

Nietzsche and Transhumanism: The Case of the Overhuman (Übermensch)

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Abstract

In contrast to Stefan L. Sorgner, Nick Bostrom does not recognize Nietzsche as a precursor of transhumanism. Against Bostrom's view, this article argues that at the center of Nietzsche's thought is his concern with the future and enhancement of the human being and how this can be promoted. In his interpretation of Nietzsche, Sorgner claims that the "overhuman" (*Übermensch*) has remarkable similarities with the concept of the posthuman, which means that he understands Nietzsche's overhumans as a new species. Against Sorgner's interpretation, this paper argues that Nietzsche does not conceive of the "overhuman" (*Übermensch*) as a new species. The article gives an interpretation of Nietzsche's concept of the *Übermensch* focusing on the differences between his understanding of the overhuman in his philosophical narrative *Zarathustra* and in his late writings. It furthers argues that the distinction Zarathustra draws between higher humanity and the overhuman is not very important for Nietzsche's own thought. The paper also raises the question whether Nietzsche, at least at some stages of his work, toyed with the possibility of the evolutionary step from humankind toward a new and higher species.

Keywords: humanity, evolution, human enhancement, higher species, higher humanity, Zarathustra

1. Transhuman, Posthuman, and Overhuman

In his book *On Transhumanism*, Stefan L. Sorgner defends a "weak Nietzschean transhumanism" (2016/2020, p. 4, pp. 74-75). In contrast, in "A History of Transhumanist Thought", Nick Bostrom does not recognize Nietzsche as a precursor of transhumanism. Bostrom admits only "some surface-level similarities with the Nietzschean vision" of the "overhuman"¹ (*Übermensch*) (Bostrom, 2005a, p. 4). In *On Transhumanism*, for good reasons Sorgner rejects Bostrom's view and claims that Nietzsche is a "progenitor of transhumanism" (2016/2020, p. 57). After a quick overview of the transhumanist project in section II, section III of this article defends Sorgner's claim and argues that at the center of Nietzsche's thought is his concern with the future and enhancement of the human being and how this can be promoted.² Nietzsche's concern goes along with his fear of forms of human decay and degeneration such as the "last man" (Z I, Prologue 5, cf. BGE 203).

¹ In this article, I translate "*Übermensch*" with "overhuman" instead of "overman" because the German term applies to men and women.

² Sorgner draws attention to the fact that also Max More's transhumanism was "influenced by Nietzsche's philosophy" (Sorgner, 2021, p. 73; More, 2010).

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In *On Transhumanism*, Sorgner also defends the thesis that “Nietzsche’s concepts of higher humanity and of the overhuman resemble Esfandiary’s concepts of the trans - and posthuman” (2016/2020, p. 67). Sorgner further claims that there are “striking” similarities between “the concept of the posthuman and Nietzsche’s ‘overhuman’ (*Übermensch*)” (2016/2020, p. 57; cf. p. 75). To understand these claims, it is necessary to consider the terms used by Fereidoun M. Esfandiary, who later changed his name to FM-2030. According to Sorgner’s rendering of Esfandiary’s definitions, “the transhuman still belongs to the human species but has already attained qualities that go beyond the usual concept of the human and has the potential to initiate the evolutionary step toward a new species. The new species is referred to here as the posthuman” (Sorgner, 2016/2020, p. 65; cf. p. 5; cf. FM-2030, 1989). Section IV of this article claims that the distinction Nietzsche’s philosophical narrative *Zarathustra* draws between higher humanity (Esfandiary’s transhuman) and the overhuman or *Übermensch* (Esfandiary’s posthuman) is not very important for Nietzsche’s own thought. According to the main thesis of section IV, Nietzsche does not conceive of the overhuman (*Übermensch*) as a new species. This section also argues that Nietzsche’s concern for the overhuman is an integral part of his concern for the future development and enhancement of human beings. Section V is a brief conclusion that also raises the question whether Nietzsche, at least at some stages of his work, speculated on the question whether a new and higher species could supersede the human species.

2. The Transhumanist Project

The term “transhumanism” was coined by Julian Huxley in his 1951 essay “Knowledge, Morality, and Destiny” and further developed in his 1957 book *New Bottles for New Wine* (1957). According to Huxley, the “human species can, if it wishes, transcend itself (...) in its entirety, as humanity” (Huxley, 1968, p. 76). For this “new belief” he suggests the term “transhumanism”: “man remaining man, but transcending himself, by realizing new possibilities of and for his human nature” (Huxley, 1968, p. 76). As “suddenly appointed managing director” of the “business of evolution”, the human being is inevitably “determining the future direction of evolution on this earth”. The new job of the human being “boils down” to “the fullest realization of man’s possibilities” (Huxley, 1968, p. 73). In order to prepare itself for this job, the human species first needs to “explore and map” human nature and its possibilities (Huxley, 1968, p. 74).

