

Zarathustra and Transhumanism: Man is Something to Be Overcome

JOSHUA MERLO

University at Buffalo, USA

jmerlo@buffalo.edu

ORCID: 0000-0002-0215-5693

Abstract. In Sorgner's 2009 paper "Nietzsche, the Overhuman, and Transhumanism", he argues, contra Bostrom, that the transhumanist movement's postman is fundamentally similar to Nietzsche's overman. In this paper, Sorgner's thesis is challenged. It is argued that transhumanism, as presented both popularly and academically, is fundamentally incompatible with Nietzsche's overman, as presented in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. This argument focuses on three significant characteristics of Zarathustra's description of the overman: the role of earthly existence, immortality, and the rejection of collective values.

Keywords: transhumanism; Nietzsche.

Introduction

"Man is something to be overcome!" So declares, stridently and repeatedly, the prophet Zarathustra. Zarathustra's antagonism to the human, as well as his urging to the beyond human, is contained within a wider evolutionary perspective on man's advancement as a species. Given contemporary attitudes, expressed by transhumanism, concerning the same perspective, Zarathustra stands as a possible proponent and opponent of transhumanism. Does he see man's evolution beyond himself in a like way to the

transhumanists? Would Zarathustra argue that transhumanism is merely another step in the progression from man to higher men to overman? Does the transhumanists' postman fit the description of the *übermensch*?¹ In his paper, "Nietzsche, the Overhuman, and Transhumanism", Stefan Lorenz Sorgner argues that transhumanism is compatible with – if not a manifestation of – Nietzsche's own conceptualization of the overman. In this paper, I will critique Sorgner's thesis narrowly, arguing that transhumanism is not compatible with at least Zarathustra's conception of the overman.² This critique will be presented in three parts. First, I will briefly define transhumanism. Then, I will situate my paper within the larger discussion of Nietzsche by transhumanists; following this, I will summarize Sorgner's thesis, focusing on where he believes the transhumanists and Nietzsche agree. Finally, I will contrast transhumanism's postman with Zarathustra's overman, asserting that Zarathustra disagrees with the transhumanists with respect to three significant characteristics: the role of earthly existence, immortality, and collective values.

1. Transhumanism

What is transhumanism? Superficially, it is the social, scientific, and spiritual movement associated with names like Ray Kurzweil, Elon Musk, Zoltan Istvan, and George Church. The movement aims to actualize futuristic projects of human-machine interfacing, digital immortality, and positive eugenics practiced through gene editing. But beneath the grandiose promises of uploading our minds into the cloud or hacking our bodies through technological augmentation or DNA splicing, there lies a more rigorously defined philosophy and a fully developed value set that supports the aspirations

¹ Note: in this paper, I will treat 'übermensch', 'overman', and 'overhuman' as equivalent names for Zarathustra's and Nietzsche's concept of those beings which are beyond humanity and human values.

² For the purposes of this paper, I will take for granted that Zarathustra's conception of the overman and Nietzsche's conception of the overman are compatible. Thus, to not qualify as an overman according to one's conception is to not qualify as an overman according to the other's conception as well.

of the Silicon Valley's prophets of a new humanity. To understand better what transhumanism is, we need to understand the values and principles that shape the transhumanist paradigm. To understand these, we can turn to the expository and framing work done in the transhumanist literature.

We can begin with Nick Bostrom's discussion of transhumanism in "Transhumanist Values". In a section explaining transhumanism generally, Bostrom says that transhumanism aims at "understanding and evaluating the opportunities for enhancing the human condition and the human organism opened up by the advancement of technology. Attention is given to both present technologies, like genetic engineering and information technology, and anticipated future ones, such as molecular nanotechnology and artificial intelligence" (Bostrom 2005, 3). Bostrom continues: "The enhancement options being discussed include radical extension of human health-span, eradication of disease, elimination of unnecessary suffering, and augmentation of human intellectual, physical, and emotional capacities. Other transhumanist themes include space colonization and the possibility of creating superintelligent machines, along with other potential developments that could profoundly alter the human condition" (Ibid., 3). There are similarities between the "popular" transhumanist movement and Bostrom's academic presentation of transhumanism. Both aim at the surpassing of biological humanness through technological means. Both also particularly aim at eliminating natural death and joining together human and machine intelligences. However, while these comparisons are apt, they do not yet answer questions about the underlying reasons for transhumanism. We know what the goals of transhumanism are. We do not yet know why transhumanism has these goals.

