Nietzsche and Transhumanism: A Reassessment

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Abstract

This paper addresses the scholarly debate over Nietzsche's relationship to transhumanism. Most writing on this topic has focused almost exclusively on whether or not Nietzsche's thought is philosophically compatible with transhumanist philosophy. Because ideas are not always transmitted in philosophically cogent ways, this approach is inadequate to address the question of how Nietzsche may have influenced transhumanism. I propose replacing the current approach with a history of ideas approach that also tracks "para-philosophical" vectors of influence. Bringing to bear such an approach, I argue that Nietzsche was crucial in laying the groundwork for transhumanism. First, his rejection of Being, of a fixed ontological order, decisively undermined essentialist conceptions of human nature, opening the door to a radical refashioning of the human being such as that envisioned in the transhumanist "posthuman." Second, Nietzsche's superman and the transhumanist posthuman are instantiations of apotheosis, a perennial impulse toward self-divinization at the core of many mystical and esoteric systems. The superman represents the ideal of apotheosis filtered through Nietzsche's materialism and his processual turn, and it is in this modified, post-Nietzschean form that the ideal passes to transhumanism. Finally, I demonstrate that Nietzsche's thought is not as philosophically incompatible with transhumanism as some critics claim.

Keywords: *Nietzsche; transhumanism; history of ideas; mysticism*

Introduction

The scholarly debate over Nietzsche's relationship to transhumanism originated in a few brief remarks by Nick Bostrom in 2005. The ensuing discussion has largely been confined to a debate over whether or not any philosophical affinities exist between Nietzsche's thought and transhumanist philosophy. The majority, among them Michael Hauskeller and Babette Babich, support Bostrom's basic view that, notwithstanding a few "surface-level similarities with the Nietzschean vision," transhumanism is aligned rather with an Enlightenment-utilitarian ethos that Nietzsche spurned (Bostrom, "History," 4).[2] On the other side are thinkers like Max More, who defend Stefan Sorgner's contention that Nietzsche is an important precursor to transhumanism.[3] Like the other contributors to this debate, I am seeking to address the question of Nietzsche's influence on transhumanism. Unlike most of these scholars, however, I do not confine myself to identifying or repudiating philosophical affinities between Nietzsche and transhumanism. As Russell Blackford explains, transhumanism is not a philosophy but "a broad intellectual *movement*" (193; my emphasis). William Sims Bainbridge, a prominent transhumanist and

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[2] See Hauskeller, "Nietzsche," 32–36; Babich 101–32.
[3] See More, "The Overhuman," 27–31.

sociologist of religion, implies the same when he writes that, although "the first generation of transhumanists have chiefly been philosophers," it "may be time to begin to transcend philosophy" (50). Transhumanism is not primarily a philosophy concerned to establish the philosophical soundness of its ideas, but rather a movement concerned to implement them. Any assessment of the relationship between Nietzsche and transhumanism must take this into account. Since philosophy is only one component of the transhumanist movement, philosophical analysis of this question should be subsumed under a *history of ideas* approach that tracks vectors of influence from Nietzsche to transhumanism that may be less than cogent from a strictly philosophical point of view.

Bringing to bear such an approach, I argue that Nietzsche was crucial in laying the groundwork for transhumanism. First, his rejection of Being, of a fixed ontological order, decisively undermined essentialist conceptions of human nature that had prevailed into the 19th century, opening the door to a radical refashioning of the human being—a project he enthusiastically endorsed. By collapsing Being into Becoming, Nietzsche replaced a "world of fixed entities" with a "'processual' world," "a world intrinsically constituted of processes" (Ulfers and Cohen 145). This "processual turn," with its dynamic and open-ended conception of the human being, is foundational to the transhumanist project of engineering a "posthuman." Second, both Nietzsche's superman[4] and the transhumanist dream of the posthuman are instantiations of what I call *apotheosis*, a perennial impulse toward self-divinization at the core of many mystical and esoteric systems. The superman represents the ideal of apotheosis filtered through Nietzsche's materialism and his processual turn, and it is in this modified, post-Nietzschean form that the ideal passes to transhumanism.

Reframing the Debate

It was Sorgner's extended reply to Bostrom that really touched off the debate over Nietzsche's relationship to transhumanism. Both Bostrom and Sorgner are transhumanists and philosophers, and the discussion growing out of this initial exchange has had the character of an in-house dispute among transhumanists, occasionally in consultation with Nietzsche scholars, concerning the philosophical underpinnings of the movement. For his part, Bostrom may have been reacting to the "bioconservative" Jürgen Habermas, who in passing describes advocates of the use of genetic engineering to steer human evolution as "self-styled Nietzscheans" (22). Habermas goes on to suggest that the central goal of the biotech revolution is the "*auto-transformation of the species*" (21; emphasis in original). These "self-styled Nietzscheans," he is saying, want to effect an auto-transformation of the species through a kind of brutal directed evolution. The superman, from this perspective, would be the Nietzschean analogue for the transhumanist posthuman, as it is for Sorgner. "In transhumanist thought," writes Habermas, "Nietzsche's overhuman is being referred to as 'posthuman'" (20). Bostrom of course denies this, yet he explicitly mentions the

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[4] My translation of *Übermensch* follows that of Jeffrey Kripal, in an unpublished essay some of which will appear in a forthcoming book for The University of Chicago Press titled *The Superhumanities*. Like Kripal, I am encouraged rather than deterred by the pop culture associations with "superman," a term which evokes the cultural influence and reception history of Nietzsche that this paper seeks to elucidate. "Superman" also keys to what Kripal, drawing on the work of Paul Loeb and David Tinsley (Nietzsche, *Unpublished Fragments*), calls the "*superior-species*" use" of *Übermensch*, in contradistinction to the "*supernatural*" or "*superior-individual*" senses (Kripal 61). Anyway, "Overhuman" or "overman" is an awkward rendering that, in my opinion, inadequately conveys the sense of *über*, which connotes both "over" and "beyond." It also serves to sanitize Nietzsche's thought by obscuring the aforementioned reception history.

superman despite only devoting four sentences to the entire topic of Nietzsche and transhumanism. He takes it as a matter of course that anyone who considers Nietzsche an ancestor of transhumanism would latch onto his superman concept. Nor is it much of an exaggeration to say that the debate over Nietzsche's relationship to transhumanism has amounted to a debate over whether or not, and to what extent, the Nietzschean superman is comparable to the transhumanist ideal of the posthuman.

The question, however, is not whether or not the superman and the posthuman share a philosophical affinity; the question is whether the superman exerted a significant *influence* on the conception and development of the posthuman. From Bostrom on, the argument against any meaningful similarity between the superman and the posthuman rests on the notion that Nietzsche's philosophy is wildly incompatible with the utilitarian ethics on which transhumanism is grounded, an ethics rooted in Enlightenment liberalism and most closely associated with John Stuart Mill.[5] There is no question that Nietzsche loathed Mill in particular and utilitarianism in general. He poured scorn on the entire liberal ethos arising out of the Enlightenment, while the vast majority of transhumanists, Bostrom and Sorgner among them, openly align themselves with some version of this ethos. The argument runs aground, however, as soon as this *philosophical incompatibility* is supposed to imply a kind of firewall between the two thought systems such that it is impossible for Nietzsche to have influenced transhumanism in any important respect. The strong version of this incompatibility argument, which allows for *no* influence between the two, can be refuted instantly. "I can state with complete confidence that such an influence does indeed exist," declares Max More, one of the founders of the movement:

> I know that because his ideas influenced my own thinking. That thinking led to my introduction of the term "transhumanism" (only later did I discover [Julian] Huxley's prior use of the term), to the publication of my essay, "Transhumanism: Towards a Futurist Philosophy," and to my original transhumanist statement, "The Extropian Principles." (More, "The Overhuman," 28)

More also subscribes to a "variant" of transhumanism that joins a professedly liberal transhumanism to Nietzsche's decidedly illiberal philosophy (More, "The Overhuman," 30). In the anti-Sorgner camp, Babich and others see no contradiction between espousing liberal-Enlightenment political values and professing to be influenced by Nietzsche. Neither, for that matter, have countless "Nietzschean" intellectuals since WWII, in the wake of Walter Kaufmann's rehabilitation of Nietzsche for the liberal intelligentsia. The firewall is a fiction. Whether or not Nietzschean thought can be reconciled on a philosophical level with a liberal socio-political project is beside the point: even if Nietzsche is not liberal or transhumanist from a philosophical perspective, he can influence people who profess to be both. Thus, the debate over whether and to what extent any philosophical affinities exist between Nietzsche and transhumanism cannot decisively answer the broader question as to Nietzsche's relationship to, or influence on, transhumanism.

Answering this question requires taking into consideration rhetorical factors that might be motivating many transhumanists to deny that Nietzsche is an important precursor of transhumanism. Sorgner is quite open about his belief that "the real motive for Bostrom's

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[5] See Bostrom, "A History," 4.

claim that Nietzsche cannot be seen as an ancestor of transhumanism" is that he wants to dissociate transhumanism from Nietzsche's "unsavory reputation" as the pet philosopher of the Third Reich (Sorgner, "Beyond Humanism," 63). Babich also accuses Bostrom of distancing his movement from Nietzsche so as to dissociate his "*liberal* eugenics" from "*Nazi* eugenics" (Babich 16f.; emphases in original). Once again, Bostrom is reacting to Habermas's attempt to identify transhumanists with Nietzscheans, "associating both with fascist breeding ideologies." Bostrom, writes Sorgner, "rightly fears" this rhetorical strategy of bringing about "negative reactions to human biotechnological procedures" by identifying "these measures with procedures undertaken in Nazi Germany" (Sorgner, "Beyond Humanism," 65). Bainbridge too appreciates the rhetorical power of associating transhumanism with Nazism via Nietzsche. "For their part," he writes,

> anti-transhumanists may find it useful to defame transhumanists as Nazis, and the ambiguities around Nietzsche merely cloud that issue. A war may be brewing, in which the Christian establishment seeks to suppress transhumanism, energized by the agonies of a falling civilization. (Bainbridge 50)

Given such high stakes, and the rhetorical force of the Nazi-via-Nietzsche association, it's understandable that a pro-Nietzschean transhumanist like Sorgner would go out of his way to deny that Nietzsche was in any way a proto-fascist or proto-Nazi. The great majority of Nietzsche scholars, insists Sorgner, consider this view "absurd" (he ignores their authority when they deem the Nietzsche-transhumanism connection equally absurd), yet for some reason "the educated public" persists in associating Nietzsche with the Third Reich (Sorgner 2017b, 63). Above all, they associate him with Nazi eugenics, a view supported by passages like the following, from a late note to *The Birth of Tragedy*:

> Let us look a century ahead, let us suppose that my *attentat* [attack] on two millennia of anti-nature and the violation of man succeeds. That party of life which takes in hand the greatest of all tasks, the higher breeding of humanity, together with the remorseless destruction of all degenerate and parasitic elements, will again make possible on earth that superfluity of life out of which the Dionysian condition must again proceed.[6] (BT, "Appendix," 4.)

In the same vein as the eugenicists and social Darwinists of the era, Nietzsche, in *Twilight of the Idols*, brands the sick and decadent individual "a parasite on society" and recommends that the medical establishment prod him into an honorable suicide (TI, "Expeditions of an Untimely Man," 36). The same sentiment is found in *The Antichrist*: "The weak and the failed should perish: first principle of *our* love of man. And we should even help them do it." (A 2. Emphasis in original). As Werner Dannhauser observes, Nietzsche

> speaks approvingly of the need for a eugenics program; he anticipates a time when whole sectors of the earth will be devoted to man's experimentation on man; and he is in favor of the merciless extinction of inferior people and races. (848)

Ever since Kaufmann's liberal rehabilitation of Nietzsche, it has been deeply out of fashion to press the connections between Nietzsche and the Nazis. And Nietzsche's liberal admirers are able to point up several important points of conflict between his thought and

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[6] All translations of Nietzsche are mine, based on the Critical Edition of his Collected Works (Nietzsche 1980).

National Socialist ideology. Yet there is no doubt that Nietzsche influenced the Nazis. Compilations of his aphorisms and other writings were published and distributed under the Third Reich to promote National Socialism.[7] Hitler himself not only paid a public visit to the Nietzsche archives run by his sister, but his enthusiasm for the great German philosopher was such that he gifted Mussolini a custom, leather-bound set of his collected works as a birthday present.[8] Thus, despite the very substantial philosophical income-patibilities between Nietzsche and fascism/National Socialism, "the fact remains," as Dannhauser concludes, "that in various ways Nietzsche influenced fascism. Fascism may have abused the words of Nietzsche, but his words are singularly easy to abuse" (849). Whether or not the Nazis misappropriated Nietzsche is virtually irrelevant when considering how he *influenced* them, and this applies no less to the question of Nietzsche's influence on transhumanism.

Unfortunately, as Steven Aschheim explains, post-World War II analyses of Nietzsche's legacy have been "less interested in the actual processes of influence and dissemination than in judging the various appropriations." The "open-ended, transformational nature of the Nietzsche legacy" has therefore eluded them (7). In his treatment of the Nietzsche-Nazi connection, Aschheim reiterates the principle that "ideological appropriation itself becomes the major relevant datum—not the question of the truth or falsity," i.e., of the philosophical cogency, "of such appropriation" (233). It was, he explains, "the radically experimental, tradition-shattering Nietzschean mode that rendered nazism thinkable" (322). Nazism and Nietzschean thought are seen, from this perspective, as linked in their "unprecedented transvaluations and boundary-breaking extremities" (Aschheim 330). Steve Fuller, an avowedly Nietzschean transhumanist, adopts a very similar interpretation of Nietzsche, according to which he "took literally the prospect of transcending the human condition" (9–10). To Fuller's regret, this interpretation fell out of favor after World War II due to its association with Nazism. But it is this tainted, pre-World War II interpretation of Nietzsche, championed in the Anglo-American sphere by figures like George Bernard Shaw and H.L. Mencken, that has inspired Fuller and other transhumanists.[9] It is still, to Sorgner's chagrin, basically the view of Nietzsche among the "educated public," which provides the rhetorical incentive for the transhumanist movement as a whole to obscure its Nietzschean roots and for the minority of openly Nietzschean transhumanists to distort his thought or dissemble their real view of it.[10]