The quest to transcend the limits of human existence goes far back in history. In the Sumerian *Epic of Gilgamesh* (approx. 2000 B.C.) a king searches for the herb that grants eternal life. In Renaissance humanism, many writers shared the ideals of the fullest realization of man’s possibilities and a well-rounded personality. The fast development of the sciences and technologies renders the quest to transcend the natural human confines more and more realistic today. The view that humans should improve and enhance themselves through science and technology is a main characteristic of today’s different versions of transhumanism. According to its transformative agenda, enhancing technologies can considerably improve human well-being and the quality of life.³ Despite their focus on science and technology, transhumanists do not neglect traditional means of enhancement such as education and the improvement of the social environment.

The biological research of Darwin, Wallace, and their predecessors revealed the descent of humans from the animal kingdom and obliterated the religious idea that the human being is superior due to divine creation and its similitude with God. In line with this, Sorgner’s version of transhumanism declares and singles out “The Rejection of the Exceptionalism of the Human” as

³ “Human beings turn to a variety of technologies in pursuit of their own ideas of the good life. It is safe to say that constant self-overcoming often results in an enhanced quality of life”; Sorgner, 2016/2020, p. 83; cf. Bostrom, 2005, p. 25.

the first of twelve “Pillars of Transhumanist Discourse” (Sorgner, 2016/2020, p. 73, 75–77). Bostrom explains convincingly that after the publication of Darwin’s *Origin of Species* (1859) “it became increasingly plausible to view the current version of humanity not as the endpoint of evolution but rather as an early phase” (Bostrom, 2005a, p. 3).

The 2011 reprint of Bostrom’s 2005 article includes “The Transhumanist Declaration” from 2009, which was “intended as a concise consensus statement of the basic principles of transhumanism” (Bostrom, 2011, p. 15, 26).⁴ The Declaration is one of two “founding documents” of the *World Transhumanist Association*, which was established in 1998 “to provide a general organizational basis for all transhumanist groups and interests, across the political spectrum” (Bostrom, 2005a, p. 3). The signatories of the Declaration “envision the possibility of broadening human potential by overcoming aging, cognitive shortcomings, involuntary suffering, and our confinement to planet Earth” (Bostrom, 2011, p. 26). Despite their positive attitude towards science and technology, the signatories recognize “that humanity faces serious risks, especially from the misuse of new technologies” (Bostrom, 2011, p. 26). In this context, the Declaration talks about “moral responsibilities towards generations that will exist in the future” (Bostrom, 2011, p. 26). In line with this, Sorgner acknowledges new “important ethical and anthropological challenges” and the need to discuss the “ethical limits on enhancement” (Sorgner, 2016/2020, pp. 15-16, 92, 124). The Declaration favors “allowing individuals wide personal choice over how they enable their lives” (Bostrom, 2011, p. 26). In agreement with this, Sorgner believes “in a radical plurality of the good” and defends “negative freedom, that is, the absence of coercion (freedom from)” as a central achievement of humanity and as a norm that “increases the probability of leading a good life” (Sorgner, 2016/2020, pp. 82-84).

3. Nietzsche as a Precursor of Transhumanism

The biological research of Darwin and Wallace is an important basis for transhumanist thought. As a consequence of this research, the Aristotelian and Christian view that the human being has an unchangeable essence was superseded by a dynamic interpretation of human nature.⁵ Bostrom explains, “Transhumanists view human nature as a work-in-progress, a half-baked beginning that we can learn to remodel in desirable ways. Current humanity need not be the endpoint of evolution” (Bostrom 2005b, p. 87). In the literature, the relation of Nietzsche to Darwin is a disputed issue (cf. Johnson, 2010; Sommer, 2010; Stegmaier, 1987). Although Nietzsche criticizes Darwin several times, he interprets Darwinism as the “latest great scientific movement” and takes the descent of humans from the animal kingdom for granted (GS 357, Nietzsche, 1882/2001, p. 218; D 49). As early as in his second *Untimely Meditation*, Nietzsche mentions the “doctrines of sovereign becoming, of the fluidity of all concepts, types and species, of the lack of any cardinal distinction between man and animal”, which he holds to be “true” (Nietzsche, 1874/1997a, p. 112). This statement corresponds to “The Rejection of the Exceptionalism of the Human”, which Sorgner singles out as the first of twelve “Pillars of Transhumanist Discourse” (Sorgner, 2016/2020, p. 73, pp. 75-77). As a natural being that has evolved over time, the human being has no fixed and unchangeable essence. This is why Nietzsche defines man as the “yet undetermined animal (noch nicht festgestellte Thier)” (BGE 62, Nietzsche, 1886/1989a, p. 74; cf. GM III 13).