Bostrom himself provides us with further explanatory work concerning transhumanism within his "A History of Transhumanist Thought". After tracing some of the predecessors of transhumanism (both in history and in ideation), Bostrom gives us this lineage. The first use of the word 'transhumanism' is credited to Julian Huxley. In his *Religion Without Revelation*, Huxley describes transhumanism as the belief that humanity, as a biological species, can transcend the biological limits of being human (Bostrom 2005,

6). Next, F.M. Esfandiary is credited with the concept of the transhuman, understood as a transitional evolutionary stage between humanity at present and the eventual postman (humanity having transcended biological limits). Esfandiary's transhuman is characterized by "prostheses, plastic surgery, intensive use of telecommunications, a cosmopolitan outlook and a globetrotting lifestyle, androgyny, mediated reproduction (such as in vitro fertilization), absence of religious belief, and a rejection of traditional family values" (Bostrom 2005, 11). Finally, Max More is credited with the "first definition of transhumanism in its modern sense". More's transhumanism "emphasized the principles of 'boundless expansion,' 'self-transformation,' 'dynamic optimism,' 'intelligent technology,' and 'spontaneous order'³" (Bostrom 2005, 12). This progression of transhumanism culminates in the 1998 founding of the World Transhumanist Association by Bostrom and fellow philosopher David Pearce. The WTA is said to have spurred the academic development of transhumanism. As precursor to this development, Bostrom points to the founding documents of the WTA. The *Transhumanist Declaration*, one of these documents, presents many of the principles that underlie the already-mentioned goals of transhumanists.

The *Declaration* begins by acknowledging that technological advancement will allow for the "redesigning of the human condition". This process is one that transhumanists welcome – "Transhumanists think that by being generally open and embracing of new technology we have a better chance of turning it to our advantage ..." – and claim as a moral right – "Transhumanists advocate the moral right for those who wish to use technology to extend their mental and physical (including reproductive) capacities and to improve their control over their lives". The *Declaration* concedes that the process of technological enhancement of humans could be harrowing – "... it is mandatory to take into account the prospect of dramatic progress in technological capabilities. It would be tragic if the potential benefits failed to materialize because of technophobia and unnecessary prohibitions. On the other hand, it would also be tragic if intelligent life went extinct because

³ Bostrom notes that this principle was later replaced with "open society".

of some disaster or war involving advanced technologies”. The document ends with an endorsement of the principle of beneficence – “Transhumanism advocates the well-being of all sentience (whether in artificial intellects, humans, posthumans, or non-human animals) and encompasses many principles of modern humanism” (Bostrom 2005, 21). Primarily in the *Declaration* (although even in the views of some of the earlier figures named), we finally are given some of the reasons for the transhumanists’ claims concerning going beyond our biological human-ness. Transhumanists accept cosmopolitan or humanist values. Transhumanists are optimistic and open concerning future advances in technology. Transhumanists value self-transformation and believe it to be a basic human right. Finally, and most importantly, transhumanists argues for the “well-being of all sentience”; transhumanism aims broadly at the good of any sensing being. It is because of these values and principles that transhumanists want things like immortality and enhanced physical capacities. We now have the beginnings of an answer to the question of ‘why transhumanism?’.

Going beyond Bostrom’s work in the literature, we can look for more responses to the question of ‘why transhumanism?’. In their “Introduction to Post- and Transhumanism”, Robert Ranisch and Stefan Lorenz Sorgner define transhumanism as the “stance that affirms the radical transformation of human’s biological capacities and social conditions by means of technologies” (Ranisch and Sorgner 2014, 7–8). They continue: the “result of such technologically induced version of evolution is referred to as the *posthuman*”. They add “... transhumanism, according to its self-understanding, is a contemporary renewal of humanism. It embraces and eventually amplifies central aspects of secular and Enlightenment humanist thought, such as belief in reason, individualism, science, progress, as well as self-perfection or cultivation” (Ibid., 8). Echoing the *Declaration*, Ransich and Sorgner affirm the importance of humanist values to the transhumanist project. They also identify beneficence as the primary value for transhumanists: “they [transhumanists and authors associated with transhumanism] all share the belief in the desirability of technologically supported human enhancement procedures” (Ibid., 13). (It should be noted that Ranisch and Sorgner also

present a historical picture of the emergence of transhumanism similar to Bostrom: Huxley, Esfandiary, Ettinger (also named by Bostrom in “A History of Transhumanist Thought”), and More. Adding to Bostrom, Ransich and Sorgner note that the WTA became Humanity+; Bostrom founded the Institute for Ethics and Emerging Technologies around that same time. Both organizations work to promulgate transhumanism.)

James Hughes provides clarification about which values qualify as humanist values in his “Contradictions from the Enlightenment Roots of Transhumanism”. Classifying transhumanism as an Enlightenment philosophy, Hughes defines the Enlightenment according to the belief that societal progress could be achieved through the application of human reason to the problems of the day (namely, scientific ignorance, questions of good governance, and systemic epistemic limits) (Hughes 2010, 623). Being a part of the Enlightenment tradition, transhumanism shares the flaws of said tradition. For the remainder of his paper, Hughes elaborates on these flaws. In these elaborations, we find an outline of what we might call, broadly, the humanist values of the Enlightenment thinkers (and so also, then, of the transhumanists). First, Hughes refers to reason; for the Enlightenment thinkers, reason was the sole epistemic ground that justified belief. It was to replace all other epistemic grounds, be they theological (revelation), personal (subjective experience or taste), or non-empirical (Ibid., 623–624). He sees transhumanists as needing to address the same worry that the Enlightenment thinkers are vulnerable to: the choice to prefer reason to unreasonableness cannot be justified by reason itself (Ibid., 625–626). Hughes also presents the problematic tension that exists between autonomous self-improvement and coerced-but-beneficent self-improvement. The value of autonomy – as demonstrated in classical liberalism – allows for persons to choose actions that are in their own best interests, assuming that persons both best know what is in their best interests as well as regularly choose to do actions that are in their best interests. However, given that people do not always choose to act in a way that aligns with what is best for them, Enlightenment thinkers also supported paternalism – as demonstrated in authoritarianism. Since people do not do what is best for themselves, they must be compelled to

