*Last Man or Overman?*

*Transhuman Appropriations of a Nietzschean Theme*

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[T]he existence on earth of an animal soul turned against itself, taking sides against itself, was something so new, profound, unheard of, enigmatic, *and pregnant with a future* that the aspect of the earth was essentially altered.

Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Genealogy of Morals*[[1]](#endnote--1)(1887)

*Singularity*, n: The moment when technological change becomes so rapid and profound, it represents a rupture in the fabric of human history.

Lev Grossman, “2045: The Year Man Becomes Immortal,” *Time*, February 21, 2011

In *The Singularity Is Near*, multimillionaire inventor, software designer, and futurist Ray Kurzweil predicts that in a few decades humans will create artificial intelligence with vastly greater intelligence than our own.[[2]](#endnote-0) In astrophysics, a “singularity” refers to a stellar black whole, the enormous gravitational field of which prevents light from escaping. In futurism, the Singularity refers to the emergence of intelligence so great that mere mortals will not be able to catch a glimpse of its aims. In this presumed turning point in cosmic evolution, we will pass the evolutionary baton to post-organic beings, progeny of whom we may be proud, astonished, and perhaps fearful. What Kurzweil calls the “accelerating returns” made possible by the confluence of nanotechnology, artificial intelligence, robotics, and genetic engineering will ostensibly transform the world far more rapidly than we can imagine. “Transhumans” (transitional humans) will soon be engineered to have greatly enhanced capacities and a dramatically extended life span. They will purportedly blaze the trail for what I will call “techno-posthumans,” in whom a *trace* of the human may remain, but we may not be able to recognize it.

Certain postmoderns have talked for years about impending posthumanism, but they did not have in mind the literal eclipse of *Homo sapiens* by artificial beings. Friedrich Nietzsche, perhaps the first postmodernist, *did* have his Zarathustra say: “What is great in man is that he is a bridge and not a goal….” *The* goal posited by Zarathustra is the Overman. Many Singulatarians claim Nietzsche’s idea of the Overman as a forerunner of their own extraordinary goal. In what follows, we examine the plausibility of such an appropriation. Can humans successfully intervene in evolution in order to generate beings somehow comparable to what Nietzsche had in mind? How might the sensibility of a late 19th century German philosopher, atheist son of a Lutheran minister and self-confessed decadent modern, resonate with the sensibility of 21st century Silicon Valley engineers, scientists, futurists, and others who are not inclined to program asceticism either into their own lives or into their creations?

I once regarded modern technology primarily with suspicion, as posing multiple threats to humankind and the biosphere. What Martin Heidegger spoke of as the highly constricted, technological understanding of being, others called “The System,” which was reducing humans to the status of the most important raw material in the relentless quest for power for its own sake. The techno-industrial System was not serving human ends; instead, humans were serving *it*. According to Heidegger, a rebirth of humanism would not prevent such ontological damnation; indeed, humanism helped to make it possible.[[3]](#endnote-1) Variants of this overstated view remain influential. For instance, many environmentalists condemn anthropocentric humanism as an arrogant pose that justifies exploitation of the biosphere. Conservatives, whether humanists or monotheists, warn of the *hubris* involved in the quest to create super posthuman intelligence, while progressive humanists, such as Jürgen Habermas, caution about the rise of a new technically enabled class structure.[[4]](#endnote-2) Dystopic sci-fi films and novels that explore techno-posthumans do not portray much of a future for humankind, much less for humanism. A common conceit: Scientists invent super beings intended to serve us, but they develop aims of their own, aims that require either our subjugation or extermination. They are not often depicted as having much sympathy for humans.

Most of those who propose to replace humans with something better envision a positive future, although some acknowledge that serious risks may be involved.[[5]](#endnote-3)*.* Some variants of transhumanism, then, are motivated—at least on the surface--by such humanistic ideals as decreasing human suffering and increasing the prospects for widespread human happiness. Such goals are shared by the utilitarian modern, whom Nietzsche called contemptuously “the last man.” Most transhumanists, however, propose an additional goal that resonates far more with Nietzsche’s thought. Transhuman beings are often envisioned as having not only greater intelligence, but also the increased aesthetic, moral, athletic, and experiential capacities necessary for *superior individuals*. Techno-posthumans go even further: they want to bring forth god-like immortals, capable of undertaking projects far beyond the capacity of even the most advanced transhuman, such as making the whole universe self-conscious. In what follows, I bracket the hotly contested question of whether creating advanced transhumans, let alone techno-posthumans, is technically feasible.

