

The Aesthetics of the Posthuman Human: Reflections Following Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*

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Abstract

*Posthuman aesthetics leads to a decentering of the human and shows aspects of existence that are no longer contained in the categories and dichotomies that define the essence of the human being. But because all aesthetic involves human experience, a posthuman conception also needs to develop its own idea of the human being. The essay shows that the posthuman human can emerge along the lines of three categorical distinctions to the traditional idea of the human. It can emerge in the animal, which is similar to, but also fundamentally different from the human being; in the angelic which transcends the ordinary human in a powerful and joyful way; and in the demonic which overcomes human experience in a transgressive and potentially terrifying way. The essay follows Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* in which these dimensions of existence are described as a new, alien and ecstatic way of being human.*

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Introduction

What defines an aesthetic theory as posthuman? A first, quick answer can be found in the difference to classical aesthetics. Classical aesthetics puts the human being in the center, as a carrier of positive moral abilities which make it the most noble and attention-worthy creature. Even in post-classical aesthetics, in what Hegel termed romantic art, the human being remains central. Romantic art explores the adventures and inner world of the bourgeois subject. A posthuman aesthetic, thus, has to achieve a profound and radical de-centering of the human. In formal terms, this de-centering results from an overcoming of the dichotomies that rule traditional aesthetics. A posthuman aesthetic blurs the distinction between the natural and the artificial, the human and the non-human, subject and object, and creating and finding. The aesthetic highlights what is other than the human being, or what is other in the human being itself, that is, what is material, animalistic, technological, etc., and so transcends both the transparent sphere of interiority and the control of human intentionality.

But this answer is not complete. It leaves open how the human being is defined, in and for itself, from a posthuman point of view. The de-centering approach, strictly speaking, only says what the human being is *not*. Eventually, posthuman aesthetics has to achieve its own ways of being human. It has to develop a positive, posthuman conception of the human.

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There are several ways in which the need for a posthuman conception of the human can be justified. The most trivial argument is that if humans are involved at all in the aesthetic creation, one has to be able to say what they are. A more interesting justification can be derived if we follow Nietzsche's cue:

Nothing is beautiful, only the human being is beautiful: on this bit of naiveté rests all aesthetics, this is its first truth. Let's immediately add its second: nothing is as ugly as a human being in the process of degeneration—and that sets the limit of the domain of aesthetic judgment. Physiologically speaking, everything ugly weakens and oppresses human beings. It reminds them of decline, danger, powerlessness; it actually makes them lose strength. You can measure the effect of the ugly with a dynamometer (Nietzsche, 1997, 62; Raids of an Untimely Man, 20).

We should not be distracted here by Nietzsche's claim that all aesthetics is naïve. The statement can be paraphrased by saying that there is no aesthetic experience that is unrelated to a pleasing feeling. What we call beautiful, or what we find aesthetically appealing, stimulating, etc., cannot be indifferent to us. Aesthetic judgments do not result from rational, disinterested truths. Following Nietzsche, we can assume that all aesthetic experiences eventually "remind" us of ourselves, that they recall or evoke our own, human experiences.² Works of art show us how to live—feel, think, see, move, sound, look, etc.—as a human being.

Another reason for which it is important to develop a positive, posthuman conception of the human being lies in the risk of fetishization. Popular media celebrate the substitution of the human with machines, as war robots (see the movie *Terminator*) or objects of sexual desire (see movies like *Ex Machina*). Powerful machines are able to mimic human beings and human beings, in turn, develop a relationship with sophisticated machines. But in many cases, there is nothing posthuman in this relationship. The machine is rather an extension of the human will to power and sexual domination. The machine, in other words, is eventually all-too-human, or just a human in disguise. It does not teach us how to go beyond a quite conventional idea of being human.

If we want to keep the emancipatory potential of posthumanism, we have to show how the very idea of a human can be challenged and transformed. I will again follow Nietzsche and describe three ways in which the conception of a posthuman human can be understood. All three ways can be found in his work *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*.