become better (Ibid., 628–629). Hughes sees this same tension, unresolved, in the transhumanists' dual desires to support individual rights while also ensuring that the ultimate evolution of the human species continues and culminates in the posthuman and in a society that is well fitted for the post-human (Ibid., 629–630). Transhumanism also carries with it the teleological bent of the Enlightenment. Hughes connects the eschatology of Christian theology with the scientific triumphalism of the Enlightenment. Having replaced revelation with reason, the Enlightenment did not also discard the Aristotelian metaphysical framework of Christendom. Instead, this universe of form-matter-composed substances being ordered to nature-defined ends was adopted and adapted, with the optimism inherent in some versions of Christian eschatology also being carried forward. The Enlightenment replaced heaven with this-world progress as the final end of human actions. Hughes sees this triumphalism restored in the transhumanists' beliefs in events like the singularity, their beliefs in technological development, and their beliefs in the inevitability of progress. This triumphalism runs counter, however, to the scientific rejection of teleology (the example of unguided Darwinian evolution is offered) (Ibid., 631–633). Hughes presents yet another tension relevant to transhumanism that originates in the Enlightenment: the tension between ethical universalism and ethical relativism. Both Enlightenment thinkers and transhumanists must deal with conflicting ethical intuitions, it is said. Ethical universalism is supported by the moral claims made about every individual's rights to self-determination and self-improvement. Ethical relativism is supported by moral claims' being concretized in a particular historical context; radical progress might change this context so thoroughly that the norms which previously applied might no longer apply. These conflicting supports leave both the Enlightenment thinker and the transhumanist unable to satisfactorily decide between the assumption of universal moral rules and the assumption of relativized moral rules (Ibid., 633–634). In summary, the humanist values of the Enlightenment that Hughes states are of particular importance to transhumanists as well – and that are particular challenges to transhumanism – include human reason, autonomy and paternalistic beneficence, scientific and

technological optimism and triumphalism, and the universality of rights and the contextual nature of moral norms.

Combining the remarks garnered from Bostrom, Rasich and Sorgner, and Hughes, we can finally give a non-superficial answer to the twin questions ‘what is transhumanism?’ and ‘why transhumanism?’. Broadly, transhumanism is a school of practical philosophy that prioritizes the transformation of the biological human species through technological augmentation and enhancement. This transformation aims at creating the postman, a superior being evolved from humanity. Transhumanism espouses humanist values and principles: beneficence, autonomy, rationality, progressivism, and optimism. With this better understanding of transhumanism, we can begin to more closely examine problems that exist within the corpus of transhumanist works.

2. Nietzsche, Transhumanism, and Sorgner’s “Nietzsche, the Overman, and Transhumanism”

Transhumanism, as described above, is focused on an evolution beyond what humanity currently is; this is to say that transhumanists desire to transcend their own humanity and for other humans to also transcend their humanity. This going beyond has a goal: the posthuman, a new kind of being that has superhuman capacities and is not subject to the limits of body, finite mind, and mortality. Review of the transhumanist literature suggests a possible historical philosophical ally to this transhumanist project: Friedrich Nietzsche. It is suggested that there are similarities between the transhumanist posthuman and Nietzsche’s own *übermensch* (see, for instance, Sorgner 2009). Particular attention is paid to Nietzsche’s own evolutionary story for the overman, a story that is said to be consistent with that given by transhumanists for the posthuman. Combined with Nietzsche’s explicit desire for humanity to transcend itself, some transhumanist authors argue that Nietzsche offers a compatible paradigm for transhumanists to operate in, if not an example of exactly the kind of thinking within the wider history of philosophy that transhumanists themselves try to defend.

Sorgner's article – "Nietzsche, the Overman, and Transhumanism" – in particular begat a fruitful discussion concerning Nietzsche's relevance to, and agreement with, transhumanism. In Bostrom's "A History of Transhumanist Thought", both theses (Nietzsche's relevance to and agreement with transhumanism) are denied. Bostrom characterizes transhumanism as only having "surface-level similarities with the Nietzschean vision". Instead, transhumanism, "with its Enlightenment roots, its emphasis on individual liberties, and its humanistic concern for the welfare of all humans (and other sentient beings) – probably has as much or more in common with Nietzsche's contemporary the English liberal thinker and utilitarian John Stuart Mill" (Bostrom 2005, 4).

