

Received: 30 July 2021 Accepted: 2 October 2021

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33182/jp.v1i2.1714>



## Transhumanism, Nietzsche and Politics: A Commentary on Their Relationship

Anna Ch. Markopoulou<sup>1</sup>

The aim of this commentary is to highlight the relationship between Nietzsche and Transhumanism on the occasion of the publication of the *Posthuman Studies Reader Core readings on Transhumanism, Posthumanism and Metahumanism* in 2021, which is edited by Evi D. Sampanikou and Jan Stasienko. More specifically, this commentary focuses on the fact that the Reader promotes Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche as the official forerunner of Transhumanism through the idea of the Overhuman, since it places humans at a transition point between animal and Overhuman.

But is Nietzsche really the official forerunner of Transhumanism? This question led me to focus more on the second part of the Reader, where, as the editors argue, the emphasis is "... on ten Transhumanist texts that have been extremely influential in both the development of this trend and its gradual integration into Posthumanism" (14). This part begins with an article by Julian Huxley (2021) who coined the English term 'transhumanism' (43). As Huxley maintains, this term already contains both its future course and its core epistemological contradictions: thus, transhumanism oscillates between *transition* and *overcoming*, since it is defined on the one hand as "the realization that both individual and social development are processes of self-transformation" (45) and on the other as "the idea of humanity attempting to overcome its limitations" (45).

From the beginning, the apolitical and technocratic character of transhumanism is evident in Huxley's assumption of the efficiency of evolution through technology rather than society. Moreover, he highlights two arguments about Transhumanism, that is the idea of external adventure, which is "the idea of humanity attempting to overcome its limitations through external technology, but also the correlative of this, the idea of internal adventure, which is a process of self-transformation of the human through contemplation, self-discipline and control of oneself" (45-46). However, as I found out later, the second idea, that of internal adventure, was given up altogether, while the first idea, that of external adventure, remained dominant in all the texts of the Reader.

It is undeniable that the contradictions, which become more prominent in the Reader's following texts, show that, in essence, Transhumanism is not a *transition*, but an *overcoming* situation of the human, that does not constitute an internal transition, but external interventions on human nature through technology, which aims to enhance the human body.

---

<sup>1</sup> Anna Ch. Markopoulou, Ph.D. in Science Education, University of Sorbonne (Paris V René Descartes).  
E-mail: [ann2mark@otenet.gr](mailto:ann2mark@otenet.gr)



The enhancement of the human body in turn leads to the emergence of a biofluid identity, based on Fereidoun M. Esfandiary's concept that "...human bodies are not biostatic but have interchangeable parts" (FM-2030, 48) as well as morphological freedom, which, according to Anders Sandberg (2021), is "...an extension of one's right to one's body, not just self-ownership but also the right to modify oneself according to one's desires" (66-67).

In this context, I argue that Esfandiary's and Sandberg's Transhumanism is not in line with Nietzsche's conception, which concerns an inner transition, in other words, a transformation of human nature. As Gilles Deleuze (2006) characteristically states: "According to Nietzsche, this transformation may be achieved through an increase, but not of human power by means of the will to change human nature, but by means of man's inner and immanent will to power" (160). A mere increase of power would leave open the possibility of human improvement only through technology, while the ultimate goal of man's inner will to power is the liberation of life mainly through a *transvaluation* of values.

As Deleuze (1988) characteristically puts it in relation to Nietzsche's Overhuman: "Nietzsche said that man imprisoned life, but the superman is what frees life *within man himself*, to the profit of another form" (130). The difference of Transhumanism from Nietzsche's view is clearly stated in the text of the transhumanist Sandberg (2021), who considers that "...technology and morphological freedom go hand in hand" (70).

It is important to note that according to Nietzsche the increase of human *inner* and *immanent* will to power is conceived through *philosophising with a hammer*. In this sense, Nietzsche formulates a negative philosophy by means of critical denial and the consequent rejection of traditional values and prejudices that make up a predominantly Christian ethics.

The other aspect of the *inner* and *immanent* will to power, which is inextricably linked to a critical denial of values, concerns, as mentioned above, the *transvaluation* of values and the transformation of denial into affirmation: it is the Dionysian affirmation as joy and dance. As Deleuze (2006) characteristically states:

"Destruction becomes active to the extent that the negative is transmuted and converted into affirmative power: the 'eternal joy of becoming' which is avowed in an instant, the 'joy of annihilation', the '*affirmation* of annihilation and destruction' ... This is the 'decisive point' of Dionysian philosophy: the point at which negation expresses an affirmation of life, destroys reactive forces and restores the rights of activity. The negative becomes the thunderbolt and lightning of a power of affirming" (174-75).