From Nietzsche to Transhumanism I: Being into Becoming

The same transgressive celebration of radical experimentation and human refashioning in Nietzsche that inspired National Socialism also links his thought to transhumanism. When Nietzsche's Zarathustra teaches the superman, he teaches that "man is something that should be overcome" (Z I, "Prologue"). The person usually credited with coining the term "transhumanism" is Julian Huxley, who in a 1951 essay defines it as

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[7] See, e.g., Nietzsche, *Schwert*.
[8] See Steinberg 204.
[9] See Shaw and Mencken.
[10] For another Nietzschean-inspired transhumanist, see Chu.

the idea of humanity attempting to overcome its limitation and to arrive at a fuller fruition; it is the realization that both individual and social development are processes of self-transformation. ("Knowledge," 139)[11]

Six years later, in a reworked version of the paper that he titled "Transhumanism," he went further, describing it as the "new belief" that the "human species can, if it wishes, *transcend itself*—not just sporadically, an individual here in one way, an individual there in another way, but in its entirety, as humanity" (*New Bottles* 17; my emphasis). While Huxley foresaw a condition of "man remaining man, but transcending himself," his successors formulated an even more radical vision, that of the "posthuman." The goal of transhumanism, More states, is to achieve the "posthuman condition" ("Transhumanism"). Anders Sandberg prophecies that "we will no longer be human anymore, but posthuman beings" ("Introductory Texts"). Kevin Warwick speaks for the movement as a whole when he declares that the condition of being human "is something we have the power to change" ("Cyborg 1.0").[12]

Nietzsche holds the same fluid conception of human nature, defining man as "the not-yet-determined animal" (KSA 11, 25 [428]). In *Human All Too Human*, he laments how philosophers treat "man during the last four thousand years" as something "eternal," when in reality "everything has come into being: there are no eternal facts as there are no absolute truths" (HH I.2). One of the chief correspondences between Nietzsche's thought and transhumanism, as Sorgner points out, is this view that "the species 'human being'…is not eternally fixed and immutable" ("Nietzsche" 15). Klaus Schwab, the transhumanist founder and executive chairman of the World Economic Forum, regards the growing development and integration of biotech and advanced computing technology, or "AI," as a "Fourth Industrial Revolution" that, unlike the previous three, is "not only changing what we do but also *who we are*" (*Fourth Industrial* 97; my emphasis). The "new technology revolution," writes Schwab, "entails nothing less than a transformation of humankind" (1). In More's words: "By thoughtfully, carefully, and yet boldly applying technology to ourselves, we can become something no longer accurately described as human—we can become posthuman" ("Philosophy" 4). Nietzsche likewise wants to de-essentialize our conception of the human being, "to take the general character of man more and more away from him," in order to "achieve a higher species than man" through the transformation of "its most individual things" (KSA 9, 6 [158]).

What lays the groundwork, ontologically, for this transformation of man into superman is Nietzsche's decisive collapse of Being into Becoming. The idea that ultimate reality is an eternal realm of "forms" or fixed objects, and that the phenomenal world is a more or less illusory reflection of the eternal realm, is the core of Platonism and Christianity, according to Nietzsche. One of his chief goals was to overturn this ontology, which he diagnosed as the deepest root of world-rejection or decadence, and to replace it with the perpetual dynamism of Becoming, with a *processual* world lacking any absolute values or fundamental metaphysical structures.

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[11] Huxley most likely borrowed the term from "Canadian author, historian, jurist, and philosopher W.D. Lighthall," who used it to designate his "highly speculative theory of cosmic evolution" (Harrison and Wolyniak 466). Allen Porter drew my attention to this article.
[12] Quoted in Aydin 322.

His success revolutionized Western thought and ushered in the postmodern age. Before Nietzsche, the thinker who took the biggest step from Being toward Becoming was Hegel, who identified God Himself with the *process* of history. Franklin Baumer characterizes the entire sweep of modern thought, from 1600 to 1950, in terms of the transition from Being to Becoming. Whereas almost every philosopher in the 18th century "mixed being with becoming," the 19th century became "the first real Century of Becoming" (Baumer 153f.). But if Becoming gained the upper hand over Being in the European thought of the 19th century, the

> first half of the twentieth century, especially after 1914, marked *a revolution in European thinking almost beyond compare.* …never before had there been a revolution quite so thoroughgoing, in the sense that it destroyed in a comparatively short period of time nearly all the "idols" that had been so painstakingly constructed, not merely by the Middle Ages but by "modern" times as well. (Baumer 402; my emphasis)