Sorgner challenges Bostrom's reading of Nietzsche, arguing that there are "significant similarities between the posthuman and the overhuman" that "can be found on a fundamental level" (Sorgner 2009, 30). Sorgner's rebuttal is in turn challenged by numerous papers (see Hauskeller 2010, Hibbard 2010, Porter 2017, Agatonović 2018), although Max More supported Sorgner's reading of Nietzsche (see More 2010). This debate would prompt a call for a special issue of the *Journal of Evolution and Technology*, one dedicated to the following question: "[t]o what extent does transhumanist thought resemble that of Nietzsche?" (Blackford 2010). Sorgner responded to various arguments raised in that special issue in "Beyond Humanism: Reflections on Trans- and Posthumanism" (Sorgner 2010). This paper is intended as another entry into this extended debate. Whereas previous papers have dealt with Nietzsche's corpus at large, I will instead focus on the singular work in which Nietzsche details the overman⁴: *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. Through detailed exegesis of the work, I will expand upon the efforts of Bostrom and Hauskeller, among others, to use the overman as a clear contrast to the posthuman. A close reading of *Zarathustra* will provide us with a clear set of criteria for the overman, a set of criteria that I will show the posthuman does not meet.

⁴ See *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*: "Within Nietzsche's corpus, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* has a controversial place ... one of Nietzsche's most well-known and morally troubling figures—the superhuman—also appears substantially only in this work ...".

Returning to Sorgner: he argues that the posthuman is compatible with Nietzsche's overman. To develop this argument, Sorgner highlights some general similarities between transhumanists and Nietzsche.

First, Sorgner notes that both transhumanists and Nietzsche "hold a dynamic view of nature and values" (Sorgner 2009, 30). Both the transhumanists and Nietzsche believe that humanity, considered as a species, is not immutable. Humans do not have an unchangeable nature that precludes evolving. Furthermore, humans, while they do make particular normative judgments, do not have to make those particular judgments. These judgments are also not rooted in some unchangeable reality, and so can evolve. With respect to human nature, Sorgner thinks that Nietzsche defines humanity (among other things) according to will. A human is an individual that wills. In Sorgner's lexicon, a human is a "will-to-power constellation", a collection of states composed of an individual's desires, power to accomplish those desires, and relations to other willing individuals (Ibid., 30–31). Because humans are defined primarily according to their will and their willings, they are fundamentally changing beings. Via Sorgner, Nietzsche believes that species are striations, groups of will-to-power constellations that are marked off by limits to their power to accomplish or satiate desires. As individuals in these groups gain in desire-accomplishing power, these individuals will eventually transcend the group. For this reason, Sorgner argues that Nietzsche's definition of humanity does not prevent individual instantiations of the species from evolving beyond that species. Transcending humanity is something that individual humans can do. Sorgner believes that this is similar to transhumanists' views: for the transhumanist, it is inevitable that human nature will not remain the same over time. Sorgner also sees values as changeable for both Nietzsche and the transhumanists. Since values are related to the actualization of power for Nietzsche, changes in values follow from the same principles that ground arguments for changes in natures. For transhumanists, Sorgner points to Bostrom's openness to revising value judgments as new evidence related to what is valued is discovered or promulgated.

The second similarity Sorgner discusses is shared approval by Nietzsche and transhumanists for science as a means for positively changing humanity.

Sorgner thinks Nietzsche appeals to a scientific attitude to ground his philosophy of the overman. Sorgner also interprets Nietzsche's theses of eternal recurrence, will-to-power, and evolution as functioning as scientific theories (or at least as mirroring scientific theories) (Ibid., 33). It is the thesis of evolution, combined with the will to power dynamic, that Sorgner gestures to as providing humans reason to improve themselves (Ibid., 33). This project of self-betterment is one that Nietzsche shares with the transhumanists. While the project is more general with respect to the progression of humans to the overman – to transcend what I am and what I value, I must have the power to do so, and to have the power to transcend myself and my values, I must become better than what I am – this difference of particularity does not properly distinguish Nietzsche's concept of self-betterment from the transhumanists' concept of self-enhancement.

Sorgner continues by referencing a third point of agreement: both Nietzsche and transhumanists believe values to be person-relative and person-dependent. Connected to this is another point of agreement: the shared belief in the importance of holistic personal development. For Nietzsche, relative values and self-overcoming (what Sorgner understands holistic personal development to be for Nietzsche) are explainable by individual instances of willing. Since every willing individual will have particular desires and a particular set of relations to other willing individuals, what that individual judges to be valuable and how that individual judges he can best improve his own power will not be universalizable to other individuals. While species may be definable according to general limits on the power of individuals so classified, there will still be differences among those individuals with respect to their power. Sorgner assesses the claims made by transhumanists as following from similar argumentation. The transhumanist will rely on some notion of autonomy or personal choice to justify claims about values being person-dependent and development being properly carried out at the individual level. But autonomy works in a similar way to Nietzsche's willing. Because of this, both Nietzsche and the transhumanist arrive at similar conclusions: freely willing beings are the sources of valuing, and these same beings are the drivers of development, which occurs at the level of the individual.

