

# Nietzsche and Transhumanism

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# Nietzsche and Transhumanism:

*Precursor or Enemy?*

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Nietzsche and Transhumanism: Precursor or Enemy?

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Edited by Yunus Tuncel

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## EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

### YUNUS TUNCEL

Nietzsche's relationship to transhumanism has been debated for the last several years, and one can find scholars on any point of the spectrum regarding Nietzsche's affinity to this movement. In this collection of essays scholars from different backgrounds explore this relationship, as they discuss many issues that are central to Nietzsche's thought and transhumanism. These issues include the overhuman (or the superhuman), the posthuman, eternal recurrence, nihilism, evolution, education, asceticism, enhancement, bio-enhancement, morality, pain, suffering, longevity, and immortality.

The anthology is structured in three parts: Essays in Part I are from the *Journal of Evolution & Technology*, a journal of Institute of Ethics and Emerging Technologies dedicated to transhumanism; in this debate from 2009 to 2010 Stefan Sorgner presented his ideas on how and why Nietzsche's ideas could be seen to have impact on transhumanism, as Max More, Michael Hauskeller, and Bill Hibbard responded to him. The last piece in this part is Sorgner's response to them. Part II carries the debate into Nietzsche scholarship; the essays of this part appeared in the Fall 2011 issue of *The Agonist*, a journal of the Nietzsche Circle. Here Keith Ansell Pearson, Paul Loeb, and Babette Babich examine Nietzsche's ideas in relation to those of transhumanism, and Sorgner responds to them. Finally, the essays of Part III were solicited specifically for this anthology, and scholars were approached to contribute to this collection. These essays are by Michael Steinmann, Russell Blackford, Rebecca Bamford, Yunus Tuncel, and Ashley Woodward. This part also ends with a response by Sorgner to these essays and does not cohere like the other two parts, which were focused debates. However, all parts and chapters deal with the same theme of this anthology, emphasizing different aspects of Nietzsche's thought and the transhumanist thought. What follows below is a summary of, or rather flavors from, each of the chapters. In this way, the reader can easily find what interests him or her the most and focus on that part of the anthology or on a specific chapter.

In Part I, Chapter 1, "Nietzsche, the Overhuman<sup>1</sup> and Transhumanism," Stefan Sorgner argues against Bostrom's claim that Nietzsche cannot be an ancestor of the transhumanist movement and shows the parallels between the concept of the posthuman and Nietzsche's overhuman. In this discussion Sorgner finds similarities between Nietzsche and transhumanism in their conceptions of dynamic, always changing aspects of life and human life, in their valuations of science, and their belief in enhancement and development. After touching upon the differences between Bostrom's and Esfandiary's concepts of the transhuman and the posthuman, Sorgner suggests that Nietzsche's concept of higher types and overhuman is similar to that of Esfandiary rather than that of Bostrom. In the last part of his essay, Sorgner engages in an analysis of Nietzsche's overhuman and argues that the concept of the posthuman would be stronger "if one accepts that it also has a meaning-giving function," (25) which he finds in Nietzsche's conception.

In the following essay, "The Overhuman in the Transhuman," Chapter 2 of the anthology, Max More not only agrees with Sorgner's conclusion, but also claims that "...transhumanist ideas were directly influenced by Nietzsche." (28) As one of the key figures of the transhumanist movement, More acknowledges Nietzsche's influence on his work in transhumanism. On a further note, More finds Nietzsche to be instrumental for critical thinking and for the transhumanist goal of self-transformation. Despite the utilitarian influence on transhumanist thought and Nietzsche's distance from utilitarianism, More entertains a Nietzschean variation of transhumanism.

Michael Hauskeller, on the other hand, disagrees with both More and Sorgner and, in his essay, "Nietzsche, the Overhuman and the Posthuman: A Reply to Stefan Sorgner," Chapter 3 of the anthology, shows the essential differences between Nietzsche and transhumanism. Here are the essentials of his position: first, Nietzsche was not interested in improving humanity in contrast to the transhumanist goal "to improve human nature by means of technology" (32). Second, Nietzsche and transhumanists would not agree on a reevaluation of all values. While transhumanism wants to maintain continuity, Nietzsche wants to undermine all values. Third, transhumanists uphold the logocentric tradition and consider the organic body to be replaceable, whereas Nietzsche considers the mind to be an invention and the body to be crucial. Fourth, Hauskeller discusses personal immortality. While transhumanism accepts it as a goal, Nietzsche

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<sup>1</sup> For *Übermensch* in Nietzsche either 'Overhuman' or 'Superhuman' is used by different authors in this collection.

rejects it. It must be noted here that this is a complicated topic in Nietzsche's works and his rejection of immortality has much to do with his criticism of Christian belief in after-life. Hauskeller does not discuss the bigger context of Nietzsche's position on immortality, which would necessitate a discussion of eternal recurrence. The last part of Hauskeller's essay addresses the question of the overhuman and finds Nietzsche's conception to be in disagreement with transhumanist ideas.

Continuing with the debate Sorgner initiated on Nietzsche and transhumanism, Bill Hibbard, in his "Nietzsche's Overhuman is an Ideal Whereas Posthumans Will be Real," Chapter 4, sees a huge divergence between the two, as he points out that Nietzsche's overhuman is an ideal, whereas the posthuman of transhumanism is real. While incorporating Nietzsche's eternal recurrence into this debate, Hibbard offers a "fixed point theory," and states that "...the overhuman's satisfaction with eternal recurrence implies that the overhuman must be the result of an infinite sequence of improving humans and posthumans" (39) and concludes that "...some posthumans would say yes to eternal recurrence" (39). This separation between ideal and real that Hibbard uses to base his argument is hardly tenable, because Nietzsche stands at a critical threshold in relation to such a separation. On a final note, Hibbard finds another major difference, which concerns the issue of "radical inequality." He claims that Nietzsche's preference for the strong would not be good for social cohesion and proposes Hobbes, with his materialism and ideas for social cohesion, to be a better antecedent for transhumanism than Nietzsche.