Nietzsche is not only a precursor of transhumanism because he takes the biological theory of descent seriously and reflects on its consequences for the image of humanity. Another reason is that his whole thought is genuinely concerned with the future and enhancement of the human

⁴ There are several earlier versions of the Declaration and a later one from 2012.

⁵ Jean-Paul Sartre drew a similar conclusion with his famous claim that, for atheistic existentialists, existence precedes essence. If the human being is not the creation of God, man has no fixed essence (Sartre, 1946/2007).

being and with how this can be promoted. In contrast to most transhumanists, however, Nietzsche focuses not only on the fullest realization of man's possibilities but also on forms of human decay and degeneration such as the "last man" (Z I, Prologue 4, cf. BGE 203).⁶ Nietzsche's dual perspective on the future of the human being could serve as an inspiration for contemporary transhumanists to include also the less optimistic scenarios in their considerations about the future of humanity.

From his evolutionary perspective, Nietzsche holds that the human being undergoes significant changes in the flux of becoming. This is elucidated by the fact that in the prehistoric period, and in the ancient world, humans had very different characteristics from those they possess in the modern world. While the world was once dominated by healthy, strong, noble and bellicose humans, which were fundamentally predators and beasts, Christianity has managed to largely determine ("feststellen") the human animal by domesticating it until "a herd animal, something benevolent, sickly and mediocre has been bread, the European of today" (BGE 62, Nietzsche 1886/1989a, p. 76, trans. slightly modified, GM I 1–17; cf. Nachlass 1885–86, [2]13, Nietzsche 1988b, p. 72). This development goes along with the belief that "*the meaning of all culture* is the reduction of the beast of prey 'man' to a tame and civilized animal, *a domestic animal*" (GM I 11, Nietzsche, 1887/1989b, p. 42). Nietzsche explains the atrophy and degradation of European man chiefly by the fatal power of Christianity and of the Christian priests. The Christians devalued this-worldly sensual existence and life by relating it to the imaginary reference point of an other-worldly "higher" existence and life. The Christian interpretation of the world has made the human animal sick because it conceives of humans as guilty and sinful and negates their corporeality and sensuality. Nietzsche criticizes in particular Christian morality and its ascetic ideal which calls for the repression of the drives and instincts (GM III 1–28). From an aesthetic perspective, Nietzsche understands the human being – analogous to the stone of the sculptor – as a material that can be formed by education and breeding. Culture, and in particular religion and morality, are the means through which the human animal is formed in the course of history. However, the beautiful stone called human being was "bungled and botched" through Christian sculpture (BGE 62, Nietzsche, 1886/1989a, p. 75).

A difference between Nietzsche's social and political philosophy and the views of most transhumanists is that Nietzsche is a critic of egalitarian thought and values. In contrast, Sorgner declares that he does not only attach great importance to the norm of freedom, but also to the norm of equality (Sorgner, 2020, pp. 12–13; cf. Bostrom, 2011, p. 26). This difference, however, is not so crucial that it calls Nietzsche's status as a precursor of transhumanism into question. Rather, he should be interpreted as an anti-egalitarian and aristocratic progenitor of transhumanism (cf. Knoll, 2010). While Nietzsche was still fighting the progressing ascent of egalitarianism, today it is a dominant belief and prevailing current in Western thought.⁷ Nietzsche assesses contemporary European humans to be diminished and mediocre. Once more, he accuses Christianity for this decline. This time, he identifies the notion that all humans have equal value as an important cause for human decay. This notion was disseminated and enforced by Christianity and its belief that all souls are equal in God's eyes. Nietzsche understands the notion that all humans have equal value as the "most enormous and most vicious attempt to

⁶ Laurence Lampert shrewdly observes: "Last man and Superman represent the two extremes made possible by the malleability of man, 'the as yet undetermined animal'" (1986, p. 24). According to Werner Stegmaier's convincing interpretation, the "last man" holds himself to be the last in the sense that beyond his form of existence man cannot be further enhanced (2013, p. 163).