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“Humanism” arose in the Italian Renaissance, which recovered classical texts and artifacts, and revivified such pagan ideals as the creative and self-assertive individual. Later, humanism fed into other early modern conversations demanding individual liberty and representative government. Humanism has also been used in a variety of other ways, for instance, to encourage appreciation of Greek and Roman classics, written in an age allegedly superior to our own; to foster a love for what is specifically human; and to describe a virtuous way of life without reference to the supernatural. To be “humane” also came to mean caring not only for people in distress, but for animals as well.

Although inflected by humanism, modern subjectivity diverges from humanisms that contrast modern times invidiously with classical civilization, that are suspicious of “progress,” and that regard human nature as fixed. The central idea of modern subjectivity is freedom, both freedom for and freedom from. Moderns proclaimed: away with all self-imposed boundaries that block free inquiry, freedom regarding religious belief and disbelief, self-expression, self-definition, autonomy, and development of all-around human potential! Many of these proclamations also show up in contemporary transhumanist manifestos, many of which are libertarian in their political orientation.

Cultural conservatives have long maintained that excessive individual freedom amounts to a license for self-assertion and self-indulgence, whereby lower drives displace nobler aspirations. Soviet Marxist and National Socialism made bids to eradicate bourgeois (individual) subjectivity in favor of collectivistic projects that promised vastly better societies. According to some critics, totalitarianism nakedly manifested the drive to domination that is allegedly modernity’s open secret. Liberal democracies, we are told, mask this drive by holding elections, but the eventual outcome will be the same: techno-industrial subjugation both humankind and the planet. We may have dodged the bullet of nuclear Armageddon, but trans- and techno-posthumanism will lead to our self-destruction.

Largely rejecting such gloomy forecasts, transhumanist maintain that the best times lie ahead. Max More, a leading transhumanist, affirms humanist values, but recognizes that these will obtain *only so long as humans prevail*. Still to come are posthumans and posthumanist values. In “On Becoming Posthuman” (1994), More writes:

Life and intelligence should never stagnate; it can re-order, transform and transcend its limits in an unlimited progression. Let our goal be the exuberant and dynamic continuation of this boundless process. …. A true humanist goal--an extropian goal--is our own expansion and progress without end. Humanity must not stagnate: to halt our burgeoning move forward, upward, outward, would be a betrayal of the dynamic inherent in life and consciousness. Let us progress on into a posthuman stage that we can barely glimpse.

[….] Humanity is a temporary stage along the evolutionary pathway. We are not the zenith of nature's development. It is time for us to consciously take charge of ourselves and to accelerate our transhuman progress.

No more gods, no more faith, no more timid holding back. Let us blast out of our old forms, our ignorance, our weakness, and our mortality. The future belongs to post humanity.[[6]](#endnote-4)

In his essay, More cites part of this well known passage from Nietzsche’s *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*:

I teach you the Overman! Mankind is something to be overcome. What have you done to overcome mankind?

All beings so far have created something beyond themselves. Do you want to be the ebb of that great tide, and revert back to the beast rather than overcome mankind? What is the ape to a man? A laughing-stock, a thing of shame. And just so shall a man be to the Overman: a laughing-stock, a thing of shame.

You have evolved from worm to man, but much within you is still worm. Once you were apes, yet even now man is more of an ape than any of the apes.

Man is a rope stretched between the animal and the Overman -- a rope over an abyss.

A dangerous crossing, a dangerous wayfaring, a dangerous looking-back, a dangerous trembling and halting.

What is great in man is that he is a bridge and not a goal: what is lovable in man is that he is an over-going and a down-going.[[7]](#endnote-5)

Presumably just as humans would be a laughing stock for the Overman, so too un-enhanced humans may be a laughing stock for our transhuman and techno-posthuman successors, the latter of whom may be millions or even billions of times more intelligent than we are. Some transhumanists, perhaps wary of the dark political uses to which Nietzsche’s thought has at times been put, insist that there are only superficial similarities between the Overman and the transhuman.[[8]](#endnote-6) Others, however, call on tropes inspired by Nietzsche, as when Mitchell Porter opines:

[W]e’re midway in the chain of being from microbe to megamind, a turning point but not an endpoint. We are a turning point, among other reasons, because of our technology: we are the first organisms to leave the planet, to discover fundamental laws, to tinker with our brains and genes. But this is surely only the start of the auto evolutionary process. I would not expect it to stabilize until we arrived at, say, a galaxy full of Jupiter-brains, all bent on projects that would mostly be incomprehensible to us.[[9]](#endnote-7)

Some people maintain that Nietzsche’s views are incompatible with transhumanism and especially techno-posthumanism, but others argue that he would be intrigued by such developments. They might not be *his* way forward, but could we not imagine him conceding that they might be *our* way? Before trying to answer such a question, let us first review Nietzsche’s complex view of humanism, which was influenced by the 19th century Basel historian, Jakob Burckhardt. In attempting to explain the Italian Renaissance, Burckhardt took into account the multitude of factors—in particular, art—that form, motivate, and maintain all significant cultures. Nietzsche’s first book, *The Birth of Tragedy out of the Spirit of Music* (1872), was influenced by Burckhardt’s “cultural” history. Nietzsche argued that tragic art enacted the tension between the Apollonian and Dionysian elements of ancient Greek culture. The young Nietzsche hoped that Wagnerian grand opera might provide the work of art necessary to rejuvenate a decadent Europe. Rejecting modernity’s progressive narratives, Nietzsche contended that Europe had long been under the influence of “slave morality,” invented by the Jews and promulgated by Christianity. What passed for humanism in 19th century Europe was not the creative, passionate, and agonistic individualism that animated Renaissance artists, thinkers, statesmen, and even some Roman clerics, but rather a pity-motivated, secularized version of slave morality which renounced cultivation of great individuals in favor of promoting the well being of the “herd.”

According to Nietzsche, the death of God freed Europeans from the limits imposed by theology, but also set them adrift on a horizonless sea. Natural science undermined the credibility of the supernatural, but in the process shattered human dignity by reducing us to the status of clever animals living on an insignificant planet in the middle of nowhere. Natural science cannot invent values, defined as the perspectives that a people needs in order to assert and to justify itself. Lacking the vigor required to create a powerful work of art from which such values could emanate, effeminate moderns remain under the baleful influence of ascetic slave morality. Faced with this desperate situation, Nietzsche proposed a new kind of artwork, the creation of which could unify and revivify Europe: the Overman(*der Übermensch*). He rarely spoke of Over*men*, but usually of the Over*man*, better translated as the Over*human*. Acutely aware that moderns were not in tune with ancient Greek and Roman aspirations, Nietzsche hoped that his aesthetic goal could appeal to people at different levels of spiritual development. Could the goal of creating an overpowering work of art in the form of a sublime race new human type overcome European decadence and nihilism? Would skillful, intelligent, and flexible craftsmen and scientists, who abound in democratic societies, be willing to help lay the foundations for posthumans so glorious that they would evoke admiration and awe? Presented with the goal of the Overhuman, could a number of such people abandon the last man’s goals of security and comfort?

Although many trans- and techno-posthumans would presumably answer such questions in the affirmative, many Nietzsche scholars would disagree for several reasons. First, transhumanists posit greater human life spans and even immortality as key goals. Nietzsche, however, was not interested in life extension, but rather in learning to die at the right time. Speaking through his prophet, Zarathustra, he called for a non-resentful relationship to time and thus mortality, a relationship that abjures all hope for an otherworldly eternal afterlife. According to Zarathustra, the way to the Overman involves digesting the most difficult truth, namely, “the eternal return of the same.” Here, one must say “Yes!” to life, down to its smallest detail, as it has already been lived an infinite number of times. Just as the human arose by embracing the ascetic ideal, so too the Overhuman would arise by surpassing that ideal and its related *ressentiment*.

*Thus Spoke Zarathustra* is inconclusive about whether such an ideal is attainable. Nietzsche admitted that he himself was akin to the decadent, redemption-promising ascetic priests of which he was so critical. Hence, when he says that the Overman, “this man of the future,” will “redeem us,” there are good reasons for us to be suspicious.[[10]](#endnote-8) Arguably, Nietzsche’s gravest concern was cultural suicide, prompted by *the lack of a motivating goal.* Was he ironic when proposing a goal that would overcome the asceticism that shaped him and continued to provide at least *some* justification for European culture? Could he take seriously a goal that would require a spiritual struggle that decadent moderns were not prepared to undertake? Drawn to ancient Greek efforts to overcome their black pessimism, Nietzsche may have created in Zarathustra an avatar that enacted the tragic struggle of a hyper-sensitive modern seeking to justify and ennoble his own existence. In creating and witnessing Zarathustra’s struggle, then, Nietzsche may have adopted the position of a Greek god toward the travails of a mortal. As a work of art, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* provided a healing balm for Nietzsche’s eyes and perhaps for a few other eyes gazing with him into the abyss opened up by the death of God.