In his essay, "Beyond Humanism: Reflections on Trans- and Posthumanism," Chapter 5 of this collection, Sorgner responds to the ongoing discussion on Nietzsche-transhumanism relationship in nine parts. What follows below is a summary of each of these parts. In 1) Technology and Evolution, Sorgner presents the following arguments. First, Nietzsche has a high regard for sciences; therefore, he would affirm technology and technological means for bringing about the overhuman. Just to diverge from Sorgner, we must also keep in mind the 'how' of sciences and technology, the affects they produce, and how they fit in the life of a culture; all of these issues would be crucial in Nietzsche. Furthermore, Sorgner sees education and enhancement as analogous processes and, as a result, concludes that Nietzsche would be in favor of technological enhancement for the overhuman. In the second section, "Overcoming Nihilism," Sorgner makes a distinction between alethic nihilism and ethical nihilism; the former stands for the fact that "...it is currently impossible to obtain knowledge of the world" (50), while the latter represents the position that no non-formal concept of the good is plausible

and there is no ethical foundation universally applicable to all. According to Sorgner, Nietzsche proposes to go beyond ethical nihilism, but embraces alethic nihilism. However, Sorgner himself does not agree with Nietzsche's call because of the potential paternalistic structures, which go along with a move beyond ethical nihilism. He then suggests that an embrace of both ethical as well as alethic nihilism would help establish a post-foundational society in which all diversity and different forms of life are accepted and coexist with each other. In the third section, "Politics and Liberalism," Sorgner sees a two-class system in Nietzsche's political vision in which society is split between the leisurely creators and the rest doing the day-to-day work; I think this is too simplistic and Sorgner acknowledges the complexity of Nietzsche's politics. On the other hand, he sees a two-class system in some brands of transhumanism. As a result, he turns Hauskeller's criticism of Nietzsche against transhumanism itself. In section four, Sorgner aligns Nietzsche's thought more with Virtue Ethics than Utilitarianism and urges transhumanists and bioethicists to benefit from Nietzsche's ideas on ethics, despite their association with Utilitarianism. Concerning the good life in section five, Sorgner warns against the dangers of upholding one true ideal for all humanity and one true good, in agreement with Nietzsche, and shows that certain aspects of the good life are not incompatible with his philosophy, contra what transhumanists claim—Nietzsche is not only open to certain forms of the good life but is also open to diverse good lives, as Sorgner exemplifies. In response to several transhumanists, Sorgner, in section six, states that Nietzsche's dynamic conception of power and the will to power is sufficient for his conception of the world as ever-changing; therefore, this conception is open to ideals of progress, which transhumanism upholds. Regarding the concepts of eternal recurrence and the overhuman, Sorgner considers them to be logically separate. He acknowledges that the former is incompatible with transhumanist thought, but the latter is not. In section seven, Sorgner expresses his criticism of Hauskeller's reading of Nietzsche on immortality and highlights the fact that both Nietzsche and transhumanism are in agreement in their critical distance to the Christian conception of after-life and immortality. As for longevity, Nietzsche clearly departs from the transhumanist goal of simple survival; as Sorgner observes, what counts is power and to be more powerful, which, in fact, ties in with living in an overhumanly way and not just living. Regarding logocentricity, in section eight, Sorgner does not agree with Hauskeller that transhumanism continues the logocentric tradition of the West. On the contrary, transhumanists may agree with Nietzsche's "naturalistic" and perspectival position on reason and knowledge. In the last section, Sorgner

exposes some of the reasons for hostility towards Nietzsche among some transhumanists and academics in general and assesses the place of Nietzsche in post-war Germany.

The first chapter of Part II of the anthology, “The Future is Superhuman” by Keith Ansell-Pearson—Chapter 6 of the anthology—presents an extensive discussion of the superhuman and nihilism. Focusing on Vattimo’s reading of Nietzsche and his position that Nietzsche’s thought “offers a possible proposal for a breakthrough” (73) to a post-metaphysical human, Ansell-Pearson offers his reading of the superhuman as “a new non-dogmatic image of thought: a seduction, a temptation, an experiment, and a hope” (74). He then moves on to discussing the question of nihilism in Nietzsche. He rightly acknowledges the ambiguity of the term and points out its different meanings and forms such as passive nihilism, which Nietzsche rejects, and active nihilism, which he embraces (75). What is crucial for both Vattimo and Ansell-Pearson is to see nihilism as “...an indicator of...our emancipation from moral monism, dogmatism, and absolutism” (74). Ansell-Pearson’s discussion of nihilism is interesting in that it poses the question as to what extent transhumanism is a problem or an overcoming from the standpoint of Nietzsche’s philosophy? In the rest of his essay, Ansell-Pearson discusses Sorgner’s appropriation of Nietzsche for transhumanism and the responses of Babich and Loeb, which I will summarize below.

In his essay, “Nietzsche's Transhumanism: Evolution and Eternal Recurrence,” Chapter 7 of the anthology, Paul Loeb expresses his dissatisfaction with the ways More and Sorgner treat the link between the *Übermensch* and the eternal recurrence, as it relates to transhumanism. Insisting on the translation of *Übermensch* as ‘superhuman,’ Loeb presents his understanding of the superhuman, which “...does not even refer to any single individual...but only to a future descendant species...,” (85) an understanding which may echo well with Sorgner and transhumanists. Loeb rightly exposes the shortcomings of More’s position on the link between the superhuman and the eternal recurrence. He first disagrees with More’s claim that eternal recurrence is bizarre and implausible, as he shows the problem in such a scholarly position and exposes its scientific aspect. Next Loeb debunks the idea that eternal recurrence rejects progress or that it is opposed to any transhumanist progress. In this way Loeb achieves two things: first, the superhuman and the eternal recurrence as two significant doctrines of Nietzsche’s thought are consistent with each other. Second, they can both be adapted by transhumanism, and even more radically he states that “...eternal recurrence is actually *required* for there to be any transhumanist progress in the first place” (91). Next Loeb

demonstrates how the idea of eternal recurrence enables Zarathustra to overcome his doubts regarding backward willing and thereby to become a transhuman; by the same token Nietzsche points the way to the future superhuman species. In arguing against More and Sorgner and their disjointed treatment of the concepts of the superhuman and the eternal recurrence, Loeb brings the two together in his conclusion as it pertains to the evolution of the superhuman animal “through its additional recurrence-enabled mnemonic control of the past” (94). On a final note for this essay, Loeb criticizes the transhumanists in that they do not discuss the problem of time in Nietzsche, which is a significant aspect of the eternal recurrence, and, therefore, they cannot explain how an evolutionary step to a higher form of species is possible. This is why Loeb ends his essay by urging transhumanists and Sorgner to reflect on and appropriate Nietzsche's teachings on time.

