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Nihilism, Neonihilism, Hypernihilism:

'Nietzsche aujourd'hui' Today?

The theme of 'the politics of difference'¹ recalls the French readings of Nietzsche which crystallized, almost a half-century ago, at the 1972 conference at Cerisy-la-Salle, *Nietzsche aujourd'hui*?² Nietzsche's fortunes have since undergone some dramatic shifts in France, but there are signs that he is once again on the ascendency. One of the most important of these signs is the 2016 edited collection *Pourquoi nous sommes Nietzscheans*.³ (The title is a direct riposte to the 1991 collection *Pourquoi nous ne sommes pas Nietzscheans*, which largely took aim at Nietzsche's politics.⁴) While a wide range of themes was covered at Cerisy in 1972, we might say that the meaning of Nietzsche for a politics of difference was centred on the twin critiques of *humanism* and *capitalism*, distinctive of French intellectual concerns of the time. Likewise, a wide range of themes are represented in the 2016 volume. I want to select from these a theme which, while far from ubiquitous, might plausibly be claimed as marking something distinctively new about the revival of interest in Nietzsche today. This is the theme of *technology*. Such a theme is announced by one of the contributors, Bernard Stiegler, as a leading vector in the development of nihilism since Nietzsche's own time:

what characterises the two centuries that for Nietzsche remained *still entirely to come*, that he *sees coming* in his present, from his epoch, is the fact that the second industrial revolution takes place, and that it does so as, precisely, the intensification of industrial becoming.⁵

¹ An earlier version of this paper was presented at the annual conference of the Friedrich Nietzsche Society, with the theme of 'The Politics of Difference', Newcastle University, 20-21 September, 2018.

² The proceedings were published in two volumes, edited by Maurice de Candillac and Bernard Pautrat: *Nietzsche aujourd'hui? Tome 1 – Intensités; Tome 2 – Passions*, Paris 1973 (reissued 2011).

³ Dorian Astor and Alain Jugnon (eds.), *Pourquoi nous sommes Nietzscheans*, Brussels, 2016. Among other signs we may also note that a one-day symposium entitled „Nietzsche, aujourd'hui: Au fils conducteur du corps“ was held at the Catholic Institute of Paris on 5 December 2017. See Alain Jugnon's introduction to *Pourquoi nous sommes Nietzscheans* for a brief overview of the changing reception of Nietzsche in France.

⁴ Luc Ferry and Alain Renaut (eds.), *Pourquoi nous ne sommes pas Nietzscheans*, Paris 1991. Translated by Robert de Loaiza: *Why We Are Not Nietzscheans*, Chicago, ILL. 1997.

⁵ Bernard Stiegler, *The Decadence of Industrial Democracies*, trans. Daniel Ross, Cambridge 2011, 56.

The “two centuries” Stiegler alludes to here are those famously announced by Nietzsche as the unfolding of nihilism,⁶ and the industrial revolutions have led to the vast technologisation of contemporary life, including today the ubiquity of computing and the technologies of information and communication.

In his introduction to *Pourquoi nous sommes Nietzscheans*, Alain Jugnon notes that the renewed interest in Nietzsche is stimulated by our times of distress and takes a political tone. For Nietzsche, of course, the name of this distress is nihilism. Again, there are many ways in which this distress might be explored with Nietzsche (for example, through the notion of ‘post-truth,’ through populist *ressentiment*, and so on). Yet for Stiegler and others, this distress is linked to technology, which is a deeply political issue insofar as the technological mediation of human life affects our ‘being together.’ In the pages of the 2016 volume, a radical discrepancy of views is expressed regarding the meaning of technologies for human life, and how they might feature in the deepening of nihilism, or the coming of the *Übermensch*. This incipient debate revolves around the concept of the ‘transhuman.’

Taking a bearing from these French readings, I want to explore the question of what ‘Nietzsche today’ might mean for us *today*. I will do this by developing an interpretive framework based on the points selected above: looking back to the themes of humanism and capitalism among the Nietzscheans of 1972, and then to those of technology and transhumanism in the ‘new’ Nietzscheans. The guiding thread throughout it all – again, an interpretive choice among many possible in Nietzsche’s hydra-headed corpus – is the politics of difference. For Nietzsche, given his central concern with nihilism, politics is never simply a matter of (say) distributive justice, or the most appropriate institutions of government, but concerns the sense of meaning and value, the affirmation of life, we are capable of. Let me begin, then, by introducing some diagnostic terms around the notion of nihilism which will allow us, at the end of this survey, to draw some conclusions, however partial and provisional, concerning Nietzsche and the politics of difference today.⁷

⁶ “What I relate is the history of the next two centuries. I describe what is coming, what can no longer come differently: the advent of nihilism”. Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, Preface 2, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R.J. Hollingdale, New York 1968.

⁷ Many of the points I connect here I have explored and argued in more detail elsewhere. These places will be footnoted.

Nihilism

Beginning with Nietzsche, nihilism is presented as highly ambiguous, and he and many subsequent thinkers have attempted to clarify it by distinguishing certain *types*. Nietzsche, for example, names some of the main types as religious nihilism, passive nihilism, active nihilism, and complete nihilism.⁸ At the risk of complicating matters further (but rather, I hope, with the effect of clarifying them), I want to introduce a typological distinction between what I shall call ‘reductive’ nihilism and ‘abyssal’ nihilism. These terms express what seem to me to be two extremes or poles at which feelings of meaninglessness (that is, ‘existential’ nihilism) manifest. Throughout the literature on nihilism, from Jacobi to the recent Nietzscheans, both these manifestations are evident again and again. On the face of it, they seem to be opposites.

Reductive nihilism indicates the feeling that certain perspectives, structures, or forces have eliminated everything that might provide value and meaning in life, reducing everything to a narrow frame of reference which cannot support what is required for life affirmation. For example, in the first philosophical use of the term nihilism, Jacobi complains to Fichte that his idealist philosophy is nihilistic, since it reduces the scope of our knowledge to *nothing but* the ego:

If the highest upon which I can reflect, what I can contemplate, is my empty and pure, naked and mere ego, with its autonomy and freedom: then rational self-contemplation, then rationality is for me a curse - I deplore my existence.⁹

More commonly, reductive nihilism has been associated with critiques of capitalism, science, and technology, with their capacities to ‘disenchant’ the world, to reduce value to exchange value, nature to abstract laws, and the world to manipulable objects (see Marx and Heidegger, for example). Reductive nihilism frequently accompanies gains in knowledge, supposed certainties, and strongly established structures and institutions. What is claimed with the accusation of nihilism, however, is that these gains have reduced away everything that might make life worth living.

⁸ An indispensable analytical survey of these types is provided by Alan White: „Nietzschean Nihilism: A Typology“, *International Studies in Philosophy* 14.2 (1987), 29-44.

⁹ Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi, „Open Letter to Fichte“, trans. D.I. Behler in *Philosophy of German Idealism*, ed. E. Behler, New York 1987, 135.

Abyssal nihilism, on the other hand, expresses a radical absence of all meaningful values, and typically accompanies the collapse of frames of reference. The gold standard expression for this is the one famously associated with Nietzsche: the death of God. Abyssal nihilism may result from the breakdown of religious belief, but also, as Nietzsche clearly teaches us, with everything that might be designated by ‘God’ as the placeholder for the highest values: belief in a ‘true world’, in a given morality, a true grasp of the natural world, of our own selves, etc. The collapse of meaningful frames of reference can produce a feeling like plunging into an abyss, and life can correspondingly seem meaningless because it lacks all purpose or goal.¹⁰ Despite the fact that the reductive and abyssal forms of nihilism appear to inhabit opposite poles, they may of course be seen as complimentary, and as frequently developing together: the reductive processes of abstraction and rationalisation degrade the social relations and structures which provide meaning and value, thus giving rise to abyssal nihilism. I will return to these themes in my conclusion.