⁷ Will Kymlicka, e.g., claims that all contemporary theories of justice "share the same 'egalitarian plateau'" (Kymlicka, 2002, p. 4). In this statement, Kymlicka takes it for granted that equality means 'numeric' or 'arithmetic' equality. This presupposition neglects the existence of 'proportional' or 'geometric' equality, which is defended by Plato, Aristotle, and Nietzsche.

assassinate noble humanity” (A 43, Nietzsche, 1888-1889/2005, p. 40). The notion that all humans have equal value has such a harmful effect on humanity because it levels the “abyssmally different order of rank, chasm of rank, between man and man” (BGE 62, Nietzsche 1886/1989a, p. 76). The basis of this judgment is Nietzsche’s own view that humans are fundamentally unequal and have unequal value. This view goes back to the ancient Greeks. The notion that all humans have equal value has consequences for the political life in Europe, because from it derives the “poisonous doctrine ‘equal rights for everyone’” (A 43, Nietzsche, 1888-1889/ 2005, p. 40). The “*democratic* movement is the heir of the Christian movement”, which promotes the process of European man becoming diminished and mediocre (BGE 202, Nietzsche, 1886/1989a, p. 116). In regard to this progressive decay and decline, Nietzsche even considers the possibility of an “*over-all degeneration of man*”, which could lead to a disdainful type of decay which he illustrates with his conception of the “*last man*” (BGE 203, Nietzsche, 1886/1989a, p. 118; Z I, Prologue 5). However, Nietzsche still has hope for a countermovement, which would be able to cause an increase and elevation of the type “man”. This hope is associated with the term “overhuman” (*Übermensch*) (see section IV). It is important to notice that, for Nietzsche, the enhancement of the human being can be achieved mainly through education, breeding, and leisure (cf. HH I 439). Therefore, Bostrom is quite right when he remarks in regard to the overhuman: “What Nietzsche had in mind, however, was not technological transformation but a kind of soaring personal growth and cultural refinement in exceptional individuals” (Bostrom, 2005a, p. 4). Despite the scientific and technological progress since the industrial revolution, Nietzsche seems to have a blind spot for the potential of technology to improve society and individual humans.⁸ Notwithstanding this blind spot, Sorgner has a point when he emphasizes Nietzsche’s esteem of the natural sciences and of courage as a central virtue. Based on such appreciation, Sorgner explains that “it cannot be ruled out that Nietzsche would have been in favor of genetic engineering measures, even if he emphasizes the role of education in the evolutionary development of the overhuman” (2016/2020, p. 64).

Nietzsche’s concern for the future development of humanity, and the outstanding importance this topic occupies in his thought, is evidenced by the following quote:

But grant me from time to time [...] the sight, but one glance of something perfect, wholly achieved, happy, mighty, triumphant, something still capable of arousing fear! Of a *man* who justifies man, of a complementary and redeeming lucky hit on the part of man for the sake of which one may still *believe in man*! For this is how things are: the diminution and leveling of European man constitutes our greatest danger, for the sight of him makes us weary [*müde*].—We can see nothing today that wants to grow greater, we suspect that things will continue to go down, down, to become thinner, more good-natured, more prudent, more comfortable, more mediocre, more indifferent, more Chinese, more Christian—there is no doubt that man is getting “better” all the time. Here precisely is what has become a fatality for Europe—together with the fear of man we have also lost our love of him, our reverence for him, our hopes for him, even the will to him. The sight of man now makes us weary—what is nihilism today if it is not that—We are weary of *man*. (GM I 12, Nietzsche, 1887/1989b, p. 44)

Nietzsche’s professed longing for “a man who justifies *man*” elucidates that he does not take it for granted that humans are valuable beings. The value of humans and their existence needs to be justified. Is the human being something good or rather a miscarriage? Independently of Nietzsche, in today’s world in which humans pollute and poison the planet while still continuously killing each other and extinguishing countless species, this is a pressing question.

⁸ Both in The Greek State and in BGE 257 Nietzsche claims that the production of “higher humans” and of culture requires some form of slavery (in D 206, he calls modern workers “factory slaves”). In contrast to his contemporary Karl Marx, Nietzsche seems to be unaware of the possibility of a major reduction of society’s necessary amount of human labor through technological progress such as automation and robotization. That such a progress could make slavery unnecessary was anticipated as early as in Aristotle’s Politics I, 1253b33-54a1.

For Nietzsche, the human being and its existence can be justified through individual humans who have fully realized their potential. Such perfected and enhanced individuals could restore both the belief in the value of the human being and the hope in its future. Nietzsche is genuinely concerned with the state and future of the human being and this concern is of central importance for his whole philosophy. This is also elucidated by his redefinition of the concept of nihilism, which was common at his time.⁹ In the quote above, he defines nihilism by the loss of the belief in the value and future of the human being. Despite such a grim prospect, Nietzsche's writings are full of hopes and considerations about the future enhancement of the human being and the overhuman.