The final similarity Sorgner comments on is the parallel structures of progression or evolution that Nietzsche and transhumanists both advance. As has been said, the development of the overman is an evolutionary development; the overman comes about as part of a historical advancement of one species to another. Sorgner describes this advancement in the following way: “[a]ccording to Nietzsche, evolution is not a gradual development from one species to another, but takes place in steps. If the conditions within one species are such that an evolutionary step can take place, various couples at the same time give birth to members of a new species. The couples who give birth to the overhuman must have qualities that Nietzsche would refer to as those of higher humans ... Higher humans still belong to the human species, but have some special capacities which an overhuman could also have ...” (Ibid., 37). Overmen come from higher men, members of the human species that have particular capacities that transcend the natural limits of humans. A higher man, however, is not an overman. Though some of the higher man’s abilities may go beyond those of ordinary humans, his power is not completely qualitatively different from individual human persons. Moreover, the higher man is still caught in the process of self-overcoming (Ibid., 38). While the overman is the end of man’s development, the higher man is still only a step in that process of development. Sorgner sees a similar relationship (means to an end versus an end) standing between the transhuman and the posthuman. Just as the higher man is simply a necessary part of the development of humanity as a species into the overman, so too is the transhuman a necessary part of the development of humanity as a species into the posthuman. Sorgner does differentiate between conceptualizations of transhumans and posthumans, claiming that not all transhumanists rely on the same species-to-species development model as does Nietzsche.⁵ What is important for the purposes

⁵ Specifically, Sorgner does not think that Bostrom’s understanding of the transhuman and the posthuman properly represent Nietzsche’s higher man and overman as parallel steps in an evolutionary process. Sorgner instead picks out the transhumanist F.M. Esfandiary as being representative of Nietzsche’s model of progression. The differences between these two thinkers are related to their conceptualizing of the posthuman as being a species-evolved being or not. Esfandiary calls the transhuman an “evolutionary

of this paper is that transhumanism, broadly construed, does describe the progression of man to something that transcends humanity in a way similar to Nietzsche's description of the role higher humans have to play in the development of the overman.

Sorgner, to restate, argues that those who believe there are only superficial similarities between Nietzsche and contemporary transhumanists (like Bostrom) are wrong. Sorgner outlines multiple different fundamental similarities between transhumanism and Nietzsche's thesis of the overman (as understood with respect to the will to power). Among these similarities are the mutability of natures and values; science as a means for self-betterment or self-improvement; the relativization of values; the need for self-development; and the process of evolutionary progression from man to a transcendent species. The remainder of this paper will show that Sorgner does not account for fundamental differences between transhumanism and Nietzsche's thesis of the overman.

3. Does Transhumanism Overcome Man?: Zarathustra Speaks

To adequately respond to Sorgner's thesis, I need to provide instances of fundamental disagreement between Nietzsche and the transhumanists. As stated, I will be situating my critique of Sorgner within a discussion of the overman. I will argue that the aim of transhumanism – the posthuman – differs significantly from the overman. That is, the posthuman and the overman are not fundamentally similar. As stated in footnote 2, I take Nietzsche's and Zarathustra's conceptions of the overman to be compatible, such that significantly differing from Zarathustra's overman will entail also significantly differing from Nietzsche's overman. Because of this, I believe that establishing that the transhumanists' posthuman differs significantly from Zarathustra's overman will sufficiently justify my objecting to Sor-

link" to the posthuman. In contrast, Bostrom believes that individual humans can become posthuman, although this transformation might be effected by similar means as the transformation from human to Esfandiary's transhuman, and Esfandiary's transhuman to his posthuman.

gner. To argue that there is a significant difference between the two, I will show that transhumanism is opposed to three major themes in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* that are characteristic of the overman.

The first characteristic of the overman that transhumanism is opposed to is the closeness of the overman to the earth. When Zarathustra first begins to teach the overman, one of his initial teachings is that the overman is “the meaning of the earth” (Nietzsche 2005, 9). This teaching is further presented as an exhortation: “I beseech you, my brothers, *remain true to the earth*, and do not believe those who speak to you of otherworldly hope!” (Ibid., 10). Finally, the teaching is given by contrasting the soul with the body: “Once the soul looked contemptuously on the body, and then that contempt was the supreme things: – the soul wished the body meager, ghastly, and famished. Thus it thought to escape from the body and the earth” (Ibid., 10). The overman is intimately linked to his body. Against those (such as Christians) who have promised another life beyond this one in which the spirit is no longer shackled with the body, Zarathustra proclaims that the overman will remain in his body. To go beyond humanity, humanity must return to their bodies, ignoring those who revere spirit over matter, the afterlife over this current life, and the soul over the body. At first glance, this sort of thinking does not seem at all unaligned with the transhumanists. On the contrary, transhumanism is a rejection of afterwordly thinking. Transhumanism is, in some ways, an attempt to make a heaven here on earth. Rather than having to leave the world to have a life in which there will be no pain, no sorrow, and no death, transhumanists believe that such a world can be brought about now, here. To truly elucidate where transhumanists will differ from the closeness to this life that is characteristic of the overman, we need further explanation about this closeness from Zarathustra.