In the following essay, “Nietzsche's Post-Human Imperative: On the ‘All-too-Human’ Dream of Transhumanism,” Chapter 8 of the anthology, Babette Babich explains why she disagrees with Sorgner's claim that Nietzsche would have been an advocate of transhumanism. One of Babich's criticisms of Sorgner is that he does not engage with the reasons as to why transhumanists like Bostrom keep Nietzsche at a distance (105). After laying down the building blocks of Sorgner's chained argument, namely education = evolution = genetic engineering, Babich lists some shortcomings in Sorgner's reconstruction of Nietzsche as a precursor of transhumanism. One shortcoming she sees is the fact that Sorgner excludes Sloterdijk from his discussion and does not discuss the reasons as to why Habermas argues against transhumanism while associating Nietzsche with it. Babich proceeds to expose the context of Habermas' critique of transhumanism, in which cybernetics and systems theory have been the basis of the military industrial world in the United States, Germany (especially of the Weimar period), and other parts of the world. She then presents the theme of Sloterdijk's discussion in “Rules for the Human Zoo:” “...‘anthropotechnics,’ the technique of the manufacturing of humanity...” which is a global concern (109). In the next section of her essay, Babich takes Sorgner to task on education and rightly questions him as to what he means by ‘education.’ After surveying several elements of Nietzsche's conception of education, Babich reveals the discrepancies between Nietzsche's and Sorgner's Nietzsche-inspired transhumanist model; in fact, the transhumanist model “...would lead to a society not of ‘enhancement,’ but and much rather of *leveled* or flattened out humanity” (114). While taking note of the danger of playing with Nietzsche's texts, Babich concludes that Nietzsche would dismiss the kind of “enhancement”

Sorgner talks about, which is not about self-overcoming but rather about self-preservation. I will end the summary of Babich's essay with two valid points she makes: first, who will benefit from all the enhancements Sorgner and transhumanists promise? Will it be only the wealthy who can afford expensive technologies? This puts a dent on the transhumanist promise for a better future for all. Second, transhumanism is too utopian to follow; in obsessing with promises and possibilities for the distant future, we forget the problems of the world today. Both of these points Babich makes are worthy of reflection not only for Sorgner and transhumanists, but for any thinker who is truly concerned with the problems we are faced with today.

In his response to the debate in *The Agonist*, "Zarathustra 2.0 and Beyond: Further Remarks on the Complex Relationship Between Nietzsche and Transhumanism," Chapter 9 of the anthology, Sorgner addresses the criticisms raised by Babich and Loeb. In this debate, Sorgner engages with Babich on the historic context of Nietzsche and transhumanism, including a discussion on fascism, futurism, and any form of totalitarianism. Sorgner not only does not see any causal relationship between transhumanism and totalitarianism, but he is also sensitive to the question of technology-totalitarianism connection: "How can technologies get dealt with without them bringing about totalitarian structures within a society?" (142) He believes that technologies, whether electronic or medical, will be available to many people, as they will enhance their lives. While Sorgner acknowledges that Nietzsche and transhumanism are different especially in relation to their philosophical inclinations (especially in their positions on Utilitarianism) and in their styles, he does not see ascetic idealism in transhumanism; on the contrary, he considers both Nietzsche and transhumanism to be "naturalistic" and to be accepting our "natural" being in the world. Sorgner then moves on to discussing Loeb's critique of transhumanism. While finding Loeb's position on the connection between the overhuman (Loeb himself uses 'superhuman') and the eternal recurrence implausible—here much of the discussion rests on memory and backward willing, Sorgner accepts, albeit for different reasons, Loeb's advice to transhumanists that they benefit from Nietzsche's conception of eternal recurrence. The main disagreement between Sorgner and Loeb in this debate lies in the question as to whether the overhuman and the eternal recurrence are separable or not. Loeb thinks not, while Sorgner holds that they are logically separable. What stands out in this debate is an in-depth discussion of the eternal recurrence.

Part III starts with Michael Steinmann's essay, "But What Do We Matter! Nietzsche's Secret Hopes and the Prospects of Transhumanism,"

Chapter 10 of the anthology. Steinmann offers a comparative study between Nietzsche and transhumanism, specifically on “Nietzsche’s hopes and the prospects of transhumanism” (174), as he starts with the overhuman. At the outset, Steinmann introduces a stark contrast between Nietzsche’s overhuman and the transhumanist vision; the former seems quite extraordinary, or “wholly other” as he puts it (174), while the latter is ordinary. Continuing along the line of contrast, Steinmann introduces another divergence between the two. In his reading of Nietzsche, the overhuman “has existed and can exist again” (176). This position, in which the higher types are not tied to any evolutionary transformation, clearly goes against the transhumanist conception of evolution. In this account, the overhuman appears as an exemplary human being, and Nietzsche’s vision for humanity rests on the potential to be different than it currently is (177). To support his argument, Steinmann gives examples from Nietzsche’s texts on what historical figures he considers to be overhumans, such as Goethe and Napoleon. After making an interesting comment on the overhuman, namely that one can have overhumanly experiences without being an overhuman, Steinmann lists its three aspects: 1) the overhuman is a mere daring and risk-taking individual; 2) the overhuman has a divine character (he states this with caution); and 3) there is an inhuman aspect of the overhuman, which has to do with brutality and evilness. He then discusses some parts of *Beyond Good and Evil*. What is relevant here is the expansion of the ‘inhuman’ aspect of the overhuman. Steinmann’s reading of Aphorism 44 of BGE is that we all learn from hardships and dangers, but destruction or “devilry of every sort” are confined to fiction and mythology and do not have any room in the conduct of life and practical philosophy. After discussing destructiveness and Dionysus in Nietzsche, specifically in BGE, Steinmann concludes that, despite some parallels between Nietzsche and transhumanism, Nietzsche’s hopes cannot be positively linked to the prospects of transhumanism, especially when the roots of transhumanist movement are to be found in Enlightenment and the progress of sciences.

In the next essay, “Nietzsche, the ‘Übermensch,’ and Transhumanism: Philosophical Reflections,” Chapter 11 of the anthology, Russell Blackford first sums up the debates on Nietzsche and transhumanism, which transpired in *Journal of Evolution & Technology* in 2009 and 2010, and in *The Agonist* in 2011 (the subject-matter of Parts I and II of the anthology). He then presents an overview of transhumanism in which he emphasizes the role of technology in human life and some of the core ideas of transhumanism such as technological advancement and transformation via technology to radically altered state called ‘posthuman.’ Blackford then

proceeds to explore Nietzsche and transhumanism connection; after considering several views, specifically those of Bostrom, Babich, More, and Sorgner, he concludes that “Nietzsche had some influence, via More, on transhumanism” (195). Despite Nietzsche’s influence on More and More’s contribution to the transhumanist movement, Blackford wants to examine if Nietzschean thinking and transhumanist thinking support each other philosophically. Regarding asceticism in transhumanism, for instance, Blackford criticizes Babich’s position. In agreement with More, Blackford states that the desire to alter and enhance human nature and body is not a form of asceticism but is rather put forward for the sake of extending “our physical, social, and sensory lives beyond their current limits...” (201). In the section, “Reflections” of his essay, Blackford presents his position on the main subject of this anthology. While expressing his doubts about transhumanist adoption of Nietzsche’s philosophy—he mentions specifically *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* and eternal recurrence, he suggests that this does not exclude the possibility of taking inspiration from his works. In fact, it did not prevent him from doing so. In a similar vein, Ted Chu, a transhumanist, was also influenced by Nietzsche’s ideas. Blackford cites from his recent book, *Human Purpose and Transhuman Potential* and calls Chu’s version of transhumanism “recognizably neo-Nietzschean.” (204) Blackford ends his essay by acknowledging philosophers such as Hobbes and Mill to be the inspiration for transhumanism, while not entirely denying Nietzsche’s influence.

In “Nietzsche on Ethical Transhumanism,” Chapter 12 of the anthology, Rebecca Bamford touches upon the subject of moral transhumanism, as she discusses such issues as altruism and enhancement, and challenges transhumanists in their understanding of morality in the light of Nietzsche’s critique. In the first section of her essay, Bamford presents the transhumanist position on moral enhancement, especially the positions of Persson and Savelescu. They argue that, despite technological advancements including those of enhancement technologies, the human capacity for morality, or altruism to be specific, has not advanced proportionally. This can have dire effects, she justifiably warns, if a solution is not found, and they find the solution in “moral bioenhancement” (205). As she shows, they base their argument on Hume and Schopenhauer for the necessity of altruism and compassion. Bamford then revises the question of defensibility for moral transhumanism. In the next part of her essay, she brings up the issue of moral arbitrariness, following on the criticisms raised by McNamee and Edwards against moral transhumanism, and discusses the subject of enhancement. After presenting Sorgner’s position that educational and genetic/bio-processes are parallel, Bamford concludes,

contra Persson and Savulescu, that "...moral motivation need not be presented as 'exclusively' a matter of genetic or pharmaceutical intervention and may also, and effectively, involve moral education" (210). In agreement with Bamford, but going further, I would raise the following Nietzschean/Foucauldian questions: In what institutional context are the genetic interventions being used? *Who* is using them? These questions seem to be absent in Persson and Savulescu. Next Bamford discusses the concerns about altruism within the context of Nietzsche's philosophy. As she engages with another book of Nietzsche's, namely *Daybreak*, she discusses Nietzsche's critique of "customary morality" and shows how debilitating this type of morality can be on human health, and similarly, compassion itself, which "...can also be profoundly disempowering and objectifying..." (212). Bamford then lists three reasons as to why, for Nietzsche, it is difficult to overcome customary morality. On the other hand, she does show how such overcoming is also possible in Nietzsche as he provides "a substantial alternative for the development of a new approach to ethics..." (214). Given the shaky grounds of transhumanist ethics built on altruism and compassion, Bamford invites transhumanists to reflect on their basic assumptions and to be consistent within their "futuristic" promises by steering away from customary morality.

The following essay, "Pain and Suffering in Nietzsche and Transhumanism," Chapter 13 of the anthology, addresses some of the fundamental differences between Nietzsche and transhumanism. Tuncel chose this topic because so much has already been said on some of the core issues such as the superhuman (or the overhuman) and the eternal recurrence. On the other hand, the question of suffering remains central to Nietzsche's thought and the previous essay by Bamford deals with it tangentially by way of her discussion of compassion in Nietzsche. The essay starts with exploring Nietzsche's ideas on suffering and related issues such as pity, compassion or how we relate to others' sufferings in general, cruelty, and more specifically "refined cruelty," and the role of suffering in memory-making. The essay then moves on to examining the transhumanist goal of eliminating pain and suffering, extending human life, and even ending aging and human mortality. Tuncel tried to include many different transhumanist goals and approaches to these issues and the common trend among them, while realizing that there are different transhumanist perspectives. In the last part of the essay, Tuncel examines in what ways Nietzsche would be in disagreement with the transhumanist goals, all of which have to do with the functions of self-preservation. He also shows, in related but different areas, how Nietzsche and transhumanist thought are at odds with one another, including their

relations to Enlightenment, metaphysical dualism, logocentricity, and the subject of death. Although there are more areas than can be presented here in which two intellectual movements can be compared, Tuncel concludes that Nietzsche and transhumanist thought are more different than similar.

In the last essay of this part before Sorgner's response, "Posthuman Reflections on the Nietzsche and Transhumanism Exchange," Chapter 14 of the anthology, Ashley Woodward engages with post-modern philosophy, especially that of Lyotard and Foucault, to show how a Nietzschean form of transhumanism is possible. The first section of the essay introduces Lyotard's ideas on post-modernity and his understanding of it as "incredulity toward meta-narratives" (232). Woodward then presents Lyotard's "post-modern fable" in which Lyotard puts forward the extra-terrestrial survival of the human species after the end of planet earth to be "the most pressing problem facing us today" (234). This surely connects with the concern of transhumanism. In this fable, the hero of the narrative is no longer the human, unlike modern narratives, but rather 'negetropy,' "...the organization of matter and energy into complex form as such" (234) hence, the relevance of the post-human in this discussion. Woodward then concludes that Lyotard's fable critiques transhumanist dreams, "but does not necessarily disqualify them" (235). In the following section of his essay, Woodward explores Nietzsche as a critic of modernity, especially concerning his ideas on the value of science and technology. After he presents Ansell-Pearson's and Babich's charge that transhumanism is a form of ascetic idealism and his own understanding of Nietzsche's ascetic idealism, he examines their arguments.