A quintessential classical humanist, Nietzsche was a master of Greek and Latin philology, an admirer of the Italian Renaissance, and a fierce proponent of the individual *arête* needed to confer pride, to invite admiration, and to provide motivation for others. Although caring about the fate of humankind, he hoped that humankind would willingly “go under” so that something still greater could arise. His prophet Zarathustra envisions a possibility that may lie just beyond the grasp of the human, however.s Perhaps this is why he wrote of his Zarathustra, “*Incipit tragoedia*,” let the tragedy begin.[[11]](#endnote-9) Nietzsche may well have concluded that there could be no Overhuman, not merely because of the obstacle posed by decadent moderns, the exhausted last men. Rather, the human animal may be *essentially* ascetic, incapable of the self-overcoming needed to generate from itself a new posthuman race.

Another objection to using the Overman to justify trans- and techno-posthumanism is that the latter are expressions of the modern drive to overcome limits not by spiritual struggle, but rather by gaining control of nature. Despite his renunciation of the otherworldly, Nietzsche presumably had something quite different in mind than planetary conquest and inventing techno-posthumans when he had Zarathustra say that humankind must “remain faithful to the Earth.” According to Heidegger’s influential but controversial interpretation, however, Nietzsche’s thought heralds technological nihilism by bringing to a culmination the Will to Power that has long animated Western civilization.[[12]](#endnote-10) Even if one disagrees with Heidegger’s interpretation, there is no denying that Nietzsche regarded the quest for power as central to all life. If the clever human life form were to project its power in the form of technologically advanced, artificial offspring, would Nietzsche offer a principled objection, and if so, what would be its basis? What objection would the *apes* have made to the humans who left them behind? The apes could not have known what it *cost* their primate cousins to move on up. Do posthumanists really comprehend the costs that would be incurred by bringing forth what amount to super beings?

As a humanist who affirmed the sacrifice involved in achieving anything great, Nietzsche’s encounter with great art was always a stereoscopic experience. His emotions were triggered by the work, but they were also enhanced by the simultaneous appreciation of *what it must have taken* to bring that work into being. What instinctual energy had to be channeled in order to carve *that* out of marble, or to compose *that* for a symphony orchestra? This is *ascetic humanism*: To paint the picture, to compose the opera, to create the powerful new scientific theory, to fashion of myself a work of art, I must be willing to forego mere happiness to achieve what I have been destined to create. Nietzsche’s conviction that suffering can ennoble and transform may well have made him leery of transhumans, if they are somehow able to *bypass the additional spiritual work and attendant suffering* supposedly required to transcend the human. Without pain, how could there be spiritual gain?[[13]](#endnote-11)

Such a question might have had more traction in a previous era, but if neurophysiological reprogramming becomes possible, we may ask: *Must* people still submit themselves to ascetic torments, which Nietzsche himself abhorred, in order to surpass the merely human? Why not discover the brain-mind conditions consistent with steely courage, enormous creativity, and wise compassion, and then engineer these into transhumans, perhaps along with artificial memories, if needed, as in the case of the replicants in *Blade Runner*? And what of techno-posthumans *who would never have engaged in ascetic practices in the first* place? Initially, Nietzsche might have regarded such prospects with contempt and consternation, but could we not imagine him coming around—with an enormous laugh?

The Overhuman has become a projection screen for those with agendas other than Nietzsche’s, as in the case perhaps of trans- and techno-posthumanists. Nietzsche could hardly object to this, given Zarathustra’s admonition to his followers that they find their own way, rather than slavishly adhering to his. Hans Blumenberg writes that Nietzsche believed that *artistic* self-overcoming could allow someone to leave behind the domineering modes of self-assertion characteristic of technological modernity.[[14]](#endnote-12) Blumenberg adds, however:

That technique also could surpass the character of pure self-assertion, that it could not only disguise the element of need but even eliminate it in the immanence of becoming an end in itself, that it could break out of competition with nature’s accomplishments and *present itself as authentic realit*y, was still beyond the horizon of experience at the time.[[15]](#endnote-13)

