

***A Transhuman Remains All Too Human, or What's the Point of Bio-Technological Enhancement If You'll Still Be the Same Old Jerk? Part II***

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*Post- and Transhumanism: An Introduction*

Edited by Robert Ranisch and Stefan Lorenz Sorgner

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“Scratch a transhumanist and you will find a humanist underneath,” writes Michael Hauskeller in his essay “Utopia” in the volume *Post and Transhumanism*. There could be no more clear way to voice my own problem with transhumanist programs.

This volume is genuinely informative about transhumanism itself. Yet it frustrates me that the premise of the entire collection’s existence depends on a false equivalency, or at least a false sense of partnership, between transhumanism and posthumanism. All that brings them together is a vague sense of somehow overcoming the human.

So I found that a lot of the essays in *Post and Transhumanism* fell short of what they could have been because they presume a more explicit connection between the Post- and Trans- prefixes than actually exist. Not only that, many essays approach the subject privileging transhumanism when the philosophies called posthumanism are more profound, interesting, and fundamentally challenging for human politics and ethics.

**A False Ancestor**

Yunus Tuncel contributes an essay entitled “Nietzsche,” which introduces the German prophet as a forerunner of much in contemporary philosophy. His account of Nietzsche’s fundamental concepts (power, perspectivism, the critique of Enlightenment humanism’s veneration of rationality) is disappointingly pedestrian and superficial. After the introductory first half of his essay, Tuncel continues in pursuit of a notion that, as far as I am concerned, misses the entire point of reading Nietzsche at all.

Based on an account of Nietzsche’s Übermensch as a superior individual human, Tuncel speculates whether Nietzsche would have endorsed cybernetic human enhancement. There is, in a quotation from Michael Zimmerman, a brief acknowledgement of “the increased aesthetic, moral, athletic, and experiential capacities necessary for superior individuals.”<sup>1</sup> But Tuncel only understands this in the context of the transhumanist visions of a perfected cybernetic man.

Robert Ranisch, the collection’s editor, is right to call much of the transhumanist movement fundamentally bioliberal. As such, transhumanism explicitly opposes all the relevant notions in the diverse philosophical traditions labelled posthumanism. N. Katherine Hayles, a writer quoted often in this collection, dismisses transhumanism as

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Zimmerman (2011). “Last Man or Overman?” *Integral Life* blog. Retrieved from <https://www.integrallife.com/integral-post/last-man-or-overman>. Accessed 13 December 2014.

too purely individualistic, a neo-liberal ideology that works toward a future of a radically enhanced humanity living in complete negative freedom.

Such negative freedom is the morphological freedom that Ranisch examines in his essay, “Morality.” Morphological freedom extends the liberal validation of negative freedom — conceived as freedom to do and to be whatever we want — into the context of human enhancement discourse. Thanks to human enhancements, we can be more kinds of organism and machine than we have ever been before, and develop greater powers than have ever existed.

### **A Vibrant Ideospace**

As for what these powers might eventually be, the transhumanist imagination has been as creative and unlimited in its imagery as that of science-fiction literature and media. So I was disappointed that Domna Pastourmazi’s essay in this book, “Science Fiction Literature,” was relatively limited in its scope of a cultural imaginary that has become genuinely global. She concentrates largely on particular canonical figures in science-fiction literature. Her eye does not even consider the contribution to human culture of the particularly vibrant imagery in television, comics, and film.

The paradigm concepts of transhumanism find their most vibrant early cinematic articulation in Fritz Lang’s masterpiece *Metropolis*, and the science-fiction film renaissance of the 1970s kept these ideas at the forefront of popular consciousness. It did not matter whether the imagery of the more-than-human came to us through high-concept intellectual cinema like *The Man Who Fell to Earth*, the campy comedy adventure of *Westworld* or *The Stepford Wives*, or the hallucinatory dreamscapes of *Fantastic Planet*. These ideas found an audience in humanity, and they continue to live.

The 1980s saw cinema shift its focus to dystopian action spectacles (*The Terminator*, *Demolition Man*), and the works of Canadian auteur David Cronenberg meditated on the sense of inevitable failure that accompanied the hubris of transhumanist experiments and visions. Television franchises kept the optimism of transhumanist ideas alive, though not without their own brands of critique and revision, in the popular culture of America with *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, and of Britain with *Doctor Who*. Japan gave the world *Dirty Pair*, *Cowboy Bebop*, *The Ghost in the Shell*, and *Akira*, among countless other films, comics, videos, and television series.

Also absent from Pastourmazi’s catalogue is the entire explosion of manic, vibrant invention in the Silver Age period of American superhero comics, which have injected transhumanism into the everyday imagination of schoolchildren for decades. What else is Tony Stark but the most insufferable bio-enhancement junkie? Captain America is little different, but with a nauseatingly egotistical sense of patriotism and a terrifying implicit endorsement of statist eugenics on top. The X-Men are themselves involuntarily enhanced transhumans.

Even within science-fiction literature itself, her essay makes no mention of innovators in dreams of human enhancement like Roger Zelazny, Stanislaw Lem, or the Strugatsky

brothers. Marcus Rockoff's essay "Literature" is at least kind enough to mention Mary Shelley and Margaret Atwood. The absence of Iain M. Banks particularly saddens me, as he sets the books of his Culture series in an explicitly transhumanist utopian paradise. The people of The Culture live a perfect bioliberal lifestyle: they change their genders, upload their minds into computers, androids, spaceships, entire planetoids, add and remove cybernetic and bio-enhanced body parts, all with the same ease that we change our hair colour.

