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Infinite Monkeys: Nietzsche and the Cruel Optimism of Personal Immortality

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Infinite Monkeys: Nietzsche and the Cruel Optimism of Personal Immortality

by

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Under the Direction of Jessica Berry, Ph.D.

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

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ABSTRACT

Nietzsche is a popular source of inspiration for transhumanist writers. Some, such as

Sorgner (2009) and More (2010), argue that Nietzsche ought to be considered a precursor of the

movement. Transhumanism is a philosophy committed to the desirability of using technology to

transform human beings, through significant alteration of their brains and bodies, into a new

posthuman species. One of the defining characteristics of transhumanism is the desire for

personal immortality. I argue that this feature of transhumanism is wholly incompatible with

Nietzsche's philosophy, and a close examination of this disagreement brings out the degree to

which transhumanists and Nietzsche differ in their values and philosophical commitments.

Nietzsche does not think that personal immortality is desirable or metaphysically possible. I

show that his views have more in common with philosophers like Bernard Williams and Derek

Parfit than they do with transhumanism.

INDEX WORDS: Immortality, Death, Friedrich Nietzsche, Philosophy of personal identity,
Transhumanism, Philosophy of technology

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

Parenthetical citations of works by Nietzsche refer to the following:
A-*The Antichrist*
BGE-*Beyond Good and Evil*
D-*Daybreak*
EH-*Ecce Homo*
GM-*On the Genealogy of Morality*
GS-*The Gay Science*
HH-*Human, All Too Human*
TSZ-*Thus Spoke Zarathustra*
UM-*Untimely Meditations*
WP-*The Will to Power*

1   INTRODUCTION

There's nothing inherently wrong with conjuring up an historical ghost to speak for you. All of us are familiar with the experience of having a good idea only to find that same idea already expressed—and probably more eloquