echoed the German philosopher's lampooning of blind faith and the herd-like belief in predetermined ideas of good and evil (More, 1991/2, p. 21; More, 1993, p. 17). While twenty-first century transhumanism is a diverse movement, and certainly not an exclusively atheistic philosophy (Pellissier, 2013, p. 21) the seed branch of extropian transhumanism *was* explicitly atheistic and More identified strongly with Nietzsche's atheistic sensibilities. More quoted Nietzsche many times throughout the 1990s and appears to have viewed the German philosopher as a kind of kindred spirit.

Yet it doesn't follow that Nietzsche would have viewed the extropians, or other transhumanists in the same kindred light. Extropians like More transposed Nietzsche's sentiments about atheism and moral relativity onto the canvas of the modern world. They adapted them by arguing that rigid adherence to the status quo in all its forms (religious, political, scientific, biological, human) would inhibit humanity's progressive overcoming of itself and hold back our evolution towards a trans, or posthuman state (More, 1991/92, pp. 18-28; More, 1993, pp. 17-18). While Nietzsche overtly rejected religious and institutional orthodoxies,

More encouraged an extension of this broadly heterodox state of mind in order to support the transhumanist rejection of the human-centric aspects of humanism. Why only seek improvement within biologically human limits? Why not seek to transcend humanity itself?

Posthumanity, then, is More's *personal* Superman ideal. He read and interpreted Nietzsche with a transhumanist gloss and found key similarities between 'his Nietzsche' and transhumanism, while others have viewed 'their Nietzsche' quite differently. I mean this as more than a simple truism about subjectivity. While everything can be read with a different emphasis, few works or bodies of work can be read and re-read with such wildly contradictory interpretations as those of Nietzsche. Any rigid interpretation of Nietzsche's works is necessarily fraught, as he himself acknowledged in *Ecce Homo*, writing: "no-one can draw more out of things, books included, than he already knows... he who thought he had understood something in my work, had as a rule adjusted something in it to his own image" (2007, p. 205).

More (2010) echoes the points above, remarking: "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" (p.1).

More further acknowledges that the similarities he has identified "between Nietzsche's thinking and some core transhumanist ideas" were "inspired *very selectively* by the former." He concedes that he selectively co-opted the Superman motif while rejecting Nietzsche's related idea of eternal recurrence, which he views as a "denial of the idea of progress." He felt justified in doing so, because, "as a strong opponent of philosophical systems, Nietzsche could hardly object to transhumanism's picking and choosing from among his thoughts" (2010, p.2). Probably not. But the fact that major contradictions are brushed aside by More, and that key ideas are taken out of context, does weaken any case in favor of Nietzsche as a strong intellectual antecedent of modern transhumanism.

In effect, More acknowledges this. His strongest claim in favor of a connection is that he was personally inspired by certain selectively chosen ideas in Nietzsche's works. On this, we should take him at his word. In a final clarification, More (2010) writes:

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. (p. 3)

More argues that Nietzsche had a considerable influence on major branches of transhumanism, namely extropianism. But he does not claim that Nietzsche considerably influenced any other leading transhumanist thinker or major branch of transhumanist culture. The above discussion clearly shows that More and the extropians *were* influenced by Nietzsche. However, they were primarily influenced by generic and selectively chosen ideas and traits. Extropians shared with Nietzsche a stylistic literary bravado and they each rejected religion and moral certitude. Both placed a strong thematic emphasis on self-transcendence and the overcoming of orthodoxy. Yet the means by which Nietzsche thought humans may transcend themselves, and those championed by transhumanists, are not demonstrably aligned. Extropian culture, and More's views on Nietzsche, are also not representative of transhumanist culture at large.

Given the limited nature of his claims, More's argument can be easily reconciled with other scholars, like Hauskeller, who ostensibly sit on the other side of the fence. As we will see below, Hauskeller does not deny that some similarities can be detected between Nietzsche's ideas and modern transhumanism. But he downplays the significance of any discernible parallels and raises some very interesting points about the ambiguities in Nietzsche's works that are worth exploring.

5. The Controversy

The editor of the *JET* special issue on Nietzsche, Russell Blackford (2010), had the following to say about the connection between Nietzsche and transhumanism:

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?. (p. ii)

Responding to Sorgner in *JET*, Hauskeller declared: “I think 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.” One such difference, in Hauskeller’s view, is that, “transhumanists believe that it is both possible and desirable to improve human nature by means of technology.” Therefore, “there is a moral imperative at the heart of the transhumanist agenda” (2010, p. 5).

Conversely, in Hauskeller’s (2010) reading of Nietzsche’s moral relativism, “there are no moral facts and nothing is truly better or worse than anything else” (p. 5). Finding a Nietzschean quote of his own to contradict the passages More quotes about humans transcending themselves and becoming Supermen, Hauskeller (2010) reminds us that Nietzsche wrote in *Ecce Homo*: “The last I would promise is to better humanity (p. 5)”. Conceding that, “Transhumanists may want to reevaluate certain aspects of our existence,” he nevertheless maintains that, “they certainly do not, as Nietzsche did, advocate the reevaluation of *all* present values” (Hauskeller, 2010, p. 6).