One of Zarathustra’s prophecies is addressed to those whom he calls the “despisers of the body”. Against these persons, against those who think that the soul or spirit is primary in man, Zarathustra so intones: “But the awakened one, the knowing one, says: ‘Body am I entirely, and nothing more; and soul is only the name of something about the body.’ / The body is a great reason, a plurality with one sense, a war and a peace, a herd and

also a shepherd. / An instrument of your body is also your little reason, my brother, which you call ‘spirit’ – a little instrument and toy of your great reason” (Ibid., 32). Against the despisers of body, Zarathustra defends a holistic account of body. Rather than denying the soul and spirit a place in his ontology, Zarathustra gives them a role within the body. The soul is a part of the body, and the spirit is an instrument of the body’s reason. By subjugating the soul and the spirit – or perhaps spirit in general, instead of any particular spirit – to the body, Zarathustra illustrates where his disagreement with the despisers of the body lies. The despisers of the body, those who are not close to the earth and this life, see the body as only a part of the overall man. Zarathustra, in contrast, sees the apparent immaterial as merely a part of the material. To be close to the earth is to grant the body primary importance. This gives us reason to argue against transhumanism’s being compatible with Zarathustra’s overman. While transhumanists show great concern with fixing bodily problems, they do not grant the body the exalted place that figures into how the overman will treat the body. This can be noted in two ways. First, transhumanists ultimately care about something that is removed from the body: consciousness. Transhumanists are clearly not soul theorists; they are not the “otherworldly” Christians who look beyond this life to another, and who thereby ignore the body in favor of what is to survive into that next life. But transhumanists do look beyond our bodily lives. Take, for instance, the idea of linked human-machine intelligences. What would this protect, save? Intelligence, while connected to the body, is not intrinsically connected, at least as it is treated by transhumanism. Indeed, the idea seems to require something that is not bodily (at least in the organic sense). This point is made more obviously when applied to digital immortality. The idea of uploading human consciousness to a virtual repository is necessarily opposed to a body. Moreover, this idea gives primacy to the mind or consciousness, not to the body. This rules out transhumanists’ being this-world oriented, something the overman will be. As a second comment, related to digital immortality: the transhumanist approach to immortality suggests a de-emphasizing of the body. If immortality is to be had in the cloud or in robotic shells – if we can live on forever so long as our minds are preserved – the role of the body for

transhumanism is severely underplayed (compared to the role of the body for the overman). But the transhumanists' concern with immortality is not only problematic with how it treats the body.

The second characteristic of the overman that transhumanism is opposed to is the overman's mortality. As I discussed above, one of the avowed goals of the transhumanists is to avoid death (or at least greatly prolong life). But death figures massively into Zarathustra's portrayal of the overman. This is bluntly said: "Many die too late, and a few die too early. Still the teaching sounds strange: 'Die at the right time!' Die at the right time: thus teaches Zarathustra" (Ibid., 63). Now, to be sure, it would be wrong to call Zarathustra some kind of prophet of death. His philosophy is not one that denies life. He sharply dismisses such philosophies and such philosophers: "There are preachers of death: and the earth us full of those to whom one must preach renunciation of life ... There are those with consumption of the soul: hardly are they born when they begin to die and to long for teachings of weariness and renunciation. / They would like to be dead and we should welcome their wish! Let us beware of waking those dead ones and of disturbing those living coffins" (Ibid., 41). Similar to the otherworldly (if not in many cases identical), the preachers of death see this life as being one of suffering and hardship. They look forward to the release from such that death promises. Zarathustra is not advocating for such thinking when he commands that we die at the right time. Rather, Zarathustra is demanding that death be purposeful, and suggesting that when we die is a contributing part to the purposefulness of our deaths. As he explains: "I show you the consummating death, which shall be a spur and a promise to the survivors ... My death, praise I to you, the voluntary death, which comes to me because *I* want it. And when shall I want it? – Whoever has a goal and an heir, wants death at the right time for the goal and the heir" (Ibid., 63). The purpose of death is to make way for one's goal and one's heir. From later passages, it should be clear that the overman is both the goal and heir of Zarathustra.⁶ Death, then, of mere men, is done so

⁶ See, for instance, *ibid.*, 174 ("O my brothers, I consecrate and direct you to a new nobility: you shall become procreators and cultivators and sowers of the future ... O my brothers, your nobility shall not gaze backward, but *outward!* ... You shall *make amends* to your

that the overman might come into existence. Zarathustra, in one of his new tablets, calls such a death a sacrifice for the sake of the overman.⁷ Importantly, this idea of sacrificing one's life for the sake of the future is linked to another central characteristic of the overman, self-overcoming.⁸ Life itself is included as a necessary part of this overcoming: "And life itself spoke this secret to me. 'Behold,' it said, 'I am that *which must ever overcome itself*'" (Ibid., 101). To hold onto *this* life is to stagnate, to prevent the actualizing of the future, a future that carries with itself the promise of greater lives for greater beings.