As is well known, Nietzsche sketched a project for the *overcoming* of nihilism through a deepening of nihilism itself, such that it is a kind of *self-overcoming*. Now, without being able to repeat any of these arguments in detail here, I want to note that an important development of the idea of nihilism since Nietzsche is that many subsequent thinkers have deeply problematized the idea of attempting to overcome it, and have often sought modes of resistance or oblique strategies in the face of what seems like an intractable aporia. To briefly note a couple of such influential developments: Heidegger argued (explicitly against Ernst Jünger, but also in response to Nietzsche) that nihilism cannot be overcome through an exertion of will, as though it is an external problem to be solved, because it determines *who* we are, and is itself constituted through willful assertion (bound up with the subject/object metaphysics of modernity and subjective domination of the objective world).¹¹ Second, the problem of overcoming nihilism was seen in the light of the Hegelian dialectic, particularly in France. A problem then appears for Nietzsche’s project of overcoming nihilism through total affirmation, as affirmation implies negation in Hegelian logic, so any affirmation inevitably reinstitutes a negation and opposition characteristic of nihilism.¹² These themes merge to form an

¹⁰ On the metaphor of the abyss, see David K. Coe, *Angst and the Abyss: The Hermeneutics of Nothingness*, New York, 1985.

¹¹ See „On the Question of Being“ in *Pathmarks*, ed. W. McNeill, Cambridge 1988; *Nietzsche* vols. 1-4, trans. David Farrell Krell, London, 1981-87.

¹² See for example Gilles Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson, New York 1983; Maurice Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*, trans. Susan Hanson, Minneapolis and London, 1993.

understanding of nihilism in the contemporary situation as characterised by the loss of hope that existential meaninglessness can be overcome, either through redemptive individual experience, or through the modern dream of collective social emancipation.¹³ With these considerations concerning nihilism in mind, let us turn now to some of the themes explored at the famous Nietzsche conference of 1972.

Neonihilism

I want to take just two examples of thinkers who presented papers at Cerisy, in which the theme of a politics of difference is strongly evident: Pierre Klossowski and Jean-François Lyotard. Many have been surprised and puzzled that the French Left intelligentsia took Nietzsche – ostensibly an extreme Right-wing thinker – as a major source of political inspiration in the 1960s and –70s. On the face of it Nietzsche’s politics would appear to be diametrically opposed to Marx’s: while Marx strove to overcome class exploitation, Nietzsche seems to defend some version of it. However, as Klossowski’s analysis shows, Nietzsche’s critique of bourgeois and industrial culture can be read as parallel to Marx’s, and this has allowed French Nietzscheans with Marxist orientations to appropriate Nietzsche for their own political agendas. Moreover, Nietzsche helped the French poststructuralists, who had become disillusioned with mainstream Marxism, to turn the very meaning of ‘the political’ in a new direction.

These themes are at the heart of Klossowski’s Cerisy paper, „*Circulus Vitiosus*“.¹⁴ This, his last published writing on Nietzsche, summarizes key aspects of his previous, highly-influential Nietzsche interpretation, and links them explicitly to questions of contemporary politics. Klossowski sees Nietzsche as uncannily prophetic of political developments in the twentieth century, and constructs an interpretation of Nietzsche’s own political thought as evolving around the notion of ‘conspiracy’ (*complot*). Unsurprisingly, his treatment of Nietzsche’s politics focuses on the categories of master and slave. Klossowski contends that the slaves of the contemporary world are all those who work at menial tasks without knowing the overall *goal* for which they work. The masters, on the other hand, are those who are able to exploit the

¹³ On reductive and abyssal nihilism, and the arguments against an overcoming of nihilism, see my *Nihilism in Postmodernity: Lyotard, Baudrillard, Vattimo*, Aurora CO 2009. On Deleuze specifically, see my „Deleuze, Nietzsche, and the Overcoming of Nihilism“, *Continental Philosophy Review* 46.1 (2013), 115-147.

¹⁴ Pierre Klossowski, „*Circulus Vitiosus*“, trans. Joseph D. Kuzma, *The Agonist* 2.1 (2009): 31-47.

labour of the masses towards their own ends. The slave 'caste' is associated with what Klossowski calls the 'gregarious', a term indicating herd morality, while the masters are those rare individuals ('singular cases', in Klossowski's terminology) who are able to create and legislate values. However, the problem for contemporary politics is that the weak have prevailed over the strong; the slaves have instituted a cultural order which suppresses potential masters. Nietzsche's political task is to reverse this situation and restore the masters to their proper place. For Nietzsche, the slaves have dominated through a complex alliance of Christianity and morality, which creates an ideal of *community* in which individuals are all of *the same, mediocre level*. Nietzsche sees contemporary science, and Darwinism in particular, as complicit in slave morality, insofar as it aims towards, and attempts to justify, the preservation of the species as a collection of mediocre individuals.

Now, Nietzsche introduces an important distinction between *false* and *true* masters, which prevents any possibility of identifying his ideal political system directly with the class exploitation of capitalism that Marx critiques. The false masters are in fact Marx's bourgeois exploiters, the "industrialists, military men, bankers, business men, bureaucrats, etc."¹⁵ According to Nietzsche these false masters are unconscious slaves, because the aims they pursue are perfectly confluent with, and actively promote, herd morality. Nietzsche sees the capitalist system as contributing to the levelling of humanity because everything becomes homogenized in universal commodity exchange, and all value judgements become mercantile. The capitalist system itself promotes the loss of any meaningful goal for humanity, because it increasingly focuses on efficient means for the circulation of commodities as an end in itself. In a note which Klossowski sees as particularly prophetic, Nietzsche identifies global economic management as the high-point of social levelling and nihilism:

Once we have that imminent, inevitable total economic administration of the earth, mankind will be able to find its best meaning as a piece of machinery in the administration's service: as a tremendous clockwork of ever smaller, ever more finely 'adapted' cogs; as an ever-increasing superfluity of all dominating and commanding elements; as a whole of tremendous force, whose individual factors represent minimal forces, minimal values.¹⁶

¹⁵ Pierre Klossowski, *Nietzsche and the Vicious Circle*, trans. Daniel W. Smith, London 2005, 121.

¹⁶ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Writings from the Late Notebooks*, ed. Rüdiger Bittner, trans. Kate Sturge, Notebook 10, Autumn 1887, 10[17], 177. Klossowski quotes this note both in „*Circulus Vitiosus*“ (35) and in *Nietzsche and the Vicious Circle* (122-23).

The true masters, on the other hand, are the strong types who are able to legislate values and the meaning of life, and whom Nietzsche characterizes collectively as a ‘contemplative’ caste. These true masters are able to turn the activities of the false masters, as well as the labouring of the masses that these false masters direct, to their own ends. Nietzsche sees these contemplative individuals as forming a *conspiracy* which aims to overturn the existing order of false masters and herd morality, and to institute what he sees as a ‘just’ political system of exploitation aimed towards higher ends.