Hauskeller also cites examples from Nietzsche’s works to argue that the German philosopher revered embodiment, in contrast with transhumanists’ primary focus on the mind as the center of identity and selfhood. He further argues that Nietzsche opposed the goal of immortality, deeming most humans unworthy of such an outcome. Most transhumanists, on the other hand, view death as a tragedy (Kurzweil, 2005) and consider the development of life-extension technologies to be a moral imperative (Bostrom, 2003, p. 31). Sorgner (2010) admits that, “it is correct that Nietzsche criticises immortality,” but he argues that this criticism does not render Nietzsche’s views contrary to the transhumanist position as, “he merely criticizes the concept as it was put forward by Christian theologians who linked it to the existence of an immortal soul which lives in the afterworld” (p.13). Again, this reasoning saddles Sorgner with a burden of proof (to show that Nietzsche would have advocated for a *transhumanist* brand of life-extension) that he does not satisfy.

One of Hauskeller’s most pertinent observations concerns deploying quotes about the Superman from Nietzsche’s *Zarathustra* as evidence that Nietzsche believed that humans should undergo a quasi-transhumanist project of progressive self-improvement. Hauskeller’s (2010) doubt stems from the fact that “Nietzsche has no clear concept of the overhuman and produces at best vague intimations of what he has in mind” (p.7). The sociologist William Sims Bainbridge (2010), who was an early pioneer of the fringe transhumanist group, the Order of Cosmic Engineers, seconds this point, writing:

We cannot be certain what Nietzsche himself would have said about transhumanism or its connection to his own system, in great measure because much of what he wrote was gloriously incoherent, in the way that poetry can mean more than it says by leaving much to the imagination. (p. 48)

With a nod to the philosopher Keith Ansell-Pearson, Hauskeller (2010) also notes that, “there is a chance that his [Nietzsche’s] overhuman is merely an ironic device, never meant to be taken

seriously as an ideal human” (p. 7). Sorgner disagrees. He argues that Nietzsche’s Superman is clearly a serious concept of evolutionary improvement, declaring that “Nietzsche saw human beings as the link between animals and overhumans” (2010, p. 2). Yet the only evidence he mounts to support this supposition is the claim that Nietzsche wrote, in his notebooks (which are not quoted) about how the overhuman might be realised “by means of education” (2010, p. 2).

Unfortunately, being a champion of education, and better ways of ordering the mind, is nowhere sufficient to claim transhumanist (or prototypically transhumanist) sensibilities. I also second Hauskeller’s point that we must leave room for the *considerable* possibility that the Superman concept in *Zarathustra* is deliberately ironic. As much of the debate over Nietzsche and transhumanism revolves around the concept of the Superman, it is worth exploring why it is so problematic, before concluding with a definitive assessment of Nietzsche’s significance in proto-transhumanist history.

6. Nietzsche and the Superman

More and Sorgner argue that the concept of the Superman strongly resonates with the transhumanist idea of actively overcoming one’s humanity. Granted, Nietzsche did hint at such a prospect, but he did so in a vague and peculiar way. The form of overcoming that Nietzsche wrote of in *Zarathustra* is conveyed through riddle and aphorism, and through the constant interplay of opposing and irreconcilable statements that render truth and fixed meaning impossible to divine. To cite one famous example, Nietzsche writes, “Man is a rope stretched between the animal and the Superman—a rope over an abyss,” and declares that, “what is great in man is that he is a bridge and not a goal.” Yet he immediately follows with the musing that, “what is loveable in man is that he is an *over-going* and a *down-going*” and follows with, “I love those that know not how to live except as down-goers, for they are the over-goers” (1997, p. 8).

If the first two quotes are read in isolation they can easily be interpreted as a championing of the emergence of a superior, transcendent being. But the nature of this Superman ideal is complicated by Nietzsche’s incessant incorporation of dualities. Humans are unfinished and we could be more than what we are, but the last two quotes introduce the possibility that to get there we may need to embrace the chaotic and limiting elements of our nature, constantly question orthodoxy (including modern scientific orthodoxies and doctrines of progress) and revel more in instinct and feeling than herd mentalities. Perhaps to be superior and to achieve an *over-going* of what we are, we need a *down-going* (perhaps in the form of a return to a more animalistic nature) in order to cast off the shackles of culture and belief? (Lemm, 2009, pp. 4, 6; 90-91).