4. Does the Overhuman Represent a New Species?

As already mentioned, for Sorgner there are “striking” similarities between “the concept of the posthuman and Nietzsche’s ‘overhuman’ (*Übermensch*)”. This means that Sorgner interprets Nietzsche’s overhuman as a new species. Such an interpretation is most notably suggested by a passage in Nietzsche’s *Zarathustra* in which he introduces the concept of the overhuman. After his descent from the mountains, Zarathustra arrives at a town and speaks to the people who are gathered in the market place. He begins his speech by saying: “*I teach you the overman. Human being is something that must be overcome*” (Z I, Prologue 3, Nietzsche, 1883-1885/2006, p. 5). That this overcoming is meant in an evolutionary sense is suggested by ensuing statements declaring that humans made their “way from worm to human” and that humans once were apes (Z I, Prologue 3, Nietzsche 1883-1885/2006, p. 6). That Nietzsche conceives of the overhuman as a new species is in particular suggested by Zarathustra’s famous assertion, “Mankind [*Der Mensch*] is a rope fastened between animal and overman – a rope over an abyss” (Z I, Prologue 4, Nietzsche, 1883-1885/2006, p. 7).¹⁰ This assertion seems to proclaim a development from ape to *Homo sapiens* to a species that could be called “*Homo superior*”.

In contemporary scholarship on Nietzsche, it has become commonplace to refrain from identifying everything that Zarathustra voices with Nietzsche’s own thought. *Zarathustra* is a philosophical narrative and Zarathustra is a fictional character. Therefore, Zarathustra’s statements have to be compared and contextualized with those writings of Nietzsche in which he speaks as author. Zarathustra’s assertion that “mankind is a rope fastened between animal and overman” also needs to be interpreted in the context of Nietzsche’s narrative. It is of crucial importance to notice that the people to whom Zarathustra speaks on the market place are waiting for a tightrope walker. The metaphor that the human being “is a rope fastened between animal and overman” is adapted to the activity of a tightrope walker and to the expectations of the people waiting. The tightrope walker has a place of departure and crosses over a rope to a place of arrival. Analogously, the human being stands for the rope that connects the animal as point of departure and leads over to the overhuman as point of arrival. It seems likely that Zarathustra connects his teaching of the overhuman to the activity of a tightrope walker and to Darwin’s well-known theory of descent in order to make himself understood amongst his audience.¹¹

In his last writings, Nietzsche comes back to the topic of the overhuman. Now he clearly distances himself from an evolutionary and biologicistic reading of the concept. In contrast to the

⁹ For the usage of the concept of nihilism at Nietzsche’s time and for the different definitions of nihilism in Nietzsche’s published and unpublished writings, see Ottmann, 1999, pp. 329–345.

¹⁰ Zarathustra uses a similar metaphor at the very end of Part I referring to “the great noon, where human beings [*Der Mensch*] stand at the midpoint of their course between animal and overman”; Z I, Bestowing Virtue, Nietzsche, 1883-1885/2006, p. 59.

¹¹ Cf. Stegmaier, 2000, p. 210. According to Daniel Conway, “we have good reason to believe that Zarathustra did not fully understand the teachings entrusted to him” (Conway, 1997, p. 21).

obscure parabolic teachings of Zarathustra, these late statements, in which Nietzsche speaks as author, should be understood as our central sources for what he means with the overhuman:

The problem I am posing is not what should replace humanity in the order of being (– the human is an *endpoint* –): but instead what type of human should be *bred*, should be *willed* as having greater value, as being more deserving of life, as being more certain of a future. This more valuable type has appeared often enough already: but only as a stroke of luck, as an exception, never as *willed*. (A 3, Nietzsche, 1888-1889/2005, p. 4)

This quotation elucidates that Nietzsche's concern for the overhuman is an integral part of his concern for the future development and enhancement of human beings (see section III). Nietzsche does not want to leave the future of humankind in the hands of chance, but actively influence it by acts of volition (BGE 203). That the more valuable humans or overhumans "should be *willed*" and that their flourishing should be actively promoted is a recurring issue in his writings (BGE 203; Z I, Prologue 3; Z I, On the Bestowing Virtue 3; A 3). In this context, Nietzsche advocates taking the risk to experiment with breeding, which should be conducted by the "philosophers of the future" (BGE 203, 201–212, cf. BGE 61, 62).¹² In the aphorism that succeeds A 3, Nietzsche further illustrates his concept of the overman:

In another sense, there is a continuous series of individual successes in the most varied places on earth and from the most varied cultures; here, a *higher type* does in fact present itself, a type of overman [*Übermensch*] in relation to humanity in general. Successes like this, real strokes of luck, were always possible and perhaps will always be possible. And whole generations, families, or peoples can sometimes constitute this sort of bull's eye, *right on the mark*. (A 4, Nietzsche, 1888-1889/2005, p. 5)

These two quotations from *The Anti-Christ* demonstrate that Nietzsche does not regard the overhuman as a new species that is supposed to evolve out of *Homo sapiens*. Rather, the overhuman refers to a "*higher type*" of human that has "greater value" than ordinary humans. If we look for concrete examples of the existence of such higher types in the past, on the individual level Nietzsche's praise of Goethe comes to mind (TI, Skirmishes 49). On the level of whole peoples that represent a "stroke of luck", it is very likely that Nietzsche thinks of the ancient Greeks.

In the late text *Ecce Homo*, Nietzsche distances himself once more from an evolutionary and biologicistic reading of the overhuman. He also demarcates this concept from other misinterpretations:

The word 'overman', as a designation for a type that has the highest constitutional excellence, in contrast to 'modern' people, to 'good' people, to Christians and other nihilists – a word that really makes you think when it comes from the mouth of a Zarathustra, a *destroyer* of morals; this word 'overman' is understood almost everywhere with complete innocence to mean values that are the *opposite* from the ones appearing in the figure of Zarathustra, which is to say the 'idealistic' type of the higher sort of humanity, half 'saint', half 'genius' . . . Other scholarly cattle have suspected me of Darwinism for this reason; (...). (EH, Books 1, Nietzsche, 1888-1889/2005, p. 101)

In the last phrase of this quotation, Nietzsche clearly distances himself from a Darwinist and biologicistic reading of the overhuman. In the phrase before he also rejects a Christian, idealistic or

¹² In the 1880s, Nietzsche was fascinated by eugenics. The Jewish scientist Josef Paneth lent his copy of Frances Galton's book *Inquiries into Human Faculty and Its Development* (1883) to Nietzsche. Galton was Darwin's cousin and the originator of modern eugenics. Nietzsche's own "eugenic calculations" are reported by Paneth's letters and are expressed in Nietzsche's published and unpublished writings (cf. BGE 251; Holub, 2016, p. 113-14, p. 121; cf. Schank, 2000).

moralistic interpretation of the concept. Rather, as he criticizes in *The Anti-Christ*, Christianity “has waged a war to the death against this higher type of person” (A 5, Nietzsche, 1888-1889/2005, p. 5; cf. BGE 62). In order to make his distancing from a Christian, idealistic or moralistic interpretation of the overman more concrete, Nietzsche claims that the higher and more valuable type he has in mind “would look more like a Cesare Borgia than a Parsifal” (EH, Books 1, Nietzsche, 1888-1889/2005, p. 101). He repeats this provocative statement in *Twilight of the Idols* by proclaiming that Cesare Borgia should be erected as “a ‘higher man’, as a type of overman” (TI, Skirmishes 37, Nietzsche, 1888-1889/2005, p. 211).¹³

Part IV of *Zarathustra* contains a longer section titled “On the Higher Man”. Several earlier sections of Part IV allude to those higher humans.¹⁴ Zarathustra teaches the higher humans that the rabble from the market place believes both that all humans are equal and that higher humans do not exist. For Nietzsche, this egalitarian belief is derived from the Christian belief that all souls are equal in God’s eyes (cf. A 43). Zarathustra reminds the higher humans that God, their “greatest danger”, is dead and that the belief of the rabble should be ignored. Repeating what he proclaimed at the very end of Part I, Zarathustra declares: “God died: now we want—the overman to live” (Z IV, On the Higher Man 2, Nietzsche, 1883-1885/2006, p. 232, cf. p. 59 and 78).¹⁵ In the fifth book of *The Gay Science*, added in 1887, Nietzsche explains that the statement ““God is dead”” means that “the belief in the Christian God has become unbelievable” (GS 343, Nietzsche, 1882/2001, p. 199; cf. GS 125).