In my view, the concept of metahumanism, as defined by Jaime del Val (2021) in the fourth part of the Reader approximates very closely this Dionysian aspect of Nietzsche's philosophy: "Metahumanism is about *ontohacking* our realities, infusing in them more plasticity, through movement, recovering and taking on the movement of variation that is evolution. Our essence (and the world's) is plasticity!" (300).

On the contrary, the Transhumanist texts in the Reader highlight a positive philosophy that does not constitute a *transvaluation* of negative values, but is constructed on the basis of strong values that in turn refer to an individualistic society governed by an almost Christian, and I would say compassionate, ethic. More specifically, Natasha Vita-More (2021) refers about the abundance of compassion (55) and Sandberg (2021) also refers to compassion as a moral



obligation to help (68). Here, the contradiction with Nietzsche's critical views on compassion is obvious, since in *Ecce Homo* (1989) he characteristically writes that compassion "...is considered a virtue only among decadents" (228).

The belief in the progress of humanity through technology, which is evident in the texts, highlights the convergence of Transhumanism with the traditional belief of the Enlightenment in the ideal of progress. This is particularly evident in James Hughes's (2021) text, which traces the origins of democratic transhumanism back to the Enlightenment and is based on two central axes: On the one hand the democratic tradition and its concomitant values of freedom, equality, solidarity and collective self-government and on the other the belief that human beings can use reason and technology to improve the conditions of life.

In this sense, the *autonomous subject*, who invents and recreates him or herself and, according to Michel Foucault (1984), constitutes the distinguishing feature of the Enlightenment era, returns to the forefront, but this time inventing and recreating him or herself through technology. Therefore, through the formation of a *biofluid identity* and the claim of *morphological freedom*, Transhumanism is - to use Cary Wolfe's (2021) expression - an "intensification of humanism" (239). In other words, Transhumanism is a return to a traditional Enlightenment-type humanism, clad in futuristic visions.

In this light, not only is Transhumanism not associated with Nietzsche's philosophy, but it is in complete opposition to it, since in his work *The Anti-Christ* (section 4) (2005) Nietzsche harshly criticizes the concept of *progress* of humanity, which he considers a modern and false idea that prevails in Europe. Moreover, in his work *On the Genealogy of Morals* (third essay, section 25) (1989) he criticizes the concept of *progress* of humanity through *science*. As he states:

"...all science, natural as well as *unnatural* – which is what I call the self-critique of knowledge – has at present the object of dissuading man from his former respect for himself, as if this had been nothing but a place of bizarre conceit" (155-56).

Stefan Lorenz Sorgner's (2021) text is on the same line as transhumanism. He criticizes humanism expressed in purely humanistic terms and using Enlightenment-type arguments, when he writes that "...the relevance of the posthuman can only be fully appreciated if one acknowledges that its ultimate foundation is that it gives meaning to scientifically minded people" (135).

It is this Enlightenment-type humanism that leads Sorgner to attribute to Nietzsche a clear distinction between religion and science when he writes that Nietzsche "...distinguishes between a religious and a scientific spirit" (134). However, this distinction does not exist in Nietzsche. More importantly, Nietzsche emphasizes that science played the role of religion, and in effect of Christian religion, when in his works *The Gay Science* (par. 344) (1974) and *On the Genealogy of Morals* (section 24) (1989) he states:

"It is still a *metaphysical faith* that underlies our faith in science – and we men of knowledge of today. We godless men and anti-metaphysicians, we, too, still derive our flame from the fire ignited by a faith millennia old, the Christian faith, which was also Plato's, that God is truth, that truth is *divine*" (1989, 152).

It is interesting to note at this point that Deleuze (2006) refers in detail to Nietzsche's critique of science and writes characteristically that:

“In Nietzsche’s view the balance sheet of the sciences is a depressing one [...] Science today is talking the exploration of nature and man further than ever in a particular direction, but it is also taking submission to the ideal and the established order further than ever. Scholars, even democratic and socialist ones, do not lack piety, they have merely invented a theology which no longer depends in the heart” (73).