How does this conspiracy unfold? The strategy Nietzsche outlines is not to *decrease* the levelling processes of planetary economic planning, but *to contribute to and exacerbate them*, with the idea that such levelling will of necessity produce a *counter-movement* with the potential to transform the existing order. (This is the political counter-part to Nietzsche’s advocacy of active nihilism as a strategy aimed at pushing nihilism to a point of self-overcoming.) This counter-movement is produced by the system of economic utility itself as the waste and surplus which it cannot use as means; which it cannot incorporate into its efficient functioning.

The notion of conspiracy in this Nietzschean sense suggests a new model of community. In the discussion following Klossowski’s paper at Cerisy, Gilles Deleuze clearly summarises the difference between community as traditionally conceived (‘society’), and the new notion of community posed by Klossowski’s work on Nietzsche:

What we call a society is a community of regularities, or more precisely, a certain selective process which retains select singularities and regularises them. [...] But a *conspiracy* – this would be a community of singularities of another type, which would not be regularised, but which would enter into new connections, and in this sense, would be revolutionary.¹⁷

Moreover, the possibility suggested by Nietzsche is that links between singularities in a ‘conspiratorial’ community would have the eternal return as their criteria. The significance of this is that, according to Klossowski’s analysis, the lived experience of the eternal return *explodes the identity of individuals*. What this amounts to is an attempt to conceive of communities – groups and whole societies – beyond the notion of identity. Indeed, Deleuze

¹⁷ In Klossowski, „*Circulus Vitiosus*“, 46-7.

highlights this elsewhere in asserting that “Klossowski’s entire work moves towards a single goal: to assure the loss of personal identity and to dissolve the self”.¹⁸

Klossowski does not repeat the arguments linking the eternal return to the dissolution of the principle of identity in his „*Circulus Vitiosus*“ paper, so we must look to his previous writings. Of particular significance here is the paper he presented at the 1964 Royaumont colloquium on Nietzsche, incorporated in *Nietzsche and the Vicious Circle* as chapter 3 of that book. Klossowski calls the eternal return a ‘vicious circle’ – or ‘*circulus vitiosus*,’ in Latin – because it is deeply paradoxical, on at least three major counts: with respect to reality, knowledge, and the self. In classical philosophical logic, the coherence of each of these themes is supported by the ‘principle of identity’. The ‘*circulus vitiosus*’ is the name, in medieval scholastic philosophy, for a logical paradox which undermines coherent argumentation. Following Nietzsche’s association of the eternal return with the *circulus vitiosus* in *Beyond Good and Evil* 56, he develops the idea of eternal return is a logical paradox which undermines the principle of identity. In the modern philosophical tradition, the self is associated (exactly how is a matter of debate) with the subject, itself dependent on the principle of identity – the subject is the self-same consciousness, the underlying constant, which guarantees the possibility of knowledge and the grasp of (objective) reality. According to Klossowski, however, the experience of the eternal return undermines the supposed identity of the experiencer (and is thus in this respect paradoxical). As a first point, Klossowski notes that as the eternal return strikes me as a revelation, I must also become aware of having been the one who had forgotten the knowledge of the eternal return, and of the necessity of again becoming this person who had forgotten it. Moreover, considering the endless repetition of every moment through which I have passed forces me to recognize that there is no stable ‘I’ which has persisted throughout these changing states: the perspective of an eternal time explodes the notion of a stable self, which is contingent upon the framework of a limited ‘time-slice’ in which self-identity seems relatively plausible. Of the subject who recognizes and wills the eternal return, Klossowski writes:

This subject is no longer able to will itself as it has been up to now, but wills *all* prior possibilities; for by embracing in a single glance the necessity of the Return as a universal law, I deactualize my present self in order to will myself in *all the other selves whose entire series must be passed through*

¹⁸ Gilles Deleuze, „Klossowski or Bodies-Language“ in *Logic of Sense*, trans. C.V. Boundas, M. Lester, and C.J. Stivale, London 1990, 283.

so that, in accordance with the circular movement, I once again become what I am at the moment I discover the law of the Eternal Return.¹⁹

The eternal return is then connected to Nietzsche's cultural politics, according to Klossowski, because it acts as a 'principle of selection', dividing the slaves from the masters: the masters are the one who are able to accept and affirm the dissolution of the self and the loss of meaning and goal.

For Klossowski, the capitalist system presents a gross caricature of the eternal return insofar as it reduces human life to the service of the circulation of commodities, without end or goal (just as the eternal return presents the world as a continual circulation of moments, which have no other goal than to return to themselves through endless repetition). However, the 'true' meaning of eternal return is precisely what challenges the capitalist system by revealing what cannot be translated into economic value, and is thus only recognized as waste or surplus in the system of commodity exchange. This political meaning of the eternal return was also taken up by other French Nietzscheans, and is developed by Lyotard in the paper he presented at Cerisy.

This paper, „Notes on the Return and Kapital“,²⁰ mobilises the 'libidinal' philosophy he was then working out under the influence Deleuze and Guattari and the Freudo-Marxism of the time. Under the name of "neo-nihilism", he presents an analysis of capitalism as a force which liquidates both archaic or pre-modern forms, and the forms through which capitalism itself has developed in modernity.²¹ Lyotard celebrates this widespread liquidation, asserting that "[t]he dissolution of forms and individuals in the consumer society must be *affirmed*".²² The problem with capitalism is not at all this dissolution (Marx and Engel's famous "All that's solid melts into air"), but rather, that this process of dissolution of structures is limited by the 'law of value' which proposes an equalization between goods which are exchanged in the system through the universal equivalent of money. Like Klossowski, Lyotard poses this as a problem of two

¹⁹ Klossowski, *Nietzsche and the Vicious Circle*, 45.

²⁰ Jean-François Lyotard, „Notes on the Return and Kapital“, trans. Roger McKeon, *Semiotexte 3.1* (1978), 44-53.

²¹ Lyotard writes: "Kapital...is *metamorphosis* without end or purpose. Such a metamorphosis operates on the one hand as a dissolution of *old* pre-capitalist institutions and on the other hand as a self-dissolution of its own institutions, constantly undone and redone." "Notes on the Return and Kapital", 47.

²² Lyotard, „Notes on the Return and Kapital“, 51.

versions of the eternal return, one which might be termed the return of the Same (capitalism), and the other, the return of the Different (Nietzsche's 'authentic' thought):

When a process reduplicates identical effects, it becomes established, closes up, gets blocked in objects and subjects, devices and inscriptions, in set quantities and intervals, in structures and representations. Metamorphosis, if it were repetitive in the customary sense, that is if it were merely regulated, if it observed rules of constant spacing [...] would amount to a systemic and representational closure. The Return would follow the course of structure.

Such is the meaning of Nietzsche for us today. *The regulated return is Kapital*. Affirmation is, shall be, the dissolution of the single rule of Kapital, i.e. the law of value.²³

In Lyotard's libidinal terms, this becomes a matter of 'intensity' (a term which is also significant for Klossowski). The capitalist system regulates exchanges and establishes institutions, and these regulations have the effect of stable structures which channel libidinal energies and maintain them at relatively low levels. For Lyotard, the 'Nietzschean' strategy in relation to capitalism should, instead, be "to raise or maintain intensity at its highest level in order to obtain as strong (*Macht*) an energetic metamorphosis as possible. In such a process does affirmation reside".²⁴ Nietzsche's theme of life-affirmation becomes, for Lyotard, who passes it through Freud, the affirmation of intense (very high or very low) libidinal energies, and the transformations such intensities perform in systems.