The term "idols" here is a reference to Nietzsche's *Twilight of the Idols*, idols being the cherished beliefs and values anchoring European civilization that Nietzsche wanted to smash in order to make way for the super-values of the super-future. Positioned around the midpoint between the rise of Becoming in the second half of the 19th century and the total triumph of Becoming over Being in the first half of the 20th century, Nietzsche is the pivotal figure in this revolution in Western thought. More radically than any previous thinker, he denied any "fixed ends" or "fixed human nature" (Baumer 381). When his Zarathustra proclaims the death of God, it is this ontological eclipse of Being that he is invoking. "God" or the fixed order of Being is what formerly secured the essence of human nature, but now that "this god has died," essentialism is deprived of philosophical foundations (Z IV, "On the Higher Man," 2). The "bloodless abstract idea 'man," writes Nietzsche, is "a fiction," a fiction which, as Zarathustra pronounces, must be "overcome" (D 105; Z I, "Prologue").[13] If man can be overcome, though, this also means that man has "the power to make himself and the world over" (Baumer 381). Which is the stated goal of the transhumanist movement. The denial of any human essence or fixed human nature undercuts the bioconservative position and licenses untrammeled modification of the human organism in the name of "enhancement." If there are no essences, then there is no essential distinction between biology and technology, man and machine. As postmodern literary critic Katherine Hayles puts it,

> in the posthuman, there are no essential differences, or absolute demarcations, between bodily existence and computer simulation, cybernetic mechanism and biological organism, robot technology and human goals. (3)

From Nietzsche to Transhumanism II: Apotheosis

If de-essentializing the human being is only the first step in overcoming man, the final goal, for Nietzsche as for the transhumanists, is the transformation of man into God. Nietzsche's Zarathustra declares not only the death of *"all gods"*—confirming that the "death of God" encompasses all absolutes, not merely the Judeo-Christian God—but also that "now we want the superman to live" (Z I, "On the Gift-Giving Virtue," 3). Later, he

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[13] Cf. WP 676.

repeats the point, "Once one said God when one looked upon distant seas; but now I have taught you to say: superman" (Z II, "Upon the Blessed Isles"). The superman has taken God's place. A few paragraphs down, Zarathustra confirms that it is his demand *to be a god* that necessitates the destruction of all gods: "*if* there were gods, how could I bear not to be a god! *Thus*, there are no gods" (ibid.; emphases in original). In the words of Yuval Harari, one of the leading transhumanist intellectuals for the superelite World Economic Forum, from his book *Homo Deus: A Brief History of Tomorrow*, the "new human agenda" boils down to "only one project (with many branches): attaining divinity" (47). Both the Nietzschean superman and the transhumanist posthuman instantiate a form of self-divinization in which the individual self does not merely enter into mystical union with God but becomes *identical with God*. I call this *apotheosis*. The distinctive feature of Nietzschean and transhumanist apotheosis is the notion that God comes into being or is created. As early as 1972, with the publication of Robert Ettinger's bizarre but seminal transhumanist manifesto, *Man into Superman*, the transhumanist aspiration has been this form of apotheosis, "to create, and become, God" (82). Fuller and Veronika Lipińska are explicit that "our own capacities for apotheosis" are the foundation of and justification for transhumanism (Fuller and Lipińska 45).[14] In Fuller's apotheosistic transhumanism, "the 'human' refers less to a particular earthbound life form than to the *process* of divine self-disclosure."

Fuller locates the "prehistory" of this form of apotheosis in the *"transgressive mindset,"* mythologized in figures such as Prometheus and Faust (Fuller 43; my emphasis). Prometheus, the titan who is continually punished for his crime of stealing fire (or science and technology) from the gods, is a widely celebrated figure among transhumanists. For Bostrom, he symbolizes not only the "quest to transcend our natural confines" but also "the concept of *hubris*: that some ambitions are off-limits and will backfire if pursued" (Bostrom, "History," 2; emphasis in original). As such, his "closest analogue" in Christian theology, Fuller explains, is Satan, who offers the first humans godhood if they will only defy God and violate His one commandment. "In contemporary transhumanist terms," writes Fuller,

> Prometheus and Satan are purveyors of an extreme version of 'ableism,' the ideology of the indefinite expansion of particular human capabilities, *even if that entails exploding the integrity of the person*. (46; my emphasis)

Proscribing such a godlike expansion of human capabilities, the Judeo-Christian God stands in the way of the transhumanist posthuman no less than the Nietzschean superman. As Hauskeller, in his study of the mytho-religious dimensions of transhumanist thought, explains, transhumanists regard the monotheistic God

> as a cruel god, a jealous and taunting god, one who does not deserve to be revered, but needs to be fought and dethroned instead. We resent the king who does not deign to let us eat at his table, who thinks we are not his equals, and, like the proud angel Lucifer, the bringer of light, we vow to right this wrong by *bringing him down and putting ourselves in his place*. (*Mythologies*, 164; my emphasis)

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[14] Fuller, like a great many other people who direct their untrained gaze at mystical phenomena, falsely confounds apotheosis with *theosis*, the form of self-divinization taught by Orthodox Christianity, in which the individual retains his distinct identity even in union with God. See Fuller 29.