The last essay of the collection is by Stefan Sorgner, Chapter 15: "Immortality as Utopia and the Relevance of Nihilism," where he responds to the authors of Part III. After discussing his version of perspectivism influenced by Vattimo, Sorgner lists three points relevant to the Nietzsche-transhumanism connection: 1) health, 2) science, and 3) the overhuman. As for the first one, Sorgner does not say much; let's keep in mind that the use of the terms 'health' or 'healthy' is complicated in Nietzsche, because he does not mean ordinary health. As for science, Sorgner, in response to Woodward, makes an interesting point about Nietzsche's prospective use of the term 'science,' a different notion of science that is yet to come. Finally, as for the overhuman, Sorgner insists on the strictly evolutionary meaning of the overhuman when he claims, contra Steinmann, that the overhuman for Nietzsche never existed in history. This is another contested area of debate in Nietzsche scholarship. Sorgner then presents his responses under the sub-sections of immortality, health, nihilism, truth, and moral bioenhancement. What I like to focus on

is his main criticism of some of the contributors of Part III, me, Woodward, and Steinmann. First, he softly and indirectly criticizes all essays, with the exception of Bamford's, for focusing "...solely on the most abstract philosophical questions, because in particular when we are dealing with applied ethical issues, the value and relevance of this comparison between Nietzsche and transhumanism can become particularly clear" (258). If it is a criticism, it cannot be a serious one, because the subject of this anthology is not Nietzsche, Transhumanism and Applied Ethics. His other criticism is more grave and, in my opinion, entirely unjustified. Under the sub-section, "The Pars Pro Toto Fallacy," he claims that Steinmann, Woodward and I are criticizing certain aspects of transhumanism, thinking that these aspects are the essence of the movement, whereas a good criticism would have to target its core or its essence (258-260). In defense of my essay, I would like to say the following and hope Steinmann and Woodward find a platform to respond to his criticism. The main goal of transhumanism is to improve humanity with the help of technology; when one asks transhumanists how this goal should be achieved, they respond (for that, one can consult with many transhumanist texts), by eliminating suffering, by way of longevity, enhancement, and by achieving immortality. In my short essay, I took on these aspects without forgetting the bigger framework of transhumanism and Nietzsche's conceptions of the overhuman and the eternal recurrence.

In conclusion, Nietzsche's works, Nietzsche scholarship, and transhumanism encompass a broad spectrum of topics all of which are relevant to our age. What is the place of scientific rationality in today's world? What is the role of technology in human society? How far can or should we go with different kinds of enhancements? Can enhancement be seen in conjunction with Nietzsche's conceptions of overcoming and education? Where are we in the evolutionary process? Are we being already displaced by the next species that is in the works? Is Nietzsche's overhuman a goal to be attained in the future? Or, does the future simply lie in the past while memory is simply a matter of interpretation, a function of backward-willing? This collection of essays poses these and many other questions, brings many topics together and should provoke and engage readers from different backgrounds who are interested in them and in thinking through the problems of our age. With this anthology, the editors of the series, while being thankful to all the contributors, hope to create a framework and a platform for future debate on Nietzsche and transhumanism. The debate shall continue.

# **PART I**

# CHAPTER ONE

## NIETZSCHE, THE OVERHUMAN, AND TRANSHUMANISM

STEFAN LORENZ SORGNER

### Introduction

When I first became familiar with the transhumanist movement, I immediately thought that there were many fundamental similarities between transhumanism and Nietzsche's philosophy, especially concerning the concept of the posthuman and that of Nietzsche's overhuman. This is what I wish to show in this article. I am employing the term 'overhuman' instead of 'overman,' because in German the term *Übermensch* can apply to both sexes, which the notion *overhuman* can, but *overman* cannot. I discovered, however, that Bostrom, a leading transhumanist, rejects Nietzsche as an ancestor of the transhumanist movement, as he claims that there are merely some "surface-level similarities with the Nietzschean vision" (Bostrom 2005a, 4).

In contrast to Bostrom, I think that significant similarities between the posthuman and the overhuman can be found on a fundamental level. Habermas agrees with me in that respect, as he has already referred to the similarities in these two ways of thinking. However, he seems to regard both of them as absurd. At least, he refers to transhumanists as a bunch of mad intellectuals who luckily have not managed to establish support for their elitist views from a bigger group of supporters (Habermas 2001, 43).<sup>1</sup>

In addition, it seems to me that Nietzsche explained the relevance of the overhuman by referring to a dimension, which seems to be lacking in transhumanism. In order to explain my position, I will progress as follows. First, I will compare the concept of the posthuman to that of Nietzsche's overhuman, focusing more on their similarities than on their differences. Second, I will contextualise the overhuman in Nietzsche's general vision, so that I can point out which dimension seems to me to be lacking in transhumanist thought.

## **1 The posthuman and Nietzsche's overhuman**

Before I focus directly on the comparison between posthumans and Nietzsche's overhuman, I will deal with some fundamental principles of Bostrom's version of transhumanism, where the concept of the posthuman can be found, and corresponding principles within Nietzsche's thought. I will give a short comparison of their dynamic views of nature and values, and their positions concerning human nature, enhancement, education, the reevaluation of values, and evolution towards a higher species.

### **1.1 The evolution of human nature, and values**

First, both transhumanists and Nietzsche hold a dynamic view of nature and values. "Transhumanists view human nature as a work-in-progress," Bostrom says (2005b, 1).

So does Nietzsche. He holds a dynamic will-to-power metaphysics which applies to human and all other beings, and which implies that all things are permanently undergoing some change.<sup>2</sup> There is nothing which is eternally fixed. According to Nietzsche, human beings are organisms constituted out of individual power quanta or will-to-power constellations. One can clarify his concept by reference to Leibniz's monadology.<sup>3</sup> A power quantum is a single entity like a monad. In contrast to the monad, it can interact with other power quanta, it can grow, it can nourish itself (which has to be understood metaphorically), and it has a perspective on the world. This perspective enables the quantum to decide what to do next, which depends upon its options and its conception of power whereby it employs an extremely wide and open notion of power. Every state, in which a power quantum is stronger, more capable, than another, and has the potential to dominate the other, represents a state of power.