The death of God is a central premise of the whole *Zarathustra*. It is proclaimed as early as during Zarathustra’s descent from the mountains at the beginning of the book (Z I, Prologue 2, Nietzsche, 1883-1885/2006, p. 5). The death of God is connected in two important ways to the concept of the overhuman.¹⁶ First, as explained in “On the Higher Man”, the egalitarian belief that all souls are equal in God’s eyes is detrimental to Nietzsche’s conviction that some humans are more valuable than others. Therefore, the death of God removes an important obstacle for the flourishing of higher humans and overhumans. Second, the Christian religion provided an interpretation of the world, an explanation of the origin and meaning of human life, moral orientation, and a set of values. As a consequence of the death of God, the Christian meaning-giving of human life, which is connected to “extraterrestrial hopes”, loses its credibility (Z I, Prologue 3, Nietzsche, 1883-1885/2006, p. 6). With his concept of the overhuman Nietzsche intends to fill the gap left by the death of God and to propose a better, purely terrestrial and secular, meaning-giving. This is the meaning of Zarathustra’s famous proclamation, “The overman is the meaning of the earth. Let your will say: the overman shall be the meaning of the earth!” (Z I, Prologue 3, Nietzsche, 1883-1885/2006, p. 6). The aim to promote the conditions for the flourishing of higher humans and overhumans establishes a new goal and meaning for mankind (Z I, Prologue 7; Z I, Bestowing Virtue 2; Z III, Old and New Tables 2). To reach this goal, Nietzsche considers it necessary to reevaluate the Jewish-Christian values and to create a new and higher morality in Europe (BGE 202–203, 208–212; Z III, Old and New Tables).

In *Zarathustra*, there is a clear hierarchy between higher humans and overhumans. Zarathustra denigrates the higher humans by saying that, for him, they “are not high and strong enough” (Z IV, Welcome, Nietzsche, 1883-1885/2006, p. 228). The clear distinction Nietzsche’s philosophical narrative *Zarathustra* draws between higher humans and overhumans is not very

¹³ It is surprising that Nietzsche characterizes Cesare Borgia in such a positive way while he classifies Napoleon ambivalently as a “synthesis of the inhuman and superhuman” (GM I 16, Nietzsche, 1887/1989b, p. 54).

¹⁴ The Cry of Distress, The Magician, The Ugliest Human Being, The Welcome; cf. Z III, The Virtue that Makes Small 1.

¹⁵ As early as in *The Gay Science* Nietzsche speculates, “Perhaps man will rise ever higher when he no longer flows off into a god” (GS 285, Nietzsche, 1882/2001, p. 162).

¹⁶ The death of God is proclaimed immediately before Zarathustra starts his teaching of the overhuman (Z I, 2 and 3).

important for Nietzsche's own thought. In the published writings after *Zarathustra*, Nietzsche only talks two more times about the "higher human" (BGE 26, GM I 2). Like in *The Anti-Christ*, in the later writings there is no clear distinction between the higher humans and the overhumans (cf. TI, Skirmishes 37, Nietzsche, 1888-1889/2005, p. 211). In the Nachlass from 1885, Nietzsche identifies the "higher human" with the "exceptional human" (*Ausnahme-Mensch*) (Nachlass 1885, 40 [65], Nietzsche 1988a, p. 666). Sorgner interprets Goethe as a "higher human", not as an "overhuman" (2016/2020, p. 68; TI, Skirmishes 49). However, apart from *Zarathustra* this distinction is irrelevant. If the overhuman does not represent a new species, there is no radical difference between a "higher human" and an "overhuman".

There is another argument for the thesis that Nietzsche does not conceive of the overhuman (*Übermensch*) as a new species. Despite the fact that Nietzsche uses the term "Übermensch" only starting with *Zarathustra*, his concern for the flourishing of higher humans is already a distinct characteristic of his early works. Throughout his career, Nietzsche refers to these higher humans with different names and uses different standards to measure their value.¹⁷ In the posthumously published essay *The Greek State*, written in 1872, Nietzsche claims that the "Olympian existence", the "creation and preparation of the genius", is the "actual aim of the state" (Nietzsche, 1872/1997b, p. 173; cf. p. 166). In the third *Untimely Meditation*, which appeared in 1874, Nietzsche explains his image of humanity and gives his account of the elevation of man, which culminates in an anthropological imperative: "Mankind must work continually at the production of individual great men—that and nothing else is its task" (SE 6, Nietzsche, 1872/1997c, p. 161). This imperative is at the center of Nietzsche's whole philosophy. In *Ecce Homo*, he envisions "a new faction in favor of life that takes on the greatest tasks of all, that of breeding humanity to higher levels" (EH, BT 4, Nietzsche, 1888-1889/2005, p. 110; cf. Drochon, 2016, pp. 165–170, 176–179). Nietzsche does not primarily conceive the generation of higher types of humans or overhumans as the affair of an isolated individual but as a social and political task (Knoll, 2014). This thesis implies that Nietzsche is indeed a political philosopher, which is a disputed issue in the literature.¹⁸