In this essay, I can of course not engage in an interpretation of *Zarathustra* as a whole. Neither do I want to claim that Nietzsche would have exhausted the possibilities of posthuman aesthetics, or that his work would be paradigmatic for it. All I want to show are some basic motives which then would need to be further explored in a more elaborate version of posthuman aesthetics.

The posthuman human, I believe, emerges along the lines of three categorical distinctions to, or deviations from the traditional idea of the human. According to the traditional idea, the human being has a unique and independent essence which allows it to think of itself as an incorporation of values (truth, goodness, beauty) and as worthy of protection and exploration. In a posthuman approach, this essence, as the sum total of specifically human qualities and

² See also Nietzsche, 1997, 61; Raids of an Untimely Man, 19.



abilities, is fractured to absorb conditions that can no longer be contained in, or integrated into it. The three categorical distinctions that I want to mention concern

1. what is close and similar but fundamentally, and incomprehensibly, different from the human being: the animal;
2. what transcends the human being in a joyful and self-assured way: the angel, or the angelic; and
3. what transcends the human being in a transgressive and potentially terrifying way: the demon, or the demonic.

The list of three distinctions can be considered complete insofar as it contains (1) what is strangely at par with the human being, (2) what is higher than the human being, and (3) what is lower (if only in the sense of something that humans would rather leave beneath themselves). Other possible distinctions could be located within this scheme, I believe. On the other hand, the scheme that I suggest is no more than a heuristic that allows us to navigate the multitude of posthuman approaches to the human. Other terms may prove more suitable and should then be used instead.

I am of course not interested in the religious dimension of the figures listed here. When I refer to angels and demons, I do so in an aesthetic way. As aesthetic figures, angels and demons are characterized through their relationality, that is, through the fact that they are still human, or at least human-like, and at the same time not human anymore. The same holds for the animal. In the aesthetic use, the figures do not carry a fixed, official meaning but allow one to explore new aspects of existence. The three figures, I believe, can also not be substituted for a fetishized version of the human being. As an animal, angel, or demon, the human being is no longer in control and possession of itself but taken by ecstasy, estrangement, and transformation.

The animal

From the beginning, Zarathustra is accompanied by his animals, eagle and serpent, which are represented as his closest allies and companions. In the pivotal chapter “The Convalescent” in Part III, Zarathustra awakes from the stupor and paralysis that befell him after being confronted with the thought of the eternal recurrence of everything. Zarathustra is told by his animals that he will have to be the teacher of this thought, even if he is yet unable to fully accept its implications. In Nietzsche’s text, the animals are able to speak, although he never explains this strange ability. The animals understand Zarathustra better than he understands himself: “[y]our animals know well, O Zarathustra, who you are and must become” (Nietzsche, 2005, 192; Zarathustra III, The Convalescent).

What the animals say points at a form of speaking that is different from linguistic utterances altogether:

Speak no further, you convalescent! ... But go out where the world awaits you like a garden. / Go out to the roses and the bees and the flocks of doves! But especially to the songbirds, that you may learn from them how to *sing!* (Nietzsche, 2005, 192; Zarathustra III, The Convalescent).

For the animals, the world is like a garden filled with flowers and many other types of animals. It constitutes an abundance that escapes all limitation. From some of the animals, Zarathustra

would be able to learn a new form of communication, song, which would be more adequate for rendering the thought he is supposed to convey. As an animal communicating with other animals, Zarathustra would not only be liberated from the limitations that are imposed on him by his human nature, he would also make himself understood in a more direct way.

The animals in Nietzsche's text are of course nothing but literary and therefore human projection. But the scene that he describes is not merely a parable in which animals take the place of humans. The animals are not other humans, or humans in disguise, but transformations of the human, in the sense of an extension of human identity into other forms of existence. Nietzsche's narrative makes clear that such an extension could not come from the own intentionality of humans, as if they simply decided to take on a different shape. The suggestion to learn speaking like an animal comes from the animals themselves. Zarathustra has to "go out", leave his usual place and manner of living behind, to adapt to a species other than his.