Lyotard then asks how such a Nietzschean politics would be possible, and what form it might take. The answer he sketches gives us an insight into the profound resonance of these readings of Nietzsche with the times, when they are taken on the political level:

Holding up production, uncompensated seizures (thefts) as modalities of consumption, refusal to "work," (illusory?) communities, happenings, sexual liberation movements, occupations, squattings, abductions, productions of sounds, words, colours, with no "work of art" intensions. Here are the "men of profusion," the "masters" of today: marginals, experimental painters, pop, hippies and yuppies, parasites, madmen, binned loonies. One hour of their lives offers more intensity and less intention than three hundred thousand words of a professional philosopher. More Nietzschean than Nietzsche's *readers*.²⁵

²³ Lyotard, „Notes on the Return and Kapital“, 46-47.

²⁴ Lyotard, „Notes on the Return and Kapital“, 49.

²⁵ Lyotard, „Notes on the Return and Kapital“, 52-3.

We see here, then, the association of Nietzsche's thought and a Nietzschean politics with the counter-culture and the legacy of the (then still very recent) events of May '68. The emphasis is on 'underground', marginal activities which destabilise the existing order of society, dissolve its institutions, and undermine the capitalist law of value.

In sum, what we see from this gloss of these two philosophers whose Nietzsche interpretation was presented at Cerisy in 1972 is a concern to read Nietzsche along with Marx as a critic of capitalism, and a critique of humanism (broadly defined) which sees the bourgeois self as a nihilistic structure which needs to be critically destroyed through a dissolution of individual subjectivity. It is a politics of *difference* on both counts: capitalism is critiqued for subsuming differences to the law of equivalence in exchange, and difference is affirmed as a countermovement to nihilism through the dissolution of identity. These concerns are wedded to the Marxist project of overcoming capitalism and the Nietzschean project of overcoming nihilism, which are viewed as significantly parallel and compatible, despite their differences. Arguably, we may see these tendencies as taking as their target *reductive* manifestations of nihilism, especially as they are expressed through capitalism and the structures which are seen to uphold it, including social institutions and the self as a fixed identity. The aim is to increase active nihilism, to hasten the dissolution of old forms and values so that they might make way for the new and life-affirmative.²⁶

Hypernihilism

Let us move now to a consideration of how things stand at present, or at least a few signs of this from *Pourquoi nous sommes Nietzscheens*. Again I will select just two papers, those of Stefan Lorenz Sorgner and Bernard Stiegler, this time to indicate a debate within the common theme of Nietzsche and technology.²⁷ Across a number of publications on the topic, Sorgner

²⁶ This affirmation of active nihilism is quite evident in both Klossowski and Lyotard. For Klossowski, the thought of Eternal Return is what enables the shift from passive to active nihilism („*Circulus Vitosus*“, 33), while Lyotard is even more explicit: “Here is a political path: to harden, to deepen, to accelerate decadence. To assume the perspective of active nihilism, not by remaining at the simple (depressing or admiring) evidence of the destruction of values: to get one's hands dirty in their destruction, to go ever further into incredulity, to fight against the restoration of values. Let us travel far and quickly in this direction, let us be undertakers in decadence ...” Jean-François Lyotard, „A Brief Putting in Perspective of Decadence and of Several Minoritarian Battles to be Waged“, trans. Taylor Adkins, *Vast Abrupt* (2018), 1-20: 4. ([HYPERLINK "https://vastabrupt.com/2018/03/12/lyotard-brief-putting-perspective-decadence/"](https://vastabrupt.com/2018/03/12/lyotard-brief-putting-perspective-decadence/) }

²⁷ In order to give a little further weight to the suggestion that technology is a significant issue for contemporary Nietzscheanism, we may note a monograph by one of the editors of the 2016 volume: Alain Jugnon, *Nietzsche*

has claimed Nietzsche as a predecessor and ally of transhumanism.²⁸ His contribution to the 2016 volume, „Nietzsche as Educator: From Heraclitus to Transhumanism“, is a largely personal statement, answering the question of why he is a Nietzschean starting from a biographical point of view. However, several key theoretical points are made. First, Nietzsche is positioned as important for transhumanism because of his penchant for both naturalism and interpretation.²⁹ As Sorgner briefly glosses this, Nietzsche posits that there are multiple ‘psychophysiological quanta’, each of which is a perspective on the world.³⁰ Transhumanists generally tend toward naturalism, and Sorgner notes that the majority of them have been Anglo-Saxons working in the traditions of utilitarianism and analytic philosophy. While they have addressed many quite specific problems and issues, Sorgner suggests that these orientations have prevented them from addressing ‘the big questions’, and from engaging with issues of broad cultural meaning and value. Such issues involve the way that naturalism tends towards an overcoming of the broad metaphysical distinction between mind and matter in the philosophical tradition, leading to a ‘posthumanism’ in which human beings come to be seen as complex arrangements of matter rather than as ontologically distinct. According to Sorgner, this constitutes a paradigm shift with massive cultural implications, which are far from being fully unfolded. Allowing us to address such issues, he suggests, is the great value of Nietzsche’s thought. And it is here, in the meeting of scientific naturalism and culture, that Sorgner positions his own approach, which he refers to as ‘Nietzschean transhumanism’, or ‘metahumanism’ (the latter term implying *beyond* humanism, and *between* posthumanism and transhumanism).³¹

Second, Sorgner acknowledges and seeks to defend transhumanism from the criticisms of high profile intellectuals such as Francis Fukuyama, Jürgen Habermas, and Peter Sloterdijk. The key issue of criticism addressed is biological eugenics, where, especially for many contemporary Germans, transhumanism arouses fears of the selective breeding programs of the National Socialist ideology. Against such criticisms, Sorgner asserts that transhumanism can and must be wedded to values of autonomy, liberty, and pluralism. Unlike the Nazis,

et Simondon: le théâtre du vivant, Paris, 2010. Gilbert Simondon is one of the most important French philosophers of technology, whose work is undergoing a renaissance today. Notably, it has had a profound influence on Stiegler, some of the implications of which will be discussed below.

²⁸ In addition to his chapter in *Pourquoi nous sommes Nietzscheans*, see the collection of Sorgner’s articles and responses by others, *Nietzsche and Transhumanism: Precursor or Enemy?*, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, 2017.

²⁹ *Pourquoi nous sommes Nietzscheans*, 231.

³⁰ *Pourquoi nous sommes Nietzscheans*, 231.