In this light, Sorgner's (2021) arguments concerning the distinction between religion and science are in line with those of Nick Bostrom (2005), who argues that “...transhumanism combines Renaissance humanism...to form the basis for rational humanism, which emphasizes empirical science and critical reason – rather than revelation and religious authority” (2). From this point of view, we could argue that both Bostrom and Sorgner point towards an *intensification of humanism*, since, through the distinction between religion and science, they highlight rationality and empirical science as universal human qualities.

In this respect, although both Nietzsche and Bostrom seem to share the Renaissance’s ideal, their conceptions of science are radically different. In particular, with respect to the achievements of modern science while Bostrom shows an overall and unhesitating acceptance, Nietzsche expresses harsh criticism and underlines their problems. In this light, Yunus Tuncel (2014) characteristically states that:

“In conclusion, although Nietzsche and the transhumanists are inspired by the same ideal, the ideal of Renaissance, they do so for different reasons, and they have different interpretations of this ideal. Their interpretation diverges radically, as transhumanism embraces modern scientific project *in toto*, while Nietzsche offers its critique and exposes its fundamental problems” (96).

Moreover, in relation to Critical Posthumanism, in the third part of the Reader, Rosi Braidotti (2021) critically highlights this rationalization of transhumanism and states in this regard:

“Posthuman critical theory needs to apply a new vision of subjectivity to both the practice and the public perception of the scientist, which is still caught in the classical and out-moded model of the humanistic ‘Man of reason’ (Lloyd, 1984) as the quintessential European citizen” (256).

As mentioned above, the transhumanist texts make frequent reference to *human rights* through which *morphological freedom* is constituted and which, according to Sandberg (2021), concerns “...the right to modify oneself according to one's desires” (66-67). In particular, Sandberg highlights the need for morphological freedom through the claim of the “...right to seek happiness, the right to life, the right to freedom, the right to property and the right to one’s body” (67).

However, the question that arises at this point concerns the socio-political context from which this claim of human rights emerges in order to achieve the morphological freedom envisioned by its creators. Concerning the latter, I would claim that the political dimension is entirely absent from most of the Transhumanist texts in the Reader. In effect, the texts refer to a completely apolitical society of individuals, each of whom has the human right to self-government within a hypothetical welfare state.

Nevertheless, the welfare state is not defined abstractly, as a set of individuals but in terms of democracy, as a set of active citizens who primarily have the political right to make decisions.



This dimension is not elaborated in the Reader's Transhumanist texts, which focus, as mentioned above, on the human rights of self-government of the body and refer primarily to societies of individuals and not to social groups and social collectivities.

In this sense, these texts conceal the conflicting and, consequently, class character of society, in that the human rights discussed could refer to a neoliberal society or even to a Hobbesian Leviathan hypertrophic state, which, as mentioned in Sandberg's text, derives its origin from the right to property. With regard to Critical Posthumanism, based on the philosophies of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, Claire Colebrook (2021), in the third part of the Reader, criticizes the individualistic dimension of modern democracy by claiming that:

“If democracy is a concept then the problem of democracy is not so much what it is (what social systems are really democratic) but the orientation it creates in thinking. What would it be to develop a socius with no other power than its own capacity for decision?” (277).

Therefore, to conclude the above, I argue that although the Reader promotes Nietzsche as the official forerunner of Transhumanism, this commentary has shown that not only Transhumanism is not associated with Nietzsche's philosophy, but it is in complete opposition to it. From this point of view, one of the principal merits of the Reader lies in the fact that the ten representative texts presented in the second part offer a clear view of the antinomies and contradictions that govern Transhumanism. These contradictions show that, in essence, Transhumanism is not a *transition*, but an *overcoming* situation of the human and, from this aspect, it is not in line with Nietzsche's conception, which concerns an inner transition, in other words, a transformation of human nature.

Furthermore, Transhumanist texts in the Reader highlight a positive philosophy that does not constitute a Nietzschean *transvaluation* of negative values, but is constructed on the basis of strong values that in turn refer to an individualistic society. From this point of view, the political dimension is entirely absent from most of the Transhumanist texts in the Reader, because, in effect, the texts refer to a completely apolitical society of individuals, each of whom has the human right to self-government within a hypothetical welfare state.

Also, the belief in the progress of humanity through technology, which is evident in the most of the Transhumanist texts in the Reader, highlights the convergence of Transhumanism with the traditional belief of the Enlightenment in the ideal of progress and, from this aspect, Transhumanism is not in line with Nietzsche's conception, expressed in a harsh criticism against the traditional Enlightenment-type Humanism, the idea of progress of humanity and the rationalization of modern science. In conclusion, I would state that Transhumanism should re-evaluate on the one hand its epistemological foundations, and in this way it does not form an intensification of humanism, as well as its relation to politics.

