

Meditations on a Theme: A Review of Steve Fuller's *Nietzschean Meditations*

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¹ Author's Note: Desmond Hewitt completed his PhD in Sociology at the University of Warwick in 2014. While a doctoral student, he taught at Warwick and also at the University of Aston. His PhD was entitled, 'Excellence in Critical Condition: the current state of English higher education'. He conducted a critical discourse analysis of successive governments reviews into higher education, focusing on 'excellence', and what it means to those in higher education who administer the university. Tracing excellence back to Aristotle and the concept of *eudaemonia*—not simply defined as 'happiness' or even 'flourishing', but as our desire to fly above the clouds. The thesis argued that the Enlightenment notion of endless development was alive and well in higher education—perhaps 'transhumanism' without calling it so.

Nietzschean Meditations: Untimely Thoughts at the Dawn of the Transhuman Era

Steve Fuller

Schwabe Verlag, 2019

pp. 240

At the time of writing this review, Steve Fuller's latest book appears in the face of what the World Health Organisation (WHO) now officially describes as a pandemic. By pure coincidence, the threat posed by Coronavirus or Covid-19 to humanity highlights many themes in *Nietzschean Meditations: Untimely Thoughts at the Dawn of the Transhumanist Era*. Fuller's latest book follows on from his previous work on his 'project humanity 2.0'; Fuller positions himself in the category of 'proactionary ultra-Enlightenment follower, dare to know, risk taking humanity, not precautionary anti-Enlightenment, or with those who feel the exploitation of the planet and nature has gone too far, more akin to posthumanism than transhumanism.

Thus Fuller defines his own transhumanist project as one which conceptualizes the state of the world, environment, politics etc. as changed, perhaps so irrevocably, that space maybe the next if not the final frontier; we may end up deciding that we would rather die (themes developed in a section Fuller entitles 'necropolitics') and have our brains suspended in silicone and uploaded to space in a future reincarnation or perhaps just die by lifting the taboo on suicide as a gift to the remaining population; perhaps a virtual life in space will seem desirable once and if the pandemic passes if only to avoid another apocalyptic experience.

Fuller ends his book with a final chapter called "Mass Extinction and Creative Destruction", employing theorists and evolutionists from Schopenhauer, Marx and Darwin to Dawkins; a favourite target of Fuller's. Given the focus on death (and our own precarious present), mass extinction and creative destruction are self-explanatory, as is the focus on genetic sequencing—for a cure and for a future beyond a possible cryogenic stasis. Fuller's work is obviously designed to shock, however, as the introduction to this review suggests, these thoughts may not in fact be untimely but very apposite. Fuller is an existentialist and all his work goes beyond many of the traditional debates on what it means to be alive in this world and what if anything it has left to offer us.

However, Fuller's book does traverse the very different meanings attributed by people to the word 'transhuman', particularly the one that transcends the binary construction of sex and gender by the transgender community. So what is so Nietzschean in character about Fuller's book? It is certainly not, as he himself points out, tainted Heideggerian interpretation of Nietzsche, but rather his early work, *Thus Spake Zarathustra*. Here Nietzsche pronounces that God is dead, whence the notion of *Übermensch*—'overman'—comes. Indeed, at play is what it is to be human, period—regardless of the monotheistic notions of "man" made in God's image or imperfect "man" after the Original Sin and "The Fall". In the process, Fuller considers what we might become or want to be possible in the face of a world teetering from the onslaught of environmental disaster, populist politics and now the coronavirus.

Politics and Music

Fuller takes a novel approach to politics bisecting left and right into up-wingers and down-wingers, although the two are not mutually exclusive: the down wingers on the left include community bottom up socialists such as Jeremy Corbyn in the UK and Bernie Sanders in the US, as well as right traditionalists. Fuller counts himself among the left up-wingers, the left technocrats, although right wing libertarians also belong to this category. It is perhaps ironic that in an earlier work, *Academic Caesar: University Leadership is Hard*, Fuller argued that politics had worked itself into an irrelevance and the precautionary and proactionary camps would replace left and right.

The response to the pandemic, at least in the West has been a “top-down”, up-wing approach complemented with a bottom-up community, voluntary action. It is extremely unlikely (perhaps arguably) that once the pandemic is over the world will embrace socialism; and what Fuller has described as “green Marxism” (a precautionary animal rights focused posthumanist movement) to defend the delicate ecology of the world, including animals and the rights of, which Fuller also engages with as an aspect of transhumanism. Indeed, the precautionary approach is precisely what Fuller does not want and argues against, and given the catastrophe enveloping us all, scientific risk-taking on humans and, animals seems highly desirable.

Fuller states in the introduction to his book that he listened to the Cream back catalogue on repeat while writing—so to mirror this approach I listened to [“Is God a Man”](#) by Arthur and the Comets, an old punk track, a parody of the very notion of God (this will of course be returned to later), which Nietzsche and Enlightenment philosophes such as Voltaire, who Fuller cites, could have to have written themselves.

I also listened to Hawkwind (AKA: Agents of Chaos), the psychedelic space rock band. Of most pertinence to one of Fuller’s central themes was the track by them called: [“The Damage of Life”](#). The lyrics corresponding most to the situation facing the world at the moment is: “wander round the streets so lonely and empty, lost in the crowd but I can’t hide, is there a place where I can escape to, a desert island where I can die; the damage of life is never ending, there’s no escape and we can’t hide, maybe our times up and we don’t want to, face up to the fact there’s little that’s life; a sobering if accurate reflection of our times. However, on a positive note, and a reflection of Fuller’s work another track by the band called [“Assault and Battery”](#) comes to mind, which to paraphrase goes something like this: “The lives of great men all remind us we may make our lives sublime and departing leave behind us footprints in the sands of time let us try to remember the times they were at”. Fuller makes no apology for his Dead White Male (DWM) approach and in fact challenges those in the academy who refuse any debate which goes against the *Zeitgeist*.

On the State of the Academy

Fuller takes on the academy in a typically forthright way and cites his own experience in defending the right of creationists against the Darwinian evolutionary brigade in and outside higher education. He also takes more than a swipe and critical theorists and ‘Critical Theory’—or academic or “cultural” Marxism—which he brands “zombie” Marxism on the grounds that the closed knowledge protected rent-seeking world of the university has closed

its mind to new paradigms and the more ‘dangerous’ ideas Fuller puts forward in characteristically erudite fashion.

This is particularly the case with the theological underpinnings of his writing, which not only unpack anew what Nietzsche did, but demonstrate Fuller’s interest and indeed his own education: One has to remember that Fuller was educated by Jesuit priests, a fact I know as a former student of his. I also know that although he is an atheist he believes strongly that what makes us different from animals is that we have a soul—as aspect of transhumanism returned to in the conclusion of this review. And as a former student, I have to declare an interest, or perhaps more accurately, a conflict of interest, as my own work has been mainly written from the perspective of the Frankfurt School—my doctoral thesis on “excellence” in higher education was written from a Habermasian perspective, representing the second generation of the school. Fuller argues that the emancipatory project of the Frankfurt School was best represented by Marcuse but ended with Adorno and Horkheimer’s admission of a self-negating project under the totalizing all-embracing and closed project of capitalism. However, and although Fuller discusses “recognition” several times in the context of identity, crucial to the many forms of transhumanism, he neglects Axel Honneth from the third generation of the Frankfurt School, who developed this concept, so while accepting the general criticism, not all Marxism can be argued to be “zombie” like, that is dead. Perhaps incidentally, Marcuse arguably ended his own project in 1977 with the publication of *The Aesthetic Dimension: Toward a Critique of Marxist Aesthetics*.

However these are minor criticisms and Fuller’s wider point on how the populist right has tainted and even co-opted this school and deviations of Marxism under the rubric of cultural Marxism stands, as does the argument on the Ivory Tower that the university has become. Indeed as indicated above, it is Fuller’s exploration of ideas, arguably not heard enough in the university, that makes this book the original work it is; is the exploration of what it is to be human and indeed, re: suicide, whether we want to be part of a ‘brave new world’ in which scientific and personal risk-taking are a prerequisite, as are the sections on computers, the desirability of these as a central if not predominant part of our society and indeed, bodies (the Turing test is mentioned a number of times).

Reconsidering Nietzsche

In conclusion, it might be worth reconsidering Nietzsche’s contention that “God is dead” as after, all meditations on this theorist’s concept of the *Übermensch* is at the heart of Fuller’s work. So utilizing the song title by Arthur and the Comics above, we can invert the question is God a man to ask is man a god, an overman or does he, she have a soul? Moreover, what insight does Fuller’s work give into the future. Did he get ‘lucky’ with the coronavirus or is his work prescient as his pre Covid-19 writing on Humanity 2.0 suggests? I would say the latter and that far from simply being fortuitous, (I admit this is slightly distasteful), Fuller read the runes correctly sometime ago.

Our time on this planet, at least in the bodies we inhabit now may well be over, and far from being seen as ‘Zombies’ as Fuller says in his conclusion transhumanists are by the rest of society; a cyborg or in stasis cryogenically frozen body awaiting rebirth as a brain in silicone

in space or here on what remains of earth may seem pretty normal in the not too distant future. Does this mean we won't have a soul and long for all the human indulgences that make us different from a divine being. Of course not but they will be different pleasures, perhaps in mind and not body.

The song 'Is God a Man' cited above ends something like this after debating rather lewdly about what God might get up to if he was like a 'man': "Is that him standing at the back of the dole queue? I dunno. You see, I gave the old bastard his cards years ago, I'm not interested in theology but good old human biology, pulchritude, look that one up!". Thus, if we keep our souls the appreciation of aesthetics will indeed continue, and doubtless the desire to keep that Enlightenment goal alive: dare to know more and be more, which in sum is Fuller's novel contribution at this very difficult point in our history. Indeed, and finally, and as Fuller himself shows through his employment of Schumpeter and Marx, the creative destruction and evolutionary motor of capitalism may at last be in the process of setting us free from our earthly bonds!