Nietzsche could not have foreseen the specific developments that may make possible posthumans who are increasingly independent of biological needs, and who use vast technological means to sculpt themselves into artistic expressions of power. Yet, he was well aware of the Hermetic *magus* who dreamt of acquiring the knowledge needed to turn humans into gods. Of *this* version of humanism, which informs trans- and techno-posthumanism, Nietzsche writes:

*Preludes of science*--Do you really believe that the sciences would ever have originated and grown if the way had not been prepared by magicians, alchemists, astrologers, and witches whose promises and pretensions first had to create a thirst, a hunger, a taste for *hidden* and *forbidden* powers? Indeed, infinitely more had to be *promised* than could ever be fulfilled in order that anything at all might be fulfilled in the realm of knowledge.[[16]](#endnote-14)

Pre-modern and early modern alchemists and magicians yearned for powers over nature that would fulfill humankind’s destiny of becoming terrestrial gods*.* Stephen A. McNight has argued that those yearnings did not vanish in the “epistemological break” that supposedly divided late medieval practices from those of early modern science. Instead, “esoteric traditions strongly affected Renaissance intellectual developments that contributed to the Scientific Revolution….”[[17]](#endnote-15) The rediscovery of supposedly ancient, pre-Christian sacred manuscripts, especially the *Corpus Hermeticum*, created a sensation among Renaissance intellectuals and artists. According to McKnight, the “new understanding of human nature” as headed toward terrestrial godhood was articulated by Renaissance thinkers such as Ficino and Pico, embraced by sixteenth and seventeenth century figures such as Agrippa, Bruno, and Campanella, and eventually found expression in “the utopian themes of three patriarchs of modernity: Bacon, Comte, and Marx.”[[18]](#endnote-16) Hegel, too, must now be added to this list.[[19]](#endnote-17)

The important role played by esoteric traditions in the formation modernity partly disconfirms Blumenberg’s thesis that modernity is not merely an illegitimate secularization of religious ideals, but instead posited goals of its own. Karl Löwith, in his “secularization” thesis, had argued that moderns had taken over many of the ideals of Christianity, but had made themselves rather than God the historical agents needed to build the earthly New Jerusalem. Löwith insisted, however, that essential human *finitude* precludes any successful outcome to efforts to turn humans into God.[[20]](#endnote-18) According to Blumenberg, however, the erosion of the Biblical narrative forced moderns to “reoccupy” positions to which Christianity had once offered answers. Moderns realized that they would have to develop worldly goals and values to survive in an indifferent universe. Blumenberg—writing in the 1960s—was not yet aware of the roles that esoteric traditions played in establishing the goals of modernity.[[21]](#endnote-19) To disregard such goals in order to establish a monochromatic secularizing pattern, McKnight writes, “is as ‘illegitimate’ as the effort to derive modernity solely from a misconstruction of Christian *Heilsgeschichte* [salvation history].”[[22]](#endnote-20)

Blumenberg is right that the Christian promise of otherworldly fulfillment via divine intervention (grace) differs profoundly from modernity’s vision of “innerworldly fulfillment.”[[23]](#endnote-21) The Ancient Wisdom traditions rediscovered in the Renaissance were not otherworldly, however. Instead, they offered “an inherently immanentist view of man and society…. Moreover, this pattern contains fundamental elements of modern consciousness and can be documented as a key shaping force from the fifteenth century *to the present*.”[[24]](#endnote-22) Blumenberg, then, fails to justify his claim that the idea of modern progress is secular, not informed by religious discourse.

Early modern advocates of esoteric traditions used the idea of “sacralization” to challenge existing theological and metaphysical views, along with the political arrangements supported thereby. Whereas secularization emphasizes human autonomy from God and the sacred, and usually assumes that God is wholly Other, “Sacralization transforms the secular realm to the point where it is indistinguishable from the sacred. Man becomes God, and society becomes an earthly paradise.”[[25]](#endnote-23) Early modern Hermeticism conceived of humanity as a divine co-creator: “The divine, rather than being remote from the world, is immanent in it, working with man to complete the creation and perfect human existence.”[[26]](#endnote-24) Divine immanence, however, as many realized, does not exclude the possibility of divine transcendence as well. Theologians used the term “panentheism” to describe the Divine as both transcending Creation, but also being present within it. This is one way of understanding the theological significance of the God-man, Jesus Christ.