According to Nietzsche, all entities are constituted out of such power constellations. The dynamics of power also underlie the process of evolution, which was responsible for bringing about the human species, animals, and plants. All organisms came into existence because the conditions were such that bringing about the respective organisms was the best possible means for realizing the striving for power of the preceding organisms. Eventually, human beings came into existence.

However, the species "human being," like every species, is not eternally fixed and immutable. It came into existence, it can fade out of existence, and it can evolve into a different species. Individual members of a species have only a certain limited potential, which is limited by their belonging to a specific species. Each species represents a species not only

because it is a community whose members have the potential to reproduce themselves with one another, but also because its members have certain limits.

A human being as a human being has only a limited amount of potential and capacities, as he belongs to the human species, and any species is defined by its limits. It cannot go beyond that limit. If a human being has acquired special capacities, then she cannot pass them on to her descendants, Nietzsche holds. However, a certain kind of Lamarckism can also be found in Nietzsche, as he stresses that certain tendencies can get inherited. If a man likes to eat well, and to enjoy the company of women, then it is advisable for his son not to live a chaste and ascetic life (KSA, 4, 356-68).

Given a certain social and individual state, which Nietzsche does not describe in detail, evolution can take place, and the species can evolve – something also maintained by transhumanists. Bostrom points out: “A common understanding is that it would be naive to think that the human condition and human nature will remain pretty much the same for very much longer” (Bostrom 2001).

Nietzsche might not be as optimistic as Bostrom: he does not argue that an evolutionary progress in which human beings are involved will take place soon. However, he does agree with transhumanists that it will happen eventually, if the human species does not cease to exist.

In addition to the ontological dynamics, which can be found both in transhumanism and in Nietzsche’s philosophy, the same dynamics also applies to the level of values. Here, Bostrom claims:

Transhumanism is a dynamic philosophy, intended to evolve as new information becomes available or challenges emerge. One transhumanist value is therefore to cultivate a questioning attitude and a willingness to revise one’s beliefs and assumptions. (Bostrom 2001.)

Nietzsche agrees that values have undergone many changes. He presents his interpretation of the evolution of values in his account of the “Genealogy of Morals” (KSA, 5, 257-89). Values undergo a change on various levels, on a social and cultural level as well as on a personal one. Nietzsche’s concept of power, to which the concept of value is closely related, can change given new experiences and insights. The content of the concept of power is perspectival (Sorgner 2007, 79-83). There are no absolute and unchanging values, as there is no Platonic realm of ideas in which something could remain fixed.

## 1.2 Science, enhancement, and education

Both Nietzsche and transhumanists have an outlook on the world, which diverges significantly from the traditional Christian one, or one which has inherited many Christian values. As one can still find many elements of Christian thinking in the value system of many people today, both Nietzsche and transhumanists are in favour of bringing about a reevaluation of values.

Bostrom emphasizes: “Transhumanists insist that our received moral precepts and intuitions are not in general sufficient to guide policy” (Bostrom 2001). Consequently, he suggests values that take into consideration a dynamic view of the world:

We can thus include in our list of transhumanist values that of promoting understanding of where we are and where we are headed. This value encloses others: critical thinking, open-mindedness, scientific inquiry, and open discussion are all important helps for increasing society’s intellectual readiness. (Bostrom 2001.)

Nietzsche agrees again. His respect for critical thinking was immense – he is widely regarded as one of the harshest critics of morality and religion. Furthermore, he also values scientific inquiry immensely (Sorgner 2007, 140-45), even though his respect for science has often been underestimated. In various passages, he points out that the future age will be governed by a scientific spirit, which is why he thinks that many future people will regard his philosophy as plausible, as his way of thinking is supposed to appeal to scientifically minded people.

Nietzsche’s high regard for the sciences has been recognized by most leading Nietzsche scholars.<sup>4</sup> His theory of the eternal recurrence is based upon premises, which have been held by many scientists. His will-to-power anthropology bears many similarities to scientific ones. Even though he is critical of Darwin, he also holds a theory of evolution. Nietzsche very often is most critical of thinkers who are closest to his own understanding of things. In Darwin’s case, Nietzsche’s critique is mainly rooted in his concept that human beings strive solely for power. Hence, a concept, which implies that a struggle for existence or a will to life is the fundamental human drive, is the one from which he feels the need to distinguish himself (Sorgner 2007, 62). Human beings strive for power. The struggle for existence represents only a marginal type of expression of the fundamental will-to-power.

If you will power, then it is in your interest to enhance yourself. Enhancement, however, is just what transhumanists aim for.

Transhumanism is in favour of technologies and other means which could be used for “enhancement of human intellectual, physical, and emotional capacities” (Bostrom 2001) so that posthumans could come into existence. Consequently, Bostrom stresses that transhumanists value a type of liberalism, which implies that people have the right to choose “to live much longer and healthier lives, to enhance their memory and other intellectual faculties, to refine their emotional experiences and subjective sense of well-being, and generally to achieve a greater degree of control over their own lives” (Bostrom 2005b, 1). Bostrom obviously has gone into more detail concerning what all of these demands do and do not imply. However, what is important is that he, in contrast to Habermas, values the option for parents to choose the genetic makeup of their children.

Habermas distinguishes between children who simply became who they are and those who were made in a specific manner (Habermas 2001, 41, 45, 80-93), and claims the following. First, the parents’ act of imposition of a genetic makeup is supposed to be immoral, as children are supposed to feel forced into a certain direction, if their genetic makeup was chosen by their parents, more so than if they became who they are by chance (Habermas 2001, 53-55). Second, there is supposed to be a difference between educating one’s children and deciding about their genetic makeup (Habermas 2001, 31, 87-114). Children are supposed to be able to do something against the way they are being educated (Habermas 2001, 100), and education is supposed to bring about only qualities, which can get changed again. A genetic makeup, however, cannot get altered again (Habermas 2001, 111). Therefore, according to Habermas, choosing a genetic makeup for one’s children and educating them are, morally-speaking, two different types of acts concerning their moral evaluation.