### **The Transhumanist Eros: Onan**

Yet as Banks' novels depict a utopian world that would satisfy the desires of the giddiest transhumanist, that world is built on the galactic-scale dastardly realpolitik of the Culture's superpowerful rulers, the Minds. The sins of cold rationality underwrite paradise. Transhumanist promises themselves provoke skepticism that their dreams are even achievable by such trifling creatures as people.

Through Banks as through Nietzsche, the transhumanist vision of a perfected human nature explodes once again, a sad inevitability. Although Ranisch's collection contains the root idea as to why, it is to the book's detriment that too many of its authors never focus on that critical key, and remain dazzled by the shining spectre of a humanity that is beyond the human in all but the most fundamental and important way.

Hauskeller quotes a paradigm figure in contemporary intellectual transhumanism, Nick Bostrom, pitching the glory and wonder of a humanity remade in the image of his dreams. It will be a humanity whose every moment is constant "Pleasure! A few grains of this magic ingredient are dearer than a king's treasure, and we have it aplenty here in Utopia. It pervades everything we do and everything we experience. We sprinkle it in our tea."<sup>2</sup>

Fellow transhumanist David Pearce wrote a similar vision in the appropriately named *The Hedonistic Imperative*. The transhumanist future offers "sights more majestically beautiful, music more deeply soul-stirring, sex more exquisitely erotic . . . than anything we can now properly comprehend."<sup>3</sup> The stunning optimism of this vision offers a future for humanity that is wholly free from suffering.

If I may be allowed a moment of crudity, this makes the transhumanist vision seem no less petty than the most intense everlasting session of masturbation conceivable. A world of pure pleasure and sensuality with no suffering is a world where all our needs are satisfied with little more than a thought.

There is another moment in science-fiction media that shows the conclusion of such a world where toil and work is unnecessary: the obese fools of *Wall-E*'s generation ship. Their organic components are blobs of fat and bone, and their cybernetic chairs and

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<sup>2</sup> Nick Bostrom (2010): "Letter from Utopia." Retrieved from <http://www.nickbostrom.com/utopia.pdf>. Accessed 13 December 2014.

<sup>3</sup> David Pearce (1995): *The Hedonistic Imperative*. Retrieved from <http://www.hedweb.com>. Accessed 13 December 2014.

armies of robots cater to their every pleasure. Their true utopia arrives when they cast their robotic guardians aside to rebuild the ruined ecologies of Earth through personal toil and labour.

### **All Too Human**

For a human to improve herself, suffering, toil, frustration, and struggle against the limitations of one's powers are necessary. I do not mean this in the patronizing sense that the idle rich often tell the poor to work for a living while they buy Dubai condos on fortunes inherited twice over. Bostrom, as Hauskeller describes in his essay, thought this was what Nietzsche meant when the German disparaged the socialist movements of his day and praised the nobility and 'higher men.'

I refer instead to the tough work of athletic training and the physiological knowledge of the human machine required for genuine organic physical perfection. I refer instead to the reordering of one's mind and even brain through the force of will and repetition of practice to carry out the most complicated mathematics. I refer instead to the depth and skill of conceptual reflection that must be developed to understand and contribute to a civilization's tradition of great philosophical and literary works. These are the strivers who Nietzsche praised as the true nobles of humanity.

The realization of the transhumanist vision is a society without striving, where we plug machines into our bodies to do all the hard work for us. The transhumanist does not want to become better; he wants magical machines to make him better without having to try, without having to risk failure. The transhumanist says he is a democrat because he knows how rare genius is, and wants all people to reap its benefits, so imagines biotechnological enhancements for all. But a true democrat would hold fast to the idealism that all people can be brilliant if they are able to try.

### **“Man Is That Which Must Be Surpassed!”**

The liberal idea that we must all be free from forces that would harm us or limit us lies at the centre of the transhumanist dream. It is a dream of a world where cybernetic enhancements will free us to be as weak as we can be. Bostrom may hold himself above Nietzsche's standard, but that is only because he is too blind to understand any of Nietzsche's thought at all, just as Tuncel's essay relegates him to such petty questions as whether he would use a cybernetic eye.

There is a task more profound even than the strivings for self-improvement that I discussed above. Its nature lies in the reasons why Nietzsche despised who he did. He could see the resentment that fuelled the socialist movements of his era: many individual activists were not truly interested in building a transformed society, but in taking over the oppressive apparatus of the state to crush those who had oppressed them. For every Pierre Proudhon and Mikhail Bakunin who worked toward a genuinely free society, there were thousands of Vladimir Lenins and Sergey Nechaevs who dreamed only of becoming new, more violent bosses.

Far from lionizing the landed aristocracy, as Bostrom accuses with such insipidly willful ignorance, Nietzsche thought them all inbred twits who slaughtered thousands in wars for the sake of vanity and riches. Posthumanism is not, as virtually all the authors in this collection proclaim, a purely critical tradition. Nietzsche's noble men were truly posthuman.

Where humanity is petty, small-minded, and hatefully seethes against those it sees accessing the most juvenile pleasures, the most noble person of the best posthumanist visions overcomes all these base desires that enslave us to our snarling, resentful impulses. Pity those who seek an end to all suffering, because they cannot feel the joy in self-discipline. Laugh at those who define enlightenment and progress in terms of pleasure alone, because they are as ridiculous as pigs wallowing in mud and gemstones.

Pastourmazi quotes Walter Mosley on the supposedly liberating power of technology. "I think that the idea that technology is going to liberate us is false. All you have to do is look at the fifty-year span between 1950 and the year 2000. The amount of technological advance in those years that should open up people's lives is immense . . . It certainly didn't liberate us."

All the technological enhancements in the world will not liberate us if we still live from the same resentful, base, and petty ethics that too many of us still do.

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