An important simile that Nietzsche uses for the new form of existence, here and in other passages in the *Zarathustra*, is dance: "[o] Zarathustra, said his animals in reply, for those who think as we do all things are already dancing: they come and shake hands and laugh and flee—and come back again" (Nietzsche, 2005, 190; Zarathustra III, The Convalescent). Transforming the world into a world of dance, or a dancing world, would amount to a new way of experiencing life that is not, or at least not yet accessible to the ordinary perspective of humans. Humans can of course dance, but when Nietzsche says that all things dance, he indicates, if only poetically, that humans eventually are not in the center. They are rather engulfed and carried away by the totality of the world.

The angelic

Whereas the animal is represented by concrete if only poetic figures, there is no figure in the *Zarathustra* that would represent the angel or the angelic.³ The category is used only in my interpretation of the text. I believe, however, that it is appropriate to capture the transformation of human experience that Nietzsche describes. The example that I want to give can be found in the chapter on the "Bestowing Virtue" in Part I:

This is your thirst, to become sacrifices and bestowals yourselves: and therefore you thirst to pile up all riches in your soul. / Insatiably your soul strives for for treasures and jewels, because your virtue is insatiable in wanting to bestow. / You compel all things toward you and into you, that they may flow back out of your wells as gifts of your love. / Verily, a predator of all values must such a bestowing love become; but whole and holy do I call such selfishness. / Another selfishness there is that is all-too-poor, and starving (Nietzsche, 2005, 65; Zarathustra I, On the Bestowing Virtue).

The virtue of which Zarathustra speaks is grounded in an ecstatic experience, an experience which blurs the distinction between egoism and altruism: bestowing is both the most selfish and most unselfish act. In its seemingly paradoxical nature, Nietzsche can only describe it in images of flow and overflow. Like an act of love, the virtuous attitude is full of positive

³ One could perhaps argue that an equivalent to the angelic lies in the idea of the child which stands for a return to innocence and uninhibited freedom after the bitterness of the fight against the existing morality. See Nietzsche, 2005, 24 and 102; Zarathustra I, On the Three Transformations 102, and Zarathustra II, On Those Who Are Sublime.



emotion and a joyous feeling of oneself *and* directed toward others who are given without any expectation of a reciprocal act.

Nietzsche uses the language of the divine in calling this virtue “holy”, but in no way does this connote a religious commitment. The bestowing virtue is holy as an experience of rapture, not as belief. That is, it is holy because it cannot be subsumed under the regular behavior of humans which always counts on an economy of mutual exchange. One cannot really explain such an extraordinary attitude, and all description is but an approximation: “[p]ay heed now, my brothers, to every hour where your spirit wants to speak in allegories: there lies the origin of your virtue” (Nietzsche, 2005, 66; Zarathustra I, On the Bestowing Virtue). Nietzsche also does not say *what* is bestowed. If anything, it is not an object but a new, freer and more joyful perspective on the world and on human affairs. “Bestowing” is eventually a simile for a way of losing oneself and sharing a more ecstatic form of existence with others. This form of existence unites body and mind in an inextricable way: “[e]levated is your body then and resurrected; with its rapture it delights the spirit, so that it becomes creator and evaluator and lover and benefactor of all things” (Nietzsche, 2005, 66; Zarathustra I, On the Bestowing Virtue).

Although Nietzsche speaks of a virtue, the attitude he describes cannot be captured in the traditional terminology of philosophical morals. It cannot be generalized nor can it be phrased as an obligation. The attitude is even “dangerous” insofar as it does not conform to social expectations and rules and may, in its overflow of an entirely singular goodness and love, disrupt norms and regular behavior: “[w]hen your hearts surge broad and full like a river, a blessing and danger to those who dwell nearby: there lies the origin of your virtue” (Nietzsche, 2005, 66; Zarathustra II, On the Bestowing Virtue).

I believe that we can call the bestowing virtue angelic because it allows Nietzsche to show not merely a human in rapture but rapture insofar as it points to something that is higher or at least more than just human in the ordinary sense. In the bestowing virtue, humans are good without wanting or knowing it, they follow a powerful impulse that ignores all human expectations.

The demonic

The angelic is transgressive in its overflowing and the constant overcoming of oneself, which means that it is transgressive without intending to be so. The demonic, instead, is an overtly transgressive attitude. It is again my interpretation that introduces the category here. There are several examples for it in the *Zarathustra*, of which I can mention only two.

The first example concerns the opposition to all commonly held moral values. The demonic calls for an overcoming of limits and rules that are set by traditional morality:

With whom does the greatest danger for all human future lie? Is it not with the good and righteous? / *Shatter, shatter for me the good and the righteous!* —O my brothers, have you understood these words too? (Nietzsche, 2005, 186; Zarathustra III, The Old and New Tablets, 27).

Like the bestowing virtue, this “shattering” of the good and just cannot lead to a new general morality. It is not even clear what exactly it means and how far it is supposed to go. The ‘shattering’ is invoked in the name of a future that is yet to come and so amounts to a probing,

interpretive attitude. The demonic, hence, does not denote an immoral or destructive attitude but again the longing for a deeper and more encompassing perspective on life. In the same vein, Zarathustra says of the overhuman: “I suspect that you would call my Overhuman—Devil!” But the overhuman too is not simply destructive, they rather “would *terrify* you with his goodness!” (Nietzsche, 2005, 125; Zarathustra II, On Human Prudence). The demonic strives for a goodness, even if it lies beyond the pragmatic interest in mutual respect and protection.

The second example comes from the “The Other Dance Song” in Part III. In it, Zarathustra has a conversation with life which admonishes him for his suicidal thoughts: “[y]ou have long not loved me as much as you say you do” (Nietzsche, 2005, 198; Zarathustra III, The Other Dance-Song). Zarathustra has to admit that life, taken as such, transcends his own, human knowledge. “Just then Life was dearer to me than all my Wisdom had ever been” (Nietzsche, 2005, 199; Zarathustra III, The Other Dance-Song). Life teaches him a song that follows the twelve strikes of the bell at midnight. The final lines say:

Five!

The world is deep,

Six!

Deeper than day had been aware.

Seven!

Deep is its woe—

Eight!

Joy—deeper still than misery:

Nine!

Woe says: Now go!

Ten!

Yet all joy Eternity—

Eleven!

—wants deepest, deep Eternity!

Twelve! (Nietzsche, 2005, 199; Zarathustra III, The Other Dance-Song).

What I believe allows me to apply the category of the demonic here is the boundless and uncontrollable joy that is evoked, a joy and a desire that persist against all reasons humans might have to be unhappy about their lives. The joy has no motive, or better: it is motivated only by the urge to perpetuate itself. Compared to the ordinary perspective on life, joy and desire are always “deeper still”. They are therefore also no individual feeling but manifest the joy of life itself, something that within a human being is again more than just human. This joy



ignores the pain that humans might rightfully feel or even takes it as a stimulus for achieving a deeper gratification.

The twelfth strike of the bell remains without words. Nietzsche's poem again points at a level of existence for which no words are adequate. Eleven lines carefully build up to a point at which human emotion extends beyond the confines of individual life. Again, we see how a posthuman aesthetics strives to achieve forms of expression that are not human in the ordinary sense of an expression of human interiority and intentionality. Nietzsche lets animals talk, and at the end, presents life itself as an interlocutor in humanized form, only to show that it is no longer relevant to let humans speak. The de-centering of the human that he achieves is playful and metaphorical but it is a de-centering nonetheless.

References

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