³¹ *Pourquoi nous sommes Nietzscheans*, 232.

transhumanists conceive of human enhancement as a private and individual affair, not an enforced collective social programme. Moreover – and it seems to me that this is a key idea – he insists on the pluralization of conceptions of the good. While in general transhumanism seeks to use science and technology to promote conditions of ‘the good life’, it should not promote any one privileged conception of the good, but rather a plurality of possible goods.³²

Once again, however, we must look to previous works to see some of this author’s primary reasons for the position we are examining. Sorgner has argued that transhumanism has some significant points of similarity with Nietzsche’s thought, especially with regard to the positive valuation of science, and of the goal of the future enhancement of human beings (the *Übermensch*, for Nietzsche, and the technologically enhanced human as a ‘posthuman’ species, for the transhumanists). Moreover, he has argued that Nietzsche can provide a justification for transhumanism missing from much transhumanist discourse. Instead of simply proposing that human technological enhancement is somehow exciting or an obvious good in itself, Nietzsche provides a framework for understanding the goal of enhancement through a broad perspective on human life and value as it has unfolded in culture and through history. For Nietzsche the *Übermensch* is a meaning-giving concept which is consistent with a secular and scientific culture: it is the goal for which we can strive after the death of God, and which gives an immanent meaning to a world stripped of its transcendent double.³³

Bernard Stiegler’s views on Nietzsche and transhumanism could not be more diametrically opposed to Sorgner’s. Like Habermas and others, Stiegler is vitriolic about transhumanism, yet his motivations lie entirely elsewhere than the fear of biological eugenics: his fear is with the effects of information technology, the ‘technicization’ of reason. He invokes Nietzsche in support of this, arguing that transhumanism is the apotheosis of nihilism in the contemporary world. His contribution to the 2016 volume is entitled „The Great Bifurcation towards the *Neganthropos*: Exceptions and Selections in Noodiversity“. In passing, he uses the adjective ‘hypernihilist’, and I have chosen to adopt this term as a general characterization of his critical position, since a main claim of his here is that we need to reinterpret nihilism in the contemporary world, in terms of the advent of information technologies in conjunction with capitalism. Stiegler writes: “Is it not astonishing to observe how much the considerations of

³² *Pourquoi nous sommes Nietzscheens*, 236-37.

³³ See Sorgner, „Nietzsche, the Overhuman, and Transhumanism“ in *Nietzsche and Transhumanism*.

Nietzsche are current to the epoch of algorithmic governmentality and *big data* [...]?”³⁴ He picks up and transforms several Nietzschean notions, especially the ‘great politics’ and ‘great hygiene’ of the last period, in terms of the need to defend *exceptions* against the levelling power of *averages*. Stiegler interprets these themes as applying to contemporary technological capitalism, which he argues brings the nihilistic crisis of values to a head more quickly than Nietzsche himself foresaw, because ‘big data’ radically exacerbates the averaging effects and destruction of exceptions that Nietzsche warned against. Contemporary capitalism deploys automatic calculative rationality, through the algorithms of information technologies, with the effect of reducing individuals to market consumers. Stiegler’s Nietzscheanism then appears as a politics of difference to the extent that it asserts the value of exceptions against the homogenising tendencies of capitalism and big data.³⁵

This analysis depends on Stiegler’s earlier works, particularly on his theses about originary technicity and libidinal economy. He has argued, first, that there is a co-constitution of the human and technics, such that human beings become who and what they are through their interactions with the technical world, producing a view of humans and machines far more intimate than that of the traditional view. This remains the best-known aspect of Stiegler’s work, developed in the *Technics and Time* series.³⁶ Second, Stiegler has developed a critique of contemporary technological capitalism around the notion of libidinal economy (stemming from Freud, Marcuse, and object-relations theory). He argues that contemporary technologies ‘short circuit’ the development of our capacities to desire in a healthy way, reducing desire to bare drives which demand immediate satisfaction, and undermining our ability to project meaningful long-term goals and invest them with value.³⁷ In short, for Stiegler, what he calls ‘hyperindustrial’ capitalism is destroying our ability to individuate in a healthy manner, that is, to become healthy individuals capable of valuing things and feeling that life is worth living. In

³⁴ Stiegler in *Pourquoi nous sommes Nietzscheans*, 99. All translations from this volume mine.

³⁵ This theme could be extended by examining the role of difference in the individuation process according to Simondon’s analysis, on which Stiegler heavily draws: for Simondon, being is non-coincident with itself and individuation takes place through the communication of disparate terms. See Simondon, *L’individuation à la lumière des notions de forme et d’information*, Grenoble 2005.

³⁶ Three volumes: *Technics and Time 1: The Fault of Epimetheus*, trans. George Collins and Richard Beardsworth, Stanford CA 1998; *Technics and Time 2: Disorientation*, trans. Stephen Barker, Stanford CA 2009; *Technics and Time 3: Cinematic Time and the Question of Malaise*, trans. Stephen Barker, Stanford CA 2010.

³⁷ See for example Bernard Stiegler, „To Love, To Love Me, To Love Us“ in *Acting Out*, trans. David Barison, Stanford CA 2008; Bernard Stiegler with Frédéric Neyrat, „Interview: From Libidinal Economy to the Ecology of the Spirit“, trans. Arne De Boever, *Parrhesia* 14 (2012), 9-15; and Bernard Stiegler, *What Makes Life Worth Living: On Pharmacology*, trans. Daniel Ross, Cambridge 2013.

his interpretation of Nietzsche, this is then understood as the power big data exerts in ‘averaging’ us, turning us into consumers of short-term satisfactions.

Polemically, Stiegler asserts that transhumanism brings nihilism to completion. What he sees in transhumanism is the assertion of a complete hegemony of calculative, probabilistic rationality, which is entirely in capitulation to the logic of consumer capitalism. Stiegler asserts that the Nietzschean transvaluation *itself* needs to be transvalued, in no small part because he sees the figure of the *Übermensch* as the phantasmatical lure of the transhumanists – such as we have just seen with Sorgner, perhaps (though Stiegler makes no direct reference to him, and quite possibly has only other transhumanists in mind³⁸) – and does not believe it can then be an effective figure of transvaluation in the contemporary epoch. Moreover, he believes there are two significant oversights in Nietzsche’s thought; issues he was not able to think, but which are essential for understanding and responding to (hyper)nihilism today: *exosomatisation*, and *entropy*.

‘Exosomatisation’ is a term that Stiegler has increasingly used since 2014 in place of his earlier preferred term ‘exteriorisation’ (taken from André Leroi-Gourhan) to refer to the intimate relation between internal (somatic) processes and exterior inscriptions (i.e. technics), and the idea that the former in fact depend on the latter as their condition of possibility. This point, then, is that Nietzsche could not adequately think technics in its intimate relation with human being and becoming. On the second point, Stiegler laments that Nietzsche rejected the idea of entropy not long after its first formulation,³⁹ because he (Stiegler) believes that entropy, and its counterpart negentropy, are essential concepts with which to think life, and its associated values, in the 21st century and beyond. He asserts that “the theory of entropy redefines the question of value”⁴⁰ and that “the *question* of entropy and negentropy among human beings [is] the *crucial problem* of the everyday life of human beings and of life in general, and, finally, of the universe in totality for every form of life”.⁴¹ This theory of energetic tendencies at the

³⁸ An important source for Stiegler’s understanding of transhumanism is Allen Buchanan, *Better than Human: The Promise and Perils of Enhancing Ourselves*, New York 2011.

³⁹ He draws on Barbara Stiegler’s *Nietzsche et la biologie*, Paris 2011. For an excellent account of Nietzsche’s interest in the nineteenth-century debates around the implications of entropy, and how they fed into his concept of the eternal return, see Paolo D’Iorio, „The Eternal Return: Genesis and Interpretation“, trans. Frank Chouraqui, *The Agonist* 3.1 (2010): 1-43.

⁴⁰ Bernard Stiegler, „*Automatic Society 1: The Future of Work* – Introduction: Functional Stupidity, Entropy and Negentropy in the Anthropocene“, trans. Daniel Ross, *La Deleuzeana* 1 (2015), 121-140: 132.