More also regards the existence of God as an "oppressive concept" that stands in the way of apotheosis: "Our own process of endless expansion into higher forms should and will replace this religious idea" (More, "Transhumanism"). In an article titled "In Praise of the Devil," More identifies himself as a "Luciferian," understanding "Lucifer" as the "embodiment of reason, of intelligence, of critical thought" (9).

One of the most recent instantiations of the Luciferian-Promethean archetype, the comic book superhero, represents the same form of apotheosis that Nietzsche helped transmit to transhumanism. As Hauskeller observes, the

> radically enhanced human or post-human that transhumanists and others envisage is really not much different from a comic book superhero. Both are able to do things that mere humans cannot do for the simple reason that, for them, the boundaries that determine our human existence no longer exist. (*Mythologies* 7)

Fuller sees the "transgressive nature" of the superhero *par excellence*, Superman, as pointing "to a continuity between the human and the divine," and he regards both the "Zarathustrian" and the "DC Comic" Superman as forms of the same archetype (58). Before the term "posthuman" came to designate the goal of transhumanist apotheosis, Ettinger simply called it "the superman," and in doing so he acknowledged a direct debt to Nietzsche (24ff.). These connections only appear eccentric to a contemporary Nietzsche scholarship that, for obvious reasons, has distanced itself from the pre-WWII interpretation of Nietzsche that Ettinger inherited and Fuller recovers, an interpretation defined by the "transgressive mindset" or "tradition-shattering mode" and by apotheosis.

The Order of Cosmic Engineers (now the Turing Church), which included Bainbridge among its members, prophesied that

> one or more natural entities are highly likely to come into being—plausibly resulting from the agency of our and other species—which will to all intents and purposes be very much akin to 'god' conceptions held by theist religions. (Prisco 2022)

The notion that divinity could *come into being*, that we can create and at the same time become God, as Fuller and Lipińska put it, is only conceivable in the wake of Nietzsche's collapse of Being into Becoming. "To imprint upon Becoming the character of Being," he writes in a note, "that is the supreme will to power" (WP 617 [KSA 12, 7 (312)]). Being is synonymous with God in Nietzsche's thought, and insofar as the human organism is the locus of Becoming and therewith of the will to power, the supreme Nietzschean will to power would be to become God through creative self-overcoming.

Objections and Responses: Nietzsche, Transhumanism, and the Revaluation of All Values

The basic case against Nietzsche being a precursor to transhumanism is, as Babich argues, that transhumanists, animated by a utilitarian ethos rooted in Enlightenment humanism, merely want to enhance the human, whereas Nietzsche, rejecting utilitarianism and humanism, was interested in overcoming the human altogether (Babich 115f.). Nietzsche cannot in any meaningful sense be regarded as an ancestor of transhumanism, according

to this argument, because he opposed the entire humanistic-utilitarian ethos of which transhumanism is only one of the latest incarnations.[15] The first problem with what I have called the incompatibility argument—the argument that Nietzsche was not a major influence on transhumanism because his philosophy is fundamentally incompatible with transhumanism—is, as I have argued, that it wrongly assumes that ideas are transmitted primarily or exclusively in ways that philosophers regard as logical and cogent. Babich herself witnesses against the existence of any firewall preventing Nietzschean streams of thought from intersecting with and influencing liberal-Enlightenment-humanistic streams: like so many other post-Kaufmann liberal admirers of Nietzsche, she manages to convince herself that he endorsed democratic institutions—which are surely aligned with the Enlightenment brand of humanism that she otherwise finds so irreconcilable with Nietzschean thought. Yet Babich is unable to acknowledge any significant influence on transhumanism.

This is not to say that logic and cogency are irrelevant factors in the transmission of ideas. The next problem with the incompatibility argument, however, is how it absolutizes the *philosophical* differences between Nietzsche and transhumanism. While there isn't enough space here to fully evaluate the claims of incompatibility made by Babich and others, it's clear that they have underestimated the actual philosophical affinities that *do* exist between Nietzschean thought and transhumanism and how these affinities have informed the development of transhumanism. Consider Ciano Aydin's version of the incompatibility argument. "From a Nietzschean point of view," he writes,

> "overcoming limitations" does not mean finding new (technological) ways to improve capacities that could contribute to realizing certain values set by a particular (in this case: humanist) value system. The Overhuman rather challenges the inevitably "limiting scope" of every particular worldview and value system and their criteria for establishing what is an (ideal) human being. (321)

Aydin has here constructed a false dichotomy around the Nietzschean project of revaluing all values: whereas transhumanists simply want to "enhance" the existing human in a manner prescribed by Enlightenment-utilitarian values, Nietzsche's goal was to revalue all values, including any notions of an "ideal" human being that would guide said enhancement. As we've already seen, however, many transhumanists, the most radical among them, want not merely to enhance the human being but to overcome the human altogether. And many of these transhumanists—again, including some of the most radical and prominent—are fully aware of the transvaluing effect of their project but embrace it anyway. In the Kevin Warwick article that Aydin cites, for example, the author appreciates that technology will change our values (Warwick).[16] Harari, who classifies transhumanism as emerging in a dialectical fashion out of the internal contradictions in humanism, forecasts that

> once technology enables us to re-engineer human minds, Homo sapiens will disappear, human history will come to an end and a completely new kind of process will begin, which people like you and me cannot comprehend. (46)

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[15] See also Buben 69.
[16] Consider also Hibbard 40.