5. Conclusion

This article has demonstrated that Nietzsche's concern for the "overhuman" (*Übermensch*) is an integral part of his concern for the future development and enhancement of human beings. These concerns refute Bostrom's claim that Nietzsche should not be recognized as a precursor of transhumanism. This article has also argued against Sorgner's view that Nietzsche conceives of the overhuman as a new species. This is clearly true for Nietzsche's writings after *Zarathustra*. However, it seems that in *Zarathustra* Nietzsche at least toyed with the possibility that humankind is an intermediate appearance in the evolution towards a higher species. Therefore, it cannot be excluded that his thoughts on this topic developed and changed over his lifetime. That Nietzsche held the evolution of *Homo sapiens* toward a higher species to be possible is also suggested by a passage of his third *Untimely Meditation*, titled *Schopenhauer as Educator* (SE). This passage from 1874 and related sections of the text are highly relevant for understanding Nietzsche's conception of the overhuman because they anticipate its central content¹⁹:

How much one would like to apply to society and its goals something that can be learned from observation of any species of the animal or plant world: that in regard to it the only concern is the individual higher exemplar, the more uncommon, more powerful, more complex, more fruitful – how much one would like to do this if

¹⁷ For these standards, see Knoll, 2014, pp. 255-258.

¹⁸ For the debate and for literature on this dispute, see Knoll, 2018.

¹⁹ This thesis is substantiated in Knoll, 2014.

inculcated fancies as to the goal of society did not offer such tough resistance! We ought really to have no difficulty in seeing that, when a species has arrived at its limits and is about to go over into a higher species, the goal of its evolution lies, not in the mass of its exemplars and their wellbeing, let alone in those exemplars who happen to come last in point of time, but rather in those apparently scattered and chance existences which favourable conditions have here and there produced; and it ought to be just as easy to understand the demand that, because it can arrive at a conscious awareness of its goal, mankind ought to seek out and create the favourable conditions under which those great redemptive men can come into existence. (SE 6, Nietzsche, 1872/1997c, p. 161–62, trans. slightly modified)

Like in his second *Untimely Meditation* from 1874, Nietzsche refers to the biological and evolutionary doctrine that a species could “go over into a higher species”. He makes clear that he is in favor of applying the consequence of this doctrine to human society and its purpose. However, according to Nietzsche’s interpretation, this consequence is not that humanity should develop into a higher species and that this is the goal of society. Rather, as he proclaimed as early as in *The Greek State*, the purpose of society and the task of humanity is the “production of individual great men” and through them the production of culture (Nietzsche, 1872/1997b). Nietzsche conceives of these great redemptive individuals, which represent not a higher species but merely the perfection of the species *Homo sapiens*, as philosophers, artists, and saints (SE 6, Nietzsche, 1872/1997c, p. 160).²⁰ In his later writings, Nietzsche calls these individuals “overhumans”. It is remarkable that in *Schopenhauer as Educator* Nietzsche makes a concrete suggestion of how the production of higher and more valuable individuals can be *willed* or actively promoted. The means to this end is an education that teaches the “young person” that the task of humankind is the production of transhumans or overhumans and that they should devote their lives to this task (SE 6, Nietzsche, 1872/1997c, p. 160).

List of Abbreviations

- A = The Antichrist
- BGE = Beyond Good and Evil
- BT = The Birth of Tragedy out of the Spirit of Music
- D = Daybreak
- EH = Ecce Homo
- GM = On the Genealogy of Morals (Cited by essay number followed by section number)
- GS = The Gay Science
- HH I = Human, All Too Human I
- SE = Schopenhauer as Educator
- TI = Twilight of the Idols
- Z = Thus Spoke Zarathustra

²⁰ In the literature, the perfectionism of Nietzsche’s ethical and political approach, which aims at the enhancement of humankind, has been acknowledged. However, the understanding of him as an elitist has been rejected (Conant, 2001). Similarly, it has been argued that the view of Nietzsche as an aristocratic political thinker “is mistaken” (Fossey, 2008, p. 299). For a detailed refutation of such interpretations, see Knoll, forthcoming. In his early writings of the 1870s, which are inspired by Schopenhauer, Nietzsche develops some metaphysical theories. In *Schopenhauer as Educator*, he understands the philosophers, artists, and saints as “the perfecting of nature” and talks about a “final and supreme becoming-human after which all nature presses and urges for its redemption from itself” (SE 6, Nietzsche, 1872/1997c, p. 160). In his later writings on higher humans or overhumans Nietzsche refrains from such metaphysical speculations.

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