⁴¹ Stiegler, „*Automatic Society I*“, 133.

cosmic level then sets the agenda for what Stiegler believes needs to be done to confront the crisis of contemporary nihilism in all its forms:

Reading Marx and Nietzsche together in the service of a new critique of political economy, *where the eco-nomy has become a cosmic factor on a local scale (a dimension of the cosmos)* and therefore an *eco-logy*, must lead to a process of *transvaluation*, such that both *economic values* and those *moral devaluations* that result when nihilism is set loose as consumerism are “*transvaluated*” *through a new value of all values, that is, by negentropy* – or negative entropy, or anti-entropy.⁴²

In short, Stiegler asserts that “the systemic and systematic valorization of negentropy”⁴³ is the necessary basis for the revaluation of values Nietzsche called for. This is in effect a privileging of order, individuation, and social structures and institutions, which he sees as radically undermined by the entropic forces of industrial consumer capitalism.

Tracy Colony helps us to understand the wider significance of Nietzsche for Stiegler by drawing out references to the German philosopher in Stiegler’s earlier works and contextualizing them in his overall project.⁴⁴ One of the major points Colony highlights is that for Stiegler, Nietzsche is important as a thinker of *tragedy* because he understands it essentially as an earlier form of thought in contrast to the *oppositional* thinking characteristic of metaphysics. Tragedy thinks the co-constitution of forces or tendencies as a generative difference; that is, it thinks in terms of differential forces in productive relation, rather than opposition, where both are irreducibly necessary. This contrasts with the Christian-Platonic thinking of oppositional categories and the morality of good and evil. Along similar lines, Stiegler interprets Nietzsche’s genealogy of morals in his own terms as expressing the transition from the tragic, pre-metaphysical thinking of what he calls the ‘default’ of origin, to the sin characteristic of Christianity and metaphysics.⁴⁵ For Stiegler, the relation between the human and technics needs to be understood as having no assignable origin, as they were historically co-constituted, and he calls this the ‘necessary default’. Metaphysics, by contrast, understands the human as prior to technics, which then appears as a fall, a corruption, and the introduction of sin, setting up the metaphysical opposition between the human and technics.

⁴² Stiegler, „*Automatic Society I*“, 131-2.

⁴³ Bernard Stiegler, *The Neganthropocene*, ed. and trans. Daniel Ross, 185. ([HYPERLINK](http://www.openhumanitiespress.org/books/titles/the-neganthropocene/) "http://www.openhumanitiespress.org/books/titles/the-neganthropocene/" }

⁴⁴ Tracy Colony, „Composing Time: Stiegler on Nietzsche, Nihilism and a Possible Future“, unpublished.

⁴⁵ See for example Bernard Stiegler, *The Decadence of Industrial Democracies*, 50-58.

What, then, are we to make of this debate over transhumanism in contemporary Nietzscheanism, and, by broad implication, the role of technology in contemporary nihilism? Matters are not so simple as being for or against transhumanism, and invoking Nietzsche as a support, as the juxtaposition of Sorgner's and Stiegler's manifest positions might suggest. Many aspects of transhumanism have been criticised from a Nietzschean perspective, first by Keith Ansell-Pearson in his book *Viroid Life*,⁴⁶ then in the responses to Sorgner collected in *Nietzsche and Transhumanism: Precursor or Enemy?* Some of the main criticisms revolve around 1) the value and status of science in relation to the ascetic ideal, and 2) transhumanism as manifesting aspects of the Enlightenment and modernity which Nietzsche criticised. What is at stake with the first point is how to understand Nietzsche's attitude(s) towards science. While Sorgner tends to simplify and over-state Nietzsche's sympathy for the 'scientific spirit', perhaps most evident in the free spirit trilogy, critics have pointed out that he also identified science with the ascetic ideal, and implicated it in forms of nihilism and *ressentiment* towards life.⁴⁷ Transhumanism, for its part, seems to play into the ascetic ideal insofar as it treats the human condition, and in particular mortality, as something to be condemned and overcome.⁴⁸

Transhumanism is typically expressed as a form of Enlightenment thought, which celebrates the application of reason to human life and structures itself as a teleological, historical narrative of progress. As such, it seems at odds with Nietzsche's critiques of reason and modernity. For example, it tends to advocate the overcoming of suffering and the utilitarian goal of the greatest happiness for the greatest number, and is thus a long way from Nietzsche's assertion of the necessity of a 'higher pessimism' which affirms suffering as the ground for self-overcoming, and of the flourishing of higher types over the levelling effects of the herd.

Yet there is no reason to believe that there is only one form that transhumanism might take. Broadly defined, transhumanism means only the application of technology for the enhancement of human life. *How* that enhancement is to be conceived will of course depend on our conception of the good, and here Sorgner's point about the pluralization of the good becomes

⁴⁶ Keith Ansell-Pearson, *Viroid Life: Perspectives on Nietzsche and the Transhuman Condition*, London and New York, 1997.

⁴⁷ See in particular *On the Genealogy of Morality*, Essay 3, sections 23-25.

⁴⁸ Ansell-Pearson and Babette Babich both express this criticism forcefully. See Ansell-Pearson, *Viroid Life*, and Babich, „Nietzsche's Post-Human Imperative: On the 'All-too-Human' Dream of Transhumanism“ in *Nietzsche and Transhumanism*.

important. A feature of contemporary life in many countries today is that we live in pluralistic cultures where there is no one agreed-upon ideal of the good life. More deeply, more philosophically, we might acknowledge that we still don't know in what the good life consists. The value of debates such as that around Nietzsche and transhumanism is precisely that it exposes the presuppositions about the good which are bound up with our attitudes towards 'liminal' ideas and practices such as human technological enhancement.

Stiegler's radical opposition to transhumanism (like that of others) proceeds as though there is a single, uniform meaning this term might take – one that fully and uncritically embraces 'algorithmic rationality'. And yet, Stiegler's work in fact gives us reasons to believe that an alternative, and potentially more 'Nietzschean', form of transhumanism is conceivable. This would be a transhumanism which, precisely, repurposes contemporary technologies to fight industrial proletarianization and enhance capacities for individuation, as Stiegler and his *Ars Industrialis* group call for.⁴⁹ Briefly, this possibility is justified by the conceptual links between Nietzsche's idea of enhancement, what Foucault calls the 'technologies of the self' (*techniques de soi*), and Stiegler's own conception of originary technicity.⁵⁰

As Sorgner acknowledges, Nietzsche conceived human enhancement not in terms of technological prostheses, but in terms of the strength to interpret and affirm life and legislate values. On the face of it, culture and education remain clearer means to achieve this form of enhancement than anything contemporary sciences and technologies have to offer. What is required, it seems, are actually quite ancient technologies, such as study, reading, writing, dietary regimes and physical training, and in general all those things which Foucault, drawing on Pierre Hadot, identified as techniques of self-cultivation in the philosophical schools of the ancient Greek and Roman worlds. Stiegler does tend to privilege such techniques as more effective for healthy individuation than the ways in which information technologies are typically deployed in our hyperindustrial capitalist system. Yet at the same time, there is nothing *essential* about this. Stiegler's thesis of originary technicity gives us reason not to draw a clear line of separation between a 'human essence' and technologies, and in fact he explicitly

⁴⁹ See Bernard Stiegler, *The Re-enchantment of the World: The Value of Spirit Against Industrial Populism*, trans. Trevor Arthur, London 2014.

⁵⁰ I have argued this in my contribution to *Nietzsche and Transhumanism*, „Postmodern Perspectives on the Nietzsche and Transhumanism Exchange“.

connects new information technologies with the technologies of the self of which Foucault wrote:

information and communication technologies are precisely spiritual technologies, and this means that they just as much raise again the question of memory techniques, which Foucault analyzed in the sense of techniques of the “writing of the self.” He returned to this in order to qualify the Greek term *hypomnēmata*, which has been the major philosophical question since Plato—he having already defined writing as *hypomnēsis*, that is, as a memory technique.