Kurzweil’s techno-posthumanism is a variant of Hermetic humanism. In his view, humans are an important, but by no means the final vehicle in the lengthy evolutionary process by which matter becomes first alive, then self-conscious, and finally achieves the status of immanent Divinity. After transforming themselves into virtual immortals, Kurzweil prophesizes, techno-posthumanists will begin colonizing the Milky Way galaxy on the way to recreating the universe in their own image. Kurzweil envisions the Singularity as fulfilling an ancient religious hope, namely, redeeming the universe from suffering and ignorance, and transforming it into a self-conscious whole.[[27]](#endnote-25) “Once we saturate the matter and energy in the universe with intelligence, it will ‘wake up,’ be conscious, and sublimely intelligent. That’s about as close to God as I can imagine.”[[28]](#endnote-26)

Such God-talk does not sit well with atheistic trans- and post-humanists. Riccardo Campa, for instance, warns that the idea of the Singularity may give rise to a new salvation religion, the God of which will presumably even be able to resurrect the dead.[[29]](#endnote-27) Kurzweil insists, however, that the techno-posthuman aim can be achieved only by the intention, intelligence, and effort of human beings who want to contribute to a new stage in cosmic evolution. The Singularity is not an excuse to wait for salvation, but rather the opportunity to pass the baton to those mighty ones who will succeed us.[[30]](#endnote-28)

Stefan Sorgner argues that techno-posthumanism gives purpose to a growing number of scientists, engineers, and inventors who want to contribute to the most stupendous invention since the emergence of self-conscious mind. They want to alter the face of the universe by parenting god-like posthumans*.*[[31]](#endnote-29) Far from being last men content to make a low-risk and low-suffering “happy” life universally available, many posthumanists align themselves with Nietzsche’s own proposal for breeding higher types: to set in place conditions needed for the next stage of evolution to emerge intentionally, rather than accidentally. Posthumans hope that an increasing number of people will elect to take part in a world-changing adventure that allows our successors to sail far beyond what passes today for the Pillars of Hercules.

Of course, it is not difficult to see why feminist critics might discern in this project the yearning by modern “man” to become, in effect, mothers of the new God, thus displacing Mary, but also to replace the imperfect human body with one capable of attaining total mastery over nature, time, and consciousness. Despite his at best problematic attitude toward women, Nietzsche would probably agree with some of these concerns. Arguably, however, he would also have been intrigued by the possibility of inventing beings that may be *better than us.*  How admirably dangerous, how worthy, how grand, he might say—proposing not only to create humanity’s most incredible work of art and science, but also in the process to roll the dice as to whether such superior post-humans will prove human-friendly. Surely, however, such a high-stakes gamble that could alter the human future should become the topic for widespread conversation. How far down this road should posthumanists be allowed to travel before others have a say in what is being prepared?

Edward Boyden, a canny MIT neuroscientist maintains that super-intelligence alone will not suffice to make possible truly extraordinary posthumans. Instead, “The ability to pursue a goal doggedly against obstacles, ignoring the grimness of reality (sometimes even to the point of delusion—i.e., against intelligence) is also important.”[[32]](#endnote-30) Without building in motivation, perhaps Nietzsche would call it “Will to Power,” to go along with intelligent-enhancement, we might end up creating beings who can come up with so many possibilities that paralysis results. Indeed, perhaps some techno-posthumans will need to create a work of art of their own, one that allows them to stare into the abyss of cosmic meaninglessness, while providing the values or power-perspectives needed to forge ahead with projects unimaginable to us. We might ask whether such a need would make them human, all too human.

In the end, of course, it doesn’t matter whether or not Nietzsche would have approved of the aims of trans- and techno-posthumanism. Appealing to his thought provides a kind of intellectual cover and *panache* for people who aim to create trans- and techno-posthumans. Jaren Lanier, a partner architect at Microsoft Research, agrees that idea of super advanced artificial intelligence “sounds like many different science fiction movies. Yes, it sounds nutty when stated so bluntly. But these are ideas with tremendous currency in Silicon Valley; these are guiding principles, not just amusements, for many of the most influential technologists.”[[33]](#endnote-31) Some influential players urge that “human friendliness” be programmed into the modes of intelligence now under consideration. How might this be achieved if those super intelligent beings lacked access to the *poignancy* of mortal life, so fraught with aspiration and despair, achievement and disaster, good and evil? The human capacity to resonate with the suffering of others is, in part, what makes possible compassion and ultimately forgiveness. Lacking this curious mode of interiority, grounded in millions of years of mammalian evolution and enhanced by millennia of human psychological-spiritual development, would techno-posthumans be more likely to look upon us with contempt rather than with compassion? look upon us not with compassion, but rather with contempt? Might our human descendents in the not too distant future, then, become literally the last humans?

1. Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, trans. Walter Kaufmann in *Basic Writings of Nietzsche* (New York: Modern Library, 1968), Part II, 521. Emphasis in original. [↑](#endnote-ref--1)
2. Ray Kurzweil, *The Singularity Is Near* (New York: Penguin, 2006). [↑](#endnote-ref-0)
3. Martin Heidegger, “Letter on Humanism” in *Basic Writings*, transl. David Farrell Krell (New York: Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2008). [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
4. See for example Francis Fukuyama, *Our Posthuman Future: Consequences of the Biotechnology Revolution* (Picador, 2003), and Jürgen Habermas, *The Future of Human Nature* (Boston: Polity, 2003). [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
5. See Nick Bostrom and Milan M. Cirkovic, eds. *Global Catastrophic Risks* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008). Co-founder of Sun Microsystems, Bill Joy, warns about the dangers of creating super-intelligent posthumans. See his influential essay, “Why the Future Doesn’t Need Us,” *Wired*, issue 8.04 (April, 2000), <http://www.wired.com/wired/archive/8.04/joy.html>. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
6. Max More, “On Becoming Posthuman” (1994). <http://www.maxmore.com/becoming.htm> [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
7. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, in The Portable Nietzsche, trans. and ed. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Viking Press, 1977), 124. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
8. Nick Bostrom, “A History of Transhumanist Thought” (2005), <http://www.nickbostrom.com/papers/history.pdf> Accessed April 20, 2010. Max More contests Bostrom’s view in “The Overhuman in the Transhuman,” *Journal of Evolution and Technology*, Vol. 21, Issue 1 (January, 2010), 1-4. By discounting the Nietzsche-transhumanist connection, Bostrom may be seeking to forestall charges that transhumanism is will lead to a form of neo-fascist eugenics. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
9. Mitchell Porter, “Transhumanism and the Singularity,” http://members.tripod.com/Transtopia/semper.html. Accessed on March 3, 2010. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
10. See Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, second essay, §§ 24-25, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Random House, 1968). [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
11. See section 342 of Nietzsche’s *The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1974). [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
12. Heidegger Nietzsche lectures from the 1930s and 1940s were published in two volumes in 1961. David Farrell Krell’s four-volume translation of these lectures and related essays are available from HarperOne. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
13. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, §983, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R.J. Hollingdale (New York: Vintage Books, 1968). [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
14. Hans Blumenberg, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, trans. Robert M. Wallace (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1983), 140-142. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
15. *Ibid*., 142. Emphasis mine. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
16. Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, section 300. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
17. Stephen A. McKnight, *Sacralizing the Secular: The Renaissance Origins of Modernity* (Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 1989), 2. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
18. McKnight, *Sacralizing the Sacred*, 3. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
19. See Glenn Alexander Magee, *Hegel and the Hermetic Tradition* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008). [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
20. McKnight, *Sacralizing the Secular*, 16-17. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
21. In *Techngnosis: Magic and Mysticism in the Age of Information* (New York: Harmony Books/5-Star, 2004), Erik Davis has shown that ancient and often forgotten esoteric yearnings still influence contemporary science and technology. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
22. McKnight, *Sacralizing the Secular*, 19. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
23. *Ibid*. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
24. *Ibid*. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
25. *Ibid*., 25. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
26. *Ibid*., 48-49. See Elizabeth Brient, *The Immanence of the Infinite: Hans Blumenberg and the Threshold to Modernity* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of American Press, 2002). [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
27. See my essay, “The Singularity: A Phase in Divine Self-Realization*?” Cosmos and History: The Journal of Natural and Social Philosophy*, Vol. 4, No 1-2 (2008). <http://www.cosmosandhistory.org/index.php/journal/article/viewFile/107/213> Accessed March 21, 2011. [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
28. Kurzweil, *The Singularity is Near*, 375. [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
29. Riccardo Campa, “Italian Transhumanist Manifesto,” <http://ieet.org/index.php/IEET/more/campa20080722/> Accessed March 21, 2011. See also Frank Tipler, *The Physics of Immortality* (New York: Anchor, 1997). [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
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