Even the avowedly liberal-humanist Bostrom acknowledges and embraces the inevitability of a revaluation of *all* values in a posthuman era. In a piece written from the futuristic perspective of a posthuman, he writes:

> You could say I am happy, that I feel good. You could say that I feel surpassing bliss. But these are words invented to describe human experience. What I feel is as far beyond human feeling as my thoughts are beyond human thought. I wish I could show you what I have in mind. (Bostrom, "Letter," 2)

Thus, apart from the fact that philosophical differences do not preclude influence, it is clear that Babich, Aydin, et al. have founded their incompatibility argument on a misrepresentation of transhumanism, ignoring where in some cases very prominent transhumanists have explicitly linked their posthuman ideal to the revaluation of all values. The notion of enhancement, Aydin argues, presupposes fixed values, and therefore the transhumanist posthuman is "at its core *invariable*, *uniform*, and *independent*, which are…the three main aspects of an 'essentialist' or 'substantialist' approach" (315; emphasis in original). Transhumanism's alleged essentialism, inherited from Enlightenment liberalism, is supposed to clash with Nietzsche's campaign against essentialism.[17] Certainly transhumanism is related to humanism and the Enlightenment tradition, but it deviates from them at precisely those points where it is inspired or at any rate prepared by Nietzsche, namely, in its acceptance of a processual conception of the human being, based on a collapse of Being into Becoming and the corollary denial of any fixed human nature, of any human being as such, and in its apotheosistic project of self-transformation or self-overcoming. Aydin and Babich therefore not only underestimate the influence that Nietzsche's thought has exerted on transhumanism, but they fail to appreciate the philosophical basis of that influence. It may be said that they contradict themselves by *essentializing* transhumanism and Nietzschean philosophy in order to establish their incompatibility.[18]

Babich's argument has other flaws. While transhumanism is driven by a crass drive toward self-preservation that Nietzsche deplored, the superman isn't about the self at all, she contends, not even a higher self; Nietzsche's philosophy aims instead at "acquiring nothing less than a culture in place of the self-absorptions of the ego" (Babich 266).[19] Is it true that Nietzsche's teaching of self-overcoming is about elevating culture over the individual human? Some of her own sources cast doubt on this interpretation. In *Schopenhauer as Educator*, for example, Nietzsche asserts that "all that matters is the higher individual specimen" (SE 6). And in a note, he describes the state as an "institution for the protection and cultivation of individuals, for the genius" (KSA 7,7 [121]). Actually, Nietzsche was interested in both the elevation of culture *and* the breeding of superior individuals, as he hints in *Beyond Good and Evil*, when he writes that a "people is a digression of nature to get to six or seven great men.—Yes, and then to get around them" (BGE 126). But even if Nietzsche's goal was the improvement or enhancement of culture as opposed to the individual, this involves Babich in a contradiction: if human enhancement is incompatible

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[17] See Aydin 313.

[18] In his most recent book, Sorgner explicitly advocates for a non-essentialist, Nietzschean transhumanism or "naturalism." See Sorgner, *We Have Always Been Cyborgs*, 11, 109ff., 151. This book was brought to my attention by the editorial staff at the *Journal of Ethics and Emerging Technology*.

[19] Cf. Egyed 76.

with self-overcoming because it implies the acceptance of an existing value system, or of some form of essentialism, as Aydin would have it, then cultural enhancement must also be incompatible with Nietzsche's goal of the perpetual transvaluation of all values, since any cultural enhancement would likewise imply the acceptance of some static *cultural* standard by which to measure the degree of enhancement. Conversely, if cultural enhancement is not necessarily humanistic or essentialist, then neither is human enhancement.

Babich attempts to vitiate Sorgner's argument for a "close structural similarity" between the superman and the posthuman by pointing out that transhumanists like Bostrom have also located their ideal in earlier precedents, all the way back to the Epic of Gilgamesh, the implication being that there is nothing very special about the hazy relationship, or structural analogy, between the transhumanist posthuman and the Nietzschean superman. Babich is actually conflating the two streams of influence that, I have shown, connect Nietzsche's thought to transhumanism. Gilgamesh is a precedent for the transhumanist posthuman insofar as he represents the desire for immortality or apotheosis. Ettinger made this connection decades before Bostrom's article. He saw in Gilgamesh the "oldest of all mythical supermen," and only a page later, in the following section, he credits Nietzsche with popularizing the term "superman" (Ettinger 24f.). The juxtaposition is not random. The figure of Gilgamesh, in an oblique way, influenced both Nietzsche and transhumanism, but it influenced transhumanism by way of Nietzsche; that is to say, the mode of apotheosis inherited by transhumanism was first filtered through Nietzsche's thought, decisively conditioned by his processual turn. Thus, while it's true that Gilgamesh is a precedent for the transhumanist posthuman, it's also true that the Nietzschean superman is its more proximate ancestor.