Considered as mnemo-technologies, industrial technologies of spirit are new forms of *hypomnēmata*; and as *hypomnēmata* of another age, particularly in the Stoic and Epicurean schools, and in primitive Christianity, in the Rome in which the Greek *skholè* became the Roman practice of the *otium*, industrial technologies of spirit call for new practices, that is, after all is said and done, new social organizations.⁵¹

Rather than celebrate or decry transhumanism outright in Nietzsche’s name, the more interesting question is what a Nietzschean transhumanism might possibly be. The challenge for a Nietzschean transhumanism, which I can only gesture towards but not explore here, would be how to understand the predominant effects and the latent potentials of current and future technologies in relation to the project of responding to nihilism.

However such a Nietzschean transhumanism might be developed, it should take into account some significant hesitations I believe we should have in the face of Stiegler’s claims to being a Nietzschean, and how he understands nihilism and its counter-movement today. These hesitations focus on his discussions of entropy and negentropy, which in fact resonate with aspects of the transhumanism he decries. In a follow-up note to Sorgner’s original article, Max More adds that the advent of transhumanism, at least in some of its influential forms, not only bears unconscious similarities to Nietzsche’s thought, but was in fact directly influenced by Nietzsche.⁵² More claims that it was he who introduced the term transhumanism and in doing so he was directly influenced by Nietzsche (who he also occasionally quotes in his seminal writings on the topic). Significantly, More explicitly centres the values of transhumanism around what he calls ‘extropy’, his own neologism for the inverse of entropy (more typically

⁵¹ Stiegler, *The Re-Enchantment of the World*, 13.

⁵² Max More, „The Overman in the Transhuman“ in *Nietzsche and Transhumanism*, 2017.

called negentropy or negative entropy), and develops them through his activities as motivational speaker for businesses and head of a cryogenics company.

Stiegler is aware of ‘extropianism’, and critically distinguishes it from his own valuation of negentropy.⁵³ Yet what the example of Max More shows is, if not a straightforward complicity of Stiegler’s views with the transhumanism he criticises, then at least the sheer *interpretability* of the terms he privileges. This is further demonstrated by Lyotard’s choice to attach exactly the opposite valuations to the same categories, associating entropy with the unexpected, the unthought, and the chance event, and negentropy with the attempt to totally calculate and programme the future in the interests of complete security and the reliable reproduction of profit. For Lyotard, the contemporary metanarrative which persists after the decline of modernity replaces the human with negentropic complexity as the hero of the narrative (much as we see with transhumanism). This perspective vitiates ethics and justice, as, Lyotard suggests, from this point of view it would seem better to eliminate the populations of the Third World because they are an entropic drain on global negentropic becoming.⁵⁴

Yet Stiegler often seems to present the thesis of entropy and negentropy as something like a *naturalization* of values, a grounding of values in the science of life (frequently referring, for example, to Schrödinger’s seminal *What is Life?*⁵⁵). Yet what is missing here is the dimension of *interpretation* which cannot be shorn from Nietzsche’s naturalism, as we have seen noted by Sorgner above.⁵⁶ Moreover, even if we *do* adopt a ‘factual’ naturalistic perspective on values, the way Stiegler presents entropy and negentropy are suspect from a purely scientific viewpoint. He refers to Georgescu-Roegen as an authority, but this influential economist’s work on entropy is today generally discredited, because he made the mistake of conflating energy and matter in his work on the supposed entropy of economic systems.⁵⁷ More importantly, there is a complex story to be told here – to which I cannot hope to do justice, but

⁵³ See for example Stiegler, *The Neganthropocene*, 86.

⁵⁴ Lyotard relates this story in numerous places, but for its most developed form, see „A Postmodern Fable“ in *Postmodern Fables*, trans. G. Van Den Abbeele, Minnesota, Minn. 1999, and for this explicit ethical point, *The Inhuman: Reflections on Time*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington and Rachel Bowlby, Cambridge, 1991, 76-77. For further discussion of this see my book *Lyotard and the Inhuman Condition: Reflections on Nihilism, Information, and Art*, Edinburgh, 2016.

⁵⁵ Erwin Schrödinger, *What is Life?*, Cambridge 1944.

⁵⁶ In a more thoroughly detailed way, Christoph Cox has convincingly shown, I believe, that Nietzsche’s perspectivism and emphasis on interpretation are not at odds, but rather are consistent with, his naturalism. For if we view human beings from a naturalistic perspective, they appear as necessarily perspectival and interpretative creatures. See Cox’s *Nietzsche: Naturalism and Interpretation*, Oakland, CA 1999.

⁵⁷ Nicholas Georgescu-Roegen, *The Entropy Law and the Economic Process*, Cambridge MA 1971.

merely gloss briefly – regarding the lineage of the concept of entropy from Norbert Wiener and cybernetics, through Simondon, to Stiegler. Isabelle Stengers has cautioned that in our reception of Simondon today, we should be cautious of the partial and selective way he took up concepts from science. In particular, drawing on the work of her collaborator Ilya Prigogine, she notes that Simondon’s understanding of ‘metastable equilibrium’ was limited to its functioning in the individuation of ‘equilibrium’ structures, such as crystals (a privileged example for Simondon). In such processes, entropy retains its ‘traditionally’ understood function as simply a loss and dissipation leading to disorder. However, a more complex picture of the role of entropy has in fact emerged with discoveries concerning metastable equilibrium. Here, when a system is in a far from equilibrium state, entropy can act as a force of production in ‘dissipative structures’, in which order emerges from chaotic states.⁵⁸ Esra Atamer has noted how the conceptions of entropy in thinkers such as Schrödinger and Wiener are limited by tending to support the old vitalist notion that life is *opposed* to ‘natural physical forces’, leading to their positing of an opposition between negentropy to entropy.⁵⁹ It seems that Stiegler has uncritically taken up this model, which should now be challenged in relation to more recent science. Atamer draws out the implications of this for Simondon, which are equally relevant for Stiegler: we should understand entropy and negentropy not as oppositions, but as co-compositional tendencies, and recognise the possibility of ‘dissipative individuation’.⁶⁰

However, questions of science are not the key stake here; evaluative categories are, and the implications they have for ethical, political, and existential matters. As we have noted above, Stiegler recognises the importance of Nietzsche’s thought of tragedy as involving the intertwining of co-compositional tendencies – a thought prior to the nihilism ushered in by Platonic-Christian oppositional thinking. However, what could be more ‘Christian’ (in Nietzsche’s pejorative sense) than setting up an absolute evaluative opposition between life and death, order and disorder, creation and destruction, with the terms negentropy and entropy? This is the heart of what is wrong with many versions of transhumanism, and Stiegler seems to be repeating this gesture. He reintroduces oppositional thought, and even the values of good

⁵⁸ See Isabelle Stengers, „Comment hériter de Simondon?“ in *Gilbert Simondon: Une Pensée Opérative*, ed. Jacques Roux, Saint-Étienne, 2002; „Pour une mise à l’aventure de la transduction“, *Annales de l’Institut de Philosophie de l’Université de Bruxelles: Simondon*, ed. Pascal Chabot, Paris, 2002; and „Résister à Simondon?“, *Multitudes* 4.4 (2004), 55-62.