## References

- Bostrom, N. (2005). A history of transhumanist thought. *Journal of Evolution and Technology*, 14(1), 1-25.
- Braidotti, R. (2021). Posthuman critical theory. In E. D. Sampanikou & J. Stasienko (Eds.), *Posthuman Studies Reader Core readings on Transhumanism, Posthumanism and Metahumanism* (pp. 251-256). Schwabe Verlag (Original work published 2013)

- Colebrook, C. (2021). Posthuman Humanities. In E. D. Sampanikou & J. Stasienko (Eds.), *Posthuman Studies Reader Core readings on Transhumanism, Posthumanism and Metahumanism* (pp. 257-278). Schwabe Verlag (Original work published 2014)
- Deleuze, G. (1988). *Foucault* (S. Hand, Trans.). University of Minnesota Press.
- Deleuze, G. (2006) *Nietzsche and Philosophy* (H. Tomlinson, Trans.). Continuum.
- FM-2030. (2021). Transhumans-2000 (1974). In E. D. Sampanikou & J. Stasienko (Eds.), *Posthuman Studies Reader Core readings on Transhumanism, Posthumanism and Metahumanism* (pp. 47-48). Schwabe Verlag.
- Foucault, M. (1984). What is Enlightenment? (C. Porter, Trans.). In P. Rabinow (Ed.), *The Foucault Reader* (pp. 31-50). Pantheon.
- Hughes, J. (2021). Democratic Transhumanism 2.0. In E. D. Sampanikou & J. Stasienko (Eds.), *Posthuman Studies Reader Core readings on Transhumanism, Posthumanism and Metahumanism* (pp. 89-114). Schwabe Verlag (Original work published 2004)
- Huxley, J. (2021). Knowledge, morality, and destiny: I. In E. D. Sampanikou & J. Stasienko (Eds.), *Posthuman Studies Reader Core readings on Transhumanism, Posthumanism and Metahumanism* (pp. 43-46). Schwabe Verlag (Original work published 1951)
- Nietzsche, F. W. (1974). *The gay science: With a prelude in rhymes and an appendix of songs* (W. Kaufmann, Trans.). Vintage Books.
- Nietzsche, F. W. (1989). *On the genealogy of morals and ecce homo*. Vintage Books.
- Nietzsche, F. W. (2005). *The anti-Christ, ecce homo, twilight of the idols, and other writings* (J. Norman, Trans.). Cambridge University Press.
- Sandberg, A. (2021). Morphological freedom – Why we not just want it, but need it. In E. D. Sampanikou & J. Stasienko (Eds.), *Posthuman Studies Reader Core readings on Transhumanism, Posthumanism and Metahumanism* (pp. 65-76). Schwabe Verlag (Original work published 2001)
- Sorgner, S. L. (2021). Nietzsche, the overhuman, and Transhumanism. In E. D. Sampanikou & J. Stasienko (Eds.), *Posthuman Studies Reader Core readings on Transhumanism, Posthumanism and Metahumanism* (pp. 123-135). Schwabe Verlag (Original work published 2009)
- Tuncel, Y. (2014). Nietzsche. In: R. Ranisch & St. L. Sorgner (Eds.), *Post- and Transhumanism. An Introduction* (pp. 83-99). Peter Lang.
- del Val, J. (2021) The dances of becoming and the *Metahumanist Manifesto*. Its genealogy, evolution and relevance 10 years after. In E. D. Sampanikou & J. Stasienko (Eds.), *Posthuman Studies Reader Core readings on Transhumanism, Posthumanism and Metahumanism* (pp. 299-303). Schwabe Verlag.
- Vita-More, N. (2021). Transhumanist Manifesto. In E. D. Sampanikou & J. Stasienko (eds.), *Posthuman Studies Reader Core readings on Transhumanism, Posthumanism and Metahumanism* (pp. 49-56). Schwabe Verlag (Original work published 1983 / 1998 / 2008 / 2020)
- Wolfe, C. (2021). What Is Posthumanism? (2010). In E. D. Sampanikou & J. Stasienko (Eds.), *Posthuman Studies Reader Core readings on Transhumanism, Posthumanism and Metahumanism* (pp. 235-250). Schwabe Verlag (Original work published 2010)