The difficulty posed to transhumanism by the twin ideas of purposeful death and self-overcoming is the importance of death itself. If immortality is a goal that transhumanists aspire to, they cannot claim to be interested in overcoming themselves. While it might be argued that self-overcoming is a constitutive part of immortality – that is, that biological humanness must be surpassed if life is to be extended indefinitely – this argument fails to account for the Zarathustrian condemnation of this life. If there are not overmen now, then all humans that exist are merely means to realizing the overman. And even if this realization can occur through some sort of transformative process that preserves this particular life throughout itself, then transhumanism must still account for self-overcoming as a process of self-mastery. As Zarathustra teaches, "All that lives, obeys ... he who cannot obey himself is commanded ... Yes, even when it commands itself, it must still pay for its commanding. It must become the judge and avenger and victim of its own law" (Ibid., 100). Self-overcoming involves internalizing the will to power, the will to command rather than to obey. In contrast,

children for being the children of your fathers: *thus* shall you redeem all that is past!"), and *ibid.*, 280 ("While all this went on Zarathustra spoke only a sentence: '*My children are near, my children* –, then he became quite silent ... 'Well! My lion has come, my children are near, Zarathustra has grown ripe, my hour has come ...'").

⁷ "O my brothers, the first-born is always sacrificed. But now we are first-born! / We bleed on secret sacrificial altars, we all burn and roast in honor of ancient idols ... *In us ourselves* he lives on still, the old idol-priest, who roasts our best for his feast. Ah, my brothers, how should the first-born now be sacrifices! / But so our kind wants it; and I love those who do not wish to preserve themselves. I love with my whole love those who go under and perish: for they cross over." – *Ibid.*, 171.

⁸ See *ibid.*, 99–102.

even if, as conceded above, the augmentative practices of transhumanism could produce an overman without the ending of the current and particular life of someone who is now human, this would be an extrinsic change. If self-overcoming is intrinsic – which it very much seems to be – then these technological processes could not satisfy the dual requirements that make up the Zarathustrian understanding of death.

Finally, transhumanism stands against the overman’s characteristic task of value-creating. This is to say that transhumanists implicitly make or adhere to collective value judgements; this contrasts sharply with the overman’s transcending of all values and value judgements. This central theme of Zarathustra’s ministry is one that does not need to be dwelt on at length. I will offer a few selections that exemplify what is meant by the overman’s transcending valuation. From the section on the thousand and one goals:

Truly, men have given to themselves all their good and evil. Truly, they did not take it, they did not find it, it did not come to them as a voice from heaven. / Only man assigned values to things in order to maintain himself ... Truly, this power of praising and blaming is a monster. Tell me, O brothers, who will subdue it for me? Tell me, who will throw a yoke upon the thousand necks of this beast? / A thousand goals have there been so far ... Only the yoke for a thousand necks is still lacking: the *one* goal is lacking. As yet humanity has no goal. / But tell me, my brothers, if the goal of humanity is still lacking, is there not also still lacking – humanity itself? – (Ibid., 53–54).

From the section on the old and new tablets: “When I came to men, I found them resting on an old conceit: all of them thought they had long known what was good and evil for man ... I disturbed this sleepiness when I taught that *no one yet knows* what is good and evil – unless it be he who creates! / – But it is he who creates man’s goal and gives the earth its meanings and its future: that anything at all is good and evil, *that is his creation*” (Ibid., 168). From the section on the higher men: “You creators, you higher men! One is pregnant only with one’s own child. / Do not let yourselves be imposed upon or beguiled! For who is *your* neighbor? Even if you do things ‘for your neighbor’ – you still do not create for him! / Unlearn this

‘for,’ you creators: your very virtue wants you to have nothing to do with ‘for’ and ‘for the sake of’ and ‘because’ ... In your selfishness, you creators, is the caution and providence of the pregnant! What no one’s eye has yet seen, the fruit: that is sheltered and indulged and nourished by your whole love” (Ibid., 249). These should suffice to clarify Zarathustra’s rejection of collective or shared values. The overman is a creator of his own values; he does not accept the values of others, nor does he value things for the sake of others or their own valuings.

Here, our criticism of Sorgner’s thesis will directly engage him. On page 5, Sorgner cites Bostrom to support the argument that both transhumanists and Nietzsche favor a “reevaluation of values”. Sorgner places particular weight on Bostrom’s identification of some transhumanist values, among which are critical thinking, open-mindedness, and open discussion (Sorgner 2009, 32). While Sorgner believes that these values are compatible with the non-absolute and created values that Nietzsche espouses, I challenge that these qualities are sufficient for giving us a properly Nietzschean (or Zarathustrian) vision of value. While Zarathustra will grant readily and easily that values are made, not discovered; and while he will also grant readily and easily that values depend on men; his ultimate vision of values dismisses any sort of collective value. When the overman exists, he will exercise his creative power freely and entirely for himself. What Sorgner’s account of Nietzschean values lacks is a proper scale for how relativized values are. The fact that Bostrom treats some values as being such that all or many transhumanists will accept them directly contrasts him with Zarathustra’s understanding of the overman’s creation of values. If the values are imposed on multiple people, they are not the kind of values that would be created and accepted by individual overmen. Even if the values are created and voluntarily accepted by multiple people together, they will still not be the kind of values that would be created and accepted by individual overmen. As further criticism, one could also again point to the fact that there are *not* any overmen as of yet. Because of this, there cannot be any values that are of the kind that will be created by overmen. Given this, any value judgements that we acknowledge will be of the kind of those value judgements that Zarathustra rejects. Given this, the