⁵⁹ Esra Atamer, „Disipative Individuation“, *Parrhesia* 12 (2011), 57-70.

⁶⁰ On entropy and negentropy in Stiegler and Lyotard, see also my chapter „Circuits of Desire: Cybernetics and the Post-natural“ in *Lyotard and Stiegler in Philosophy After Nature*, ed. Rosi Braidotti and Rick Dolphijn, London 2017.

and evil, at a meta-level: the co-constitutive tendencies that he recognises as valuable are both categorised on the side of negentropy, while all that falls on the side of entropy is condemned.⁶¹ This is a long way from Nietzschean higher pessimism and tragic affirmation, and Stiegler would do well to remember Nietzsche's warning, in *Gay Science* 109: "Let us beware of saying that death is opposed to life".⁶²

When we think of the co-compositional tendencies of Nietzsche's tragic thought, we cannot but think of the Apollonian and the Dionysian.⁶³ Now, in his analysis of the human condition and the 'tragic' response to it in *The Birth of Tragedy*, the Dionysian is precisely a force of dis-individuation, a collapse of the *principium individuationis*, which is ecstatic and intoxicating, and which attenuates the suffering attendant on our condition as individuated beings. The Dionysian is described as a tendency which has "little regard for the individual, even seeking to annihilate, redeem, and release him".⁶⁴ It "causes subjectivity to vanish to the point of complete self-forgetting".⁶⁵ We should, then, extend hesitations regarding Stiegler's assertion of the evaluative categories of entropy and negentropy along two lines: 1) entropy may play a productive role in individuation (in dissipative structures), and 2) the Dionysian as a force of dis-individuation should be tragically affirmed.

I would like to conclude by recalling the typological distinction with which I began, that of *reductive* and *abyssal* nihilism. This distinction, I suggest, allows a certain perspective, simplified and overly-schematic to be sure, through which to compare some of the main themes of Nietzsche interpretation I have discussed, both historic and recent. Interpreters of the '60s

⁶¹ It seems to me that Stiegler's following remarks about Marxist thought might equally well be applied to his own on the issue of (neg)entropy: "A great weakness of Marxist thought ... has been that it has understood class struggle as the possible and necessary *elimination* of one tendency of the exteriorization process in which social life exists by another, contrary tendency. The Marxist thought of struggle then becomes *reactive* in the Nietzschean sense: it does not think tragically; there is within Marxism still something Christian (that is, for Nietzsche, Platonic), something that *does not want to think tragically, that is, to think through composition* rather than through opposition". (Stiegler, *The Decadence of Industrial Democracies*, 52-3).

⁶² Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, ed. Bernard Williams, trans. Josephine Nauckhoff, Cambridge 2001, 110.

⁶³ While the Apollonian and the Dionysian are often described by Nietzsche as oppositional, they are just as clearly described as tendencies capable of co-composition: "These two very different drives (*Triebe*) exist side by side, mostly in open conflict, stimulating and provoking (*reizen*) one another to give birth to ever-new, more vigorous offspring in whom they perpetuate the conflict inherent in the opposition between them, an opposition only apparently bridged by the common term 'art' – until eventually, by a metaphysical miracle of the Hellenic 'Will', they appear paired and, in this pairing, finally engender a work of art which is Dionysiac and Apolline in equal measure: Attic tragedy". Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, ed. Raymond Geuss and Ronald Speirs, trans. R. Speirs, Cambridge 1999, 14.

⁶⁴ Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, 19.

⁶⁵ Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, 17.

and '70s such as Klossowski, Lyotard, and Deleuze focus on the destruction of reductive nihilism through strategies of dissolution of the self and existing social structures. Arguably, these attempts remain tied to the strategy of overcoming, both Nietzschean and Marxist, and the belief that meaning can arise once nihilism is completely destroyed. If the hope of a decisive overcoming is abandoned, however, a danger becomes apparent: that the strategy of responding directly only to reductive nihilism may in fact exacerbate abyssal nihilism. Arguably, this danger is particularly prominent in contemporary society, where many existing structures and institutions are already significantly deregulated. By directly responding only to reductive nihilism, then, Klossowski, Lyotard and other earlier Nietzscheans threaten to exacerbate the abyssal nihilism which afflicts contemporary societies.

By contrast, with Stiegler we see something of the opposite extreme: a response to the nihilism of hyperindustrial capitalism, in which information technologies play a decisive role, through the affirmation of negentropy in response to abyssal nihilism. Stiegler's primary concern is with the possibility of individuation, of properly forming selves and social institutions, rather than their dissolution. Stiegler's work is vitally important today, and supplies a necessary corrective to the one-sided focus of the 70s philosophers, but he also risks squandering the legacy of the philosophical avant-gardes in veering too far towards what could be interpreted as a reassertion of bourgeois values. Against this, recalling the image of Nietzsche presented in earlier French philosophy, the monster of energy who can affirm suffering and affirm destruction and dissolution as necessary to processes of change, becoming, and life itself, is also a necessary corrective.

How we are to understand Nietzsche, in relation to the various interpretations of a politics of difference we have seen above, of course depends entirely on the view we take of the contemporary world. Klossowski and Lyotard write as though we are caught in a machine of generalised regulated repetition, the forces of which need to be deregulated so the machine can explode and its parts dissolve, metamorphosing the system and setting us free. Stiegler, on the other hand, writes as though we are hooked up to this machine and dependant on its survival, while it is running dangerously low on energy and is about to stop functioning at all. Undoubtedly, the world and its primary political challenges no longer appears to us as they did for the Nietzscheans of '72. Many analyses have tried to explain how the 'system' of technoscience and capitalism have mutated such that the strategies of the countercultural revolution and poststructuralist philosophy of this period – strategies aimed at the dissolution

of the self, the State, and traditional social structures – seem naive, or even counterproductive, in today’s world.⁶⁶

The machine itself is beyond our grasp; all we can do is look for signs of the whole. It is also complex, a mechanosphere, a patchwork of little machines, local machines. Even if we need to inject some energy into the ‘big machine’ to save us from entropy, that doesn’t mean we don’t need to exacerbate entropy in local machines, including ourselves, to dissolve old forms and let new ones breathe. The two images of Nietzsche as creator and destroyer supply concepts which might help in thinking complex form of life in processes of becoming, as ambiguously intertwined as Apollo and Dionysus, and just as tragic in their modest capacity to help us understand and deal with our contemporary predicament. Rather than choose strategies which work towards a decisive overcoming of nihilism, I would argue that with our reading of Nietzsche today we should try to find and employ strategies which meet *both* reductive and abyssal manifestations of nihilism on their own terms. This means recalling the past radical readings of Nietzsche as much as inventing new ones. Such a double strategy would aim to open spaces for the enhancement of the value of life against the encroachment of these dual nihilistic currents. This approach would be a way of responding to nihilism beyond the hope of a definitive overcoming, and without deferring its mitigation to some distantly imagined future.

⁶⁶ Of particular note for the perspectives we have explored here is Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello’s *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Gregory Elliot, London 2018. See Stiegler’s analysis of this work, at once sympathetic and critical, in the first part of *The Lost Spirit of Capitalism: Disbelief and Discredit, volume 3*, trans. Daniel Ross, Cambridge 2014. For Stiegler’s own extended analysis of the political shortcomings of the poststructuralist generation of French philosophers, see his *States of Shock: Stupidity and Knowledge in the 21st Century*, trans. Daniel Ross, Cambridge, 2014.