Conclusion

The prevailing approach to assessing Nietzsche's relationship to transhumanism has consisted in debating the extent to which Nietzschean thought is or is not philosophically compatible with transhumanist thought. I have exposed some of the crucial shortcomings of this approach. First, transhumanism is not simply a philosophy; it is a movement, and any exclusively philosophical analysis of transhumanist thought is liable to abstract from its political goals and rhetorical strategies. Second, even if one grants the majority position that Nietzsche's thought is deeply incompatible with transhumanist philosophy, it does not follow from this that Nietzsche did not *influence* transhumanism in important ways. For, as a history of ideas approach reveals, ideas are not always or even primarily transmitted in a cogent fashion that philosophers approve of. In the words of Arthur Lovejoy, founder of the history of ideas subdiscipline, "The history of philosophy and of all phases of man's reflection *is*, in great part, a history of confusions of ideas" (Lovejoy 22; emphasis in original). This applies especially to Nietzsche, whose thought has from the outset been promiscuously appropriated by the left and the right, by musicians and maniacs, and by any number of incompatible intellectual movements.

Nonetheless, there are distinctive, revolutionary trends in Western thought that are directly attributable to Nietzsche, trends which are best understood in light of his pre-WWII reception history. I have highlighted two of these which are foundational to transhumanism.

First, his rejection of what he identified as the core of Christian-Platonic metaphysics, of an ontology of Being based on a world of fixed forms or objects, paved the way for a processual metaphysics based on an ontology of Becoming. By denying the human being a fixed essence and recasting it as merely a moment in an ongoing process of transformation, Nietzsche's processual turn made conceivable the sort of radical human modification envisioned by transhumanists. For Nietzsche, to affirm this processual reality (which he called the Will to Power, defined as "life itself" [BGE 13]) meant affirming the self-overcoming or self-transcendence of the human organism as we know it. The result is his ideal of the superman. The de-essentialization of human nature on which the superman is based is also foundational to transhumanism and its stated project of transcending the limitations of the current human organism in order to create a higher or better or more advanced organism, i.e., the posthuman.

Second, both the Nietzschean superman and the transhumanist posthuman reflect a perennial impulse toward self-divinization that I refer to as apotheosis. In *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Nietzsche makes it abundantly clear that the superman represents not merely the self-overcoming of man but also the ontological replacement for God; it is, he says, the ambition to be "a god" that necessitates the denial of God (Z II, "Upon the Blessed Isles"). The superman, then, with its underlying denial of essentialist ontology, is a product of the apotheosistic impulse to divinize the self. The same impulse is reflected in the transhumanist posthuman, and many transhumanists are quite explicit that the posthuman ideal reflects a desire to become God.

The pre-WWII reception history which is central to my analysis has been obscured by rhetorical factors that also obscure the influence of Nietzsche on transhumanism. Nietzsche's reputation was tainted in the middle of the 20th century by his association with Nazism. This reputation was revived by Walter Kauffmann in part by dissociating him from Nazi racial eugenics. Transhumanism's goals of human enhancement and modification are, as Bainbridge and others recognize, susceptible to being associated with Nazi eugenics by bioconservative critics, and this incentivizes transhumanists to dissociate their movement from Nietzsche. The few openly Nietzschean transhumanists, like More and Sorgner, tend to downplay the association between Nietzsche and the Nazis for the same reason, because it compromises transhumanism's reputation in public discourse. Only a few, like Fuller, are willing to embrace the legacy of Nietzsche before WWII.

Finally, I have shown that, while an alleged lack of philosophical affinity between Nietzsche and transhumanism is not an impediment to Nietzsche's influencing transhumanism, there is in fact more compatibility between the two than is acknowledged by proponents of the incompatibility thesis. Aydin and Babich, for example, base much of their argument on the notion that Nietzsche's goal of revaluing all values is incompatible with transhumanism's supposed commitment to liberal utilitarianism. They fail to appreciate the extent to which transhumanism, which inherits Nietzsche's de-essentialized ontology and anthropology, deviates from the liberal Enlightenment tradition. In so doing, Aydin and Babich have constructed a false philosophical opposition between Nietzsche and transhumanism that ignores the extent to which transhumanism in general and many prominent transhumanists in particular openly embrace the very revaluation of all values that Nietzsche prescribed.

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