values and value judgements of transhumanists cannot be compatible with Nietzschean thought concerning values in the way that Sorgner suggests.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have argued against Sorgner's thesis that transhumanism is generally compatible with Nietzsche's philosophy of the *übermensch*. To do this, I offered a brief description of transhumanism and its principles. I next summarized Sorgner's thesis, noting the points of similarity he observed between transhumanism and Nietzsche's philosophy. Finally, I challenged Sorgner by showing three points of incompatibility between Zarathustra's treatment of the overman and transhumanism: the overman's closeness to the earth, immortality as a goal, and the collective values of transhumanists. To end this paper, I offer two concluding thoughts about where further work could be done with respect to my thesis.

Though I granted that Nietzsche's and Zarathustra's understandings of the overman were such that incompatibility with one would entail incompatibility with the other, this point could be proven more rigorously. However, this is a less interesting (though perhaps not less important) problem than the one I will now propose. Transhumanism, as Bostrom himself remarks, is a fragmentary movement. It is, as of yet, not unified with respect to all of its goals, the means it recommends to those goals, and the justifications it offers for both its goals and the means by which they are to be accomplished. Both Sorgner and myself rely on certain themes in Nietzsche and Zarathustra being fundamental to them. We also rely on certain themes in transhumanism being likewise fundamental in order for us to, respectively, compare or contrast transhumanism's fundamental themes with Nietzsche's and Zarathustra's fundamental themes. A project that remains for those interested in relation between the posthuman and the overman is as follows: if transhumanism could become a more unified field of thought, would this change the fundamental themes that are available for association with Nietzsche's own thought? In other words, would a comprehensive theory of transhumanism give reason to Sorgner

or myself to change our conclusions concerning the likeness or dislikeness of transhumanism's posthuman and Nietzsche's overman?

References

- Agar, Nicholas. 2007. "Whereto Transhumanism? The Literature Reaches a Critical Mass". *Hastings Center Report*, vol. 37, no. 3 (May–June): 12–17.
- Agatonović, Miloš. 2018. "The Case of Transhumanism: The Possibility of Application of Nietzsche's Ethics and Critique of Morality Today". *Philosophy and Society*, vol. 29, no. 3: 317–474.
- Blackford, Russell. 2010. "Editorial: Nietzsche and the European Posthumanisms". *Journal of Evolution and Technology*, vol. 21, iss. 1 (January): i–iii.
- Bostrom, Nick. 2005. "A History of Transhumanist Thought". *Journal of Evolution and Technology*, vol. 14 (April): 1–25.
- Bostrom, Nick. 2005. "Transhumanist Values". *Review of Contemporary Philosophy*, vol. 4 (May): 3–14.
- Hauskeller, Michael. 2010. "Nietzsche, the Overhuman and the Posthuman: A Reply to Stefan Sorgner". *Journal of Evolution and Technology*, vol. 21, iss. 1: 5–8.
- Hibbard, Bill. 2010. "Nietzsche's Overhuman is an Ideal Whereas Posthumans Will be Real". *Journal of Evolution and Technology*, vol. 21, iss. 1 (January): 9–12.
- Hughes, Hames. 2010. "Contradictions from the Enlightenment Roots of Transhumanism". *Journal of Medicine and Philosophy*, vol. 35: 622–640.
- More, Max. 2010. "The Overhuman in the Transhuman". *Journal of Evolution and Technology*, vol. 21, iss. 1 (January): 1–4.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich. 2005. *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. Edited by George Stade. Translated by Clancy Martin. New York: Barnes & Noble Books.
- Porter, Allen. 2017. "Bioethics and Transhumanism". *Journal of Medicine and Philosophy*, vol. 42: 237–260.
- Ranisch, Robert and Sorgner, Stefan Lorenz. 2014. "Introducing Post- and Transhumanism". *Post- and Transhumanism: An Introduction*, 7–27. Edited by Robert Ranisch and Stegan Lorenz Sorgner. Internationaler Verlag der Wissenschaften: Peter Lang GmbH.
- Sorgner, Stefan Lorenz. 2009. "Nietzsche, the Overman, and Transhumanism". *Journal of Evolution and Technology*, vol. 20, iss. 1 (March): 29–42.
- Sorgner, Stefan Lorenz. 2010. "Beyond Humanism: Reflections on Trans- and Posthumanism". *Journal of Evolution and Technology*, vol. 21, iss. 2 (October): 1–19.
- Zimmerman, Michael E. 2011. "Last Man or Overman?: Transhuman Appropriations of a Nietzschean Theme". *The Hedgehog Review* (summer): 31–44.