Nietzsche’s *Zarathustra* declares that he wants to be free of “herds and herdsmen and corpses” and associate with “the creators, the reapers and the rejoicers.” By seeing beyond present conventions and values, he writes, “over the loitering and the tardy will I leap” (2007, p. 18). This passage certainly reads as advocating conscious, intellectual overcoming, rather than animalistic ‘down-going as overgoing.’ The problem is that the prophet *Zarathustra* introduces a new system of belief with the idea of the Superman. He then becomes the very thing ostensibly being parodied throughout *Zarathustra* and rejected in Nietzsche’s major works: religious proselytizing and the cultivation of herd mentalities.

When the prophet *Zarathustra* is shunned by the masses, he has an epiphany. He must stop trying to preach his new values to the herd and instead find his equals. Among these equals, “the rainbow will I show them, and all the stairs to the Superman” (2007, p. 18). While *Zarathustra* thinks he is abandoning the role of preacher here, the classic religious trope of a wise man showing others a promised land resounds as strongly as before. *Zarathustra* muses that the herds hate “him who breaketh up their tables of values... he, however, is the creator.” Another religious trope is apparent here, this time of God’s representative believing his values to be true and superior (remember, *Zarathustra* is also named after the Persian prophet Zoroaster, whose

teachings spawned the dominant Persian religion of Zoroastrianism). Zarathustra then concludes that his path is the new and righteous one and that creators such as himself must “grave new values on new tables” (2007, p. 17).

These passages can be credibly read as a parodic image of a philosophical and religious revolution that will inevitably sink back into the trap of becoming a new orthodoxy, with a new creed set in stone. An ‘eternal recurrence,’ as it were, of human folly, precipitated by the weaknesses of our all-too-human nature. This is certainly not the only reading, but it is a plausible one. To cherry pick a quote of my own from *The Birth of Tragedy*, we are, according to Nietzsche: “a chorus of natural beings who live ineradicably, as it were, behind all civilization and remain eternally the same, despite the changes of generations and of the history of nations” (2000, p. 59).

The further complication in *Zarathustra* is the reliability of the speaker of the text. Should we read the words of the prophet Zarathustra as the words of Nietzsche himself? On the basis of the seemingly parodic quality of the text, which appears to consistently satirize religious hypocrisy while thwarting any clear reading through the constant interplay of dualities that are not fully reconciled, there is good reason to consider that the speaker may be unreliable. While there is much debate over this question, the Nietzsche scholar Dirk R. Johnson suggests that Zarathustra’s role in the text is to serve as a literary mouthpiece and not as the voice of Nietzsche himself (2010, p. 53), while Kristen Brown offers the more general, but pertinent remark that, “among the tales he tells, Nietzsche seems to offer none as his official story” (2006, p. 3).

7. Conclusion

We can never establish whether Nietzsche would have approved of transhumanist ideas if he had lived long enough to encounter them. Those who claim that we can have good intuitions about this (Sorgner, 2016/2020) carry a heavy burden of proof. To date, no compelling passages have been unearthed, or quoted in any publication in the Nietzsche/transhumanism debates, which clearly foreshadow modern transhumanist thinking.

Nietzsche doesn’t champion the use of science and technology to radically extend human lifespans, eliminate ageing and disease, colonize other planets, develop brain-machine interfaces, alter our genetic makeup, or enhance our intellectual capabilities. Transhumanists need not champion *every* technology of this ilk, but they broadly express an interest in, and enthusiasm for, all of these ideas. Indeed, the transhumanist emphasis on using *technology* to enhance the human condition and overcome steadfast biological limitations is the principal characteristic that differentiates it from humanism. For Nietzsche to credibly be considered a strong proto-transhumanist, evidence must be cited showing that Nietzsche championed the use of technology to overcome human limitations. No such evidence has, to date, been unearthed.

It is also worth emphasizing that only one prominent transhumanist (More, 2010) has argued for a strong connection to date, while another leading transhumanist (Bostrom, 2005a, p. 4) believes the connection is largely superficial. Almost all other participants in these debates have been non-transhumanist philosophers. Where do the leading transhumanist contributors stand? To my mind, not terribly far apart. As representative transhumanists, More, Bostrom and Blackford basically agree that at least some *superficial* similarities do exist between Nietzschean writings and ideas and those of modern transhumanists. Sorgner (2016/2020) thinks those similarities run deeper, but has yet to provide compelling evidence to support that view. In the end, I side with Bostrom and Hauskeller in viewing the similarities between Nietzschean thinking and modern transhumanism as largely unremarkable.

Was Nietzsche a proto-transhumanist? The answer is yes. But in a very limited way. Nietzsche influenced More and the brazen style and flair of extropianism. But as I have shown—and as More and Sorgner effectively concede—his works do not contain any strong or non-

controversial proto-transhumanist ideas or sentiments. At best there is a loose conceptual connection between the concept of the posthuman and the vague and unreliably outlined idea of the Superman. Nietzsche is a fascinating enigma and a beguiling subject to write about. But he is ultimately a weak transhumanist precursor and this should become the normative view of him in proto-transhumanist history.

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