Bostrom points out the following: “Transhumanists also hold that there is no special ethical merit in playing genetic roulette. Letting chance determine the genetic identity of our children may spare us directly from directly confronting some difficult choices” (Bostrom 2001). Accordingly, he simply rejects Habermas’ first point. It seems to be implicit in his position that most parents love their children, from which follows that most parents aim for the good for their children. That good can be something the parents regard as good, or something, which they regard as in the interest of the child. No matter which concept of the good the parents favor, it is usually better that parents decide than that the child’s genetic potential is the result of a genetic roulette, or of a chance outcome. Consequently, Bostrom argues, Habermas’ second criticism does not hold either. If the genetic design that parents decide for is better, in most cases,

than that which they receive by chance, then obviously it does not matter morally that it cannot get altered, at least not as easily as qualities which one developed as a result of education. One might even be tempted to say that, in most cases, it is even better that these qualities cannot get altered, as they are a good for the child. Here, it also must be noted that it is far from clear whether Habermas' second point is correct. It might be the case that many qualities one develops on the basis of one's education are embedded so deeply in one's personality that they cannot get altered significantly either.

Critics of genetic engineering also tend to stress the dangers related to new technological methods: that some things will certainly go wrong in the beginning, and that one must not play around with human beings, or treat them solely as a means. Concerning such worries, Bostrom responds: "Transhumanism tends toward pragmatism [...] taking a constructive, problem-solving approach to challenges, favouring methods that experience tells us give good results, and taking the initiative to 'do something about it' rather than just sit around complaining" (Bostrom 2001). He is right, as all scientists and technicians who aim for new goals have to be brave as they enter new, potentially dangerous waters. The same applies to researchers in the field of genetic engineering. We would not have discovered America, or developed smallpox vaccination, if there had not been people brave enough to do what was essential for fulfilling these tasks.

Courage is a significant virtue within Nietzsche's favored morality. In addition, he stresses the importance of science for the forthcoming centuries, and does not reject that development. Given these two premises, I cannot exclude the possibility that Nietzsche would have been in favor of genetic engineering, even though he mainly stresses the importance of education for the occurrence of the evolutionary step towards the overhuman. If genetic engineering, or liberal eugenics, can actually be seen as a special type of education, which is what transhumanists seem to hold, then it is possible that this position would have been held by Nietzsche, too, as education played a significant role in his ethics. He affirmed science and was in favor of enhancement and the bringing about of the overhuman.

### **1.3 The perspectival view of values, and the Renaissance genius**

Transhumanists do not intend to impose their values upon other people, as "transhumanists place emphasis on individual freedom and individual choice in the area of enhancement technologies" (Bostrom

2005b). One reason for holding this position is that Bostrom regards it as “a fact that humans differ widely in their conceptions of what their own perfection would consist in” (Bostrom 2001). And: “The second reason for this element of individualism is the poor track record of collective decision-making in the domain of human improvement. The eugenics movement, for example, is thoroughly discredited” (Bostrom 2001). Besides the fact that Bostrom here uses the word “eugenics” but refers to state regulated eugenics only, which I do not regard as a useful way of employing that notion (Sorgner 2006, 201-209), he puts forward a position that can be called a perspectival view of values. Nietzsche also defends such a view.

Each power constellation, and hence each human being, according to Nietzsche, has a different perspective on the world and as each individual concept of power depends on who one is and which history one has had, each human being has a unique concept of power, and consequently a unique conception “of what their own perfection would consist in.” Nietzsche himself has a clear concept of power, and what he regards as the highest feeling of power, which is directly connected to the classical ideal (Sorgner 2007, 53-58). A similar ideal seems to be upheld by transhumanists, according to Bostrom:

Transhumanism imports from secular humanism the ideal of the fully-developed and well-rounded personality. We can't all be renaissance geniuses, but we can strive to constantly refine ourselves and to broaden our intellectual horizons. (Bostrom 2001.)

Not only the aspect of the “fully-developed and well-rounded personality” can be found in Nietzsche, but also the striving “to constantly refine ourselves and to broaden our intellectual horizons.” In Nietzsche, this aspect is called “overcoming” (KSA, 4, 146-49). Higher humans wish to permanently overcome themselves, to become stronger in the various aspects, which can be developed in a human being, so that finally the overhuman can come into existence. In transhumanist thought, Nietzsche's overhuman is being referred to as “posthuman.”

#### **1.4 The posthuman, the transhuman, and Nietzsche's overhuman**

Who is a posthuman? Which qualities does he have? I think that the only qualities, which all transhumanists can subscribe to, are the following: “we lack the capacity to form a realistic intuitive understanding of what it would be like to be posthuman” (Bostrom 2001). However,

various transhumanists have tried to describe a posthuman in more detail. According to Bostrom, F.M. Esfandiary held the following concept: “a transhuman is a ‘transitional human’, someone who by virtue of their technology usage, cultural values, and lifestyle constitutes an evolutionary link to the coming era of posthumanity” (Bostrom 2005a, 12). In that case, a transhuman would still belong to the species of human beings, which, however, in some aspects has already developed qualities that stretch the concept of a human being, and have the potential to establish itself as the basis for the evolutionary step to a new species. The new species that represents a further stage of evolution is referred to as the posthumans. Hence, transhumans and human beings have the capacity to reproduce themselves with each other, but posthumans would not, in the same way that we cannot reproduce ourselves with great apes, at least not in a sexual manner. It might even be the case that posthumans need to rely on technological means for reproduction.

Bostrom’s concept of the posthuman seems to be slightly different from Esfandiary’s: “By a posthuman capacity, I mean a general central capacity greatly exceeding the maximum attainable by any current human being without recourse to new technological means” (Bostrom forthcoming, 1). It becomes clear that posthuman capacities cannot be identical to the qualities current human beings have. However, Bostrom still thinks that we<sup>5</sup> can develop into such a being. He thereby does not refer to us as the species of human beings, which can evolve into a new species with capacities which are far more complex than our own, but he thinks that any human being, by means of technology or other methods, might be able to develop into a posthuman. He even claims: “This could make it possible for personal identity to be preserved during the transformation into posthuman” (Bostrom forthcoming, 15). Therefore, he seems to have in mind that both current human beings, as well as posthumans, belong to the species of human beings, which implies that they have the potential to reproduce themselves with another by means of sexual reproduction. Posthumans are not a separate species but a particular group of humans with capacities which cannot yet be imagined by us, but which can involve an enhancement in all human aspects including a physiological, emotional, or intellectual enhancement. Bostrom suggests that it is most likely for us to acquire these capacities by technological means.<sup>6</sup>

Let me clarify some options of general enhancement, according to Bostrom, whereby I will employ the notion of eugenics which he does not, but which I regard as appropriate.<sup>7</sup> We have had examples of state regulated and liberal eugenics. State regulated eugenics is the type of

eugenics present in the Third Reich, which is morally despicable, and which is regarded as something to avoid today by most, if not all serious, Western ethicists. Liberal eugenics, on the other hand, is being discussed today, as a morally legitimate possibility, and scholars such as Nicholas Agar (1998) are in favor of some acts associated with liberal eugenics. Transhumanists, as mentioned before, also regard liberal eugenics a morally legitimate way of enhancing human beings. Both state regulated and liberal eugenics, however, are heteronomous types of eugenics, which means that people decide about the enhancement of other people. In the case of state regulated eugenics, the state decides, whereas in the case of liberal eugenics, the parents have the right to decide what ought to be done to offspring. Transhumanists seem to identify a further type of eugenics, which I suggest could be called autonomous eugenics. People may decide for themselves whether they wish to be transformed into posthumans by technological means. Given the theme in Bostrom's articles, this even seems to be the dominant way, he expects posthumans, "an exceedingly worthwhile type" (Bostrom forthcoming, 24), to come into existence.<sup>8</sup>

Given the above analysis of two concepts of the posthuman, I claim that Nietzsche's concept of higher humans and the overhuman is very similar to Esfandiary's concepts of the transhuman and the posthuman, but not to Bostrom's concepts. According to Nietzsche, individual members of the species of human beings have the capacity to develop only certain limited qualities. It is supposed to be characteristic of all species that their respective members can develop only within fixed limits. Given certain conditions, which Nietzsche does not specify, evolution can take place. According 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. One of the conditions necessary for an evolutionary step to occur is that many higher humans exist. Normally, a higher human cannot simply transfer his outstanding capacities to his descendants. However, if there are many higher humans and some other conditions are present too, such an evolutionary step can occur (KSA, 13, 316-317).

Higher humans still belong to the human species, but have some special capacities, which an overhuman could also have. However, higher humans cannot pass on their special capacities to their descendants by means of sexual reproduction. By chance, higher humans have the potential they have and, in addition, they must put significant effort into

developing their various capacities. According to Nietzsche, Goethe represents the best example of a higher human (KSA, 6, 151-152). Nietzsche's higher humans are based upon a special nature that they have by chance. Their nature enables them to develop into higher humans, if they realize their potential by working hard at enhancing themselves. Hereby, he particularly stresses the development of intellectual capacities, the ability to interpret. Nietzsche does not refer to technological means of improvement – Bostrom is correct in that respect. However, Nietzsche does not exclude the additional possibility of technological enhancement either.

The overhuman has a significantly different potential from that of higher humans. So far no overhuman has existed, but the normal capacities of an overhuman are beyond the capacities even of a higher human. Like every species, the species of the overhuman has limits, but their limits are different from the limits of the human species. The overhuman comes about via an evolutionary step, which originates from the group of higher humans. Nietzsche does not exclude the possibility that technological means bring about the evolutionary step. His comments concerning the conditions for the evolutionary step toward the overhuman are rather vague in general, but in this respect his attitude is similar to that of transhumanists. However, he thinks that the scientific spirit will govern the forthcoming millennia and that this spirit will bring about the end of the domination of dualist concepts of God and metaphysics, and the beginning of a wider plausibility for his way of thinking.

Given this brief characterisation of higher humans and the overhuman, I am bound to conclude that Nietzsche's higher humans are similar to Esfandiary's concept of the transhuman and that Nietzsche's overhuman bears many similarities to Esfandiary's posthuman. What can we say about Bostrom's concept of the posthuman in comparison to Nietzsche's concepts?

Bostrom holds: "One might well take an expansive view of what it means to be human, in which case 'posthuman' is to be understood as denoting a certain possible type of human mode of being" (Bostrom forthcoming, 24). Accordingly, he also holds that posthumans have capacities that cannot be found in living human beings. As Nietzsche defends that the species of human beings has strict limits, it is rather unlikely that the concept of a type of human being with capacities, which have not yet existed, is consistent with his philosophy. Consequently, we can conclude that Nietzsche and the transhumanists share many aspects in their general anthropologies and their values, but Nietzsche's concept of the overhuman does not correspond to the concept of the posthuman of all

transhumanists. However, there are transhumanists whose concept of the posthuman bears many significant similarities to that of Nietzsche's overhuman.

## 2 The Overhuman, and Nietzsche's Hope for the Future

Transhumanists, at least in the articles which I have consulted, have not explained why they hold the values they have, and why they want to bring about posthumans. Nietzsche, on the other hand, explains the relevance of the overhuman for his philosophy. The overhuman may even be the ultimate foundation for his worldview.

Nietzsche sees philosophers as creators of values, which are ultimately founded in personal prejudices.<sup>9</sup> He regards his own prejudices as those that they correspond to the spirit, which will govern the forthcoming centuries. "Spirit" here does not refer to an immaterial *nous* in the Platonic sense, or some ghostly spiritual substance. "Spirit" in Nietzsche's writing refers to a bodily capacity of interpretation by means of language, which is based upon physiological strength. He distinguishes between a religious and a scientific spirit. Weak reactive human beings, who cannot fulfill their wishes in the here and now, incorporate the religious spirit, which makes them long for a good afterlife. This spirit was dominant among human beings for a very long time. However, eventually human beings grew stronger and consequently more and more developed a scientific spirit. The importance of the scientific spirit has increased significantly, particularly since the Renaissance. Nietzsche expects this spirit to become even more dominant in the future. As his worldview is supposed to appeal to the scientific spirit, it is supposed to become more and more attractive to the people of the future.

According to Nietzsche, Plato can be seen as a representative of a philosophy based on the religious spirit, Nietzsche as representative of a philosophy based on the scientific one. Christianity, which was dominant in Western countries for a very long time, has to be regarded as Platonism for the people. It is Nietzsche's intention and need to turn Platonism upside down. He refers to his own philosophy as inverted Platonism. In the same way, as Christian thought has dominated many centuries, his scientific way of thinking is supposed to govern forthcoming centuries. Consequently, inverted versions of the main elements of Platonic-Christian thinking have to be found in Nietzsche's thought.

One central aspect of Christianity, according to Nietzsche, is the personal afterlife. It is what makes Christian thinking appealing to many people, and gives a sense of meaning to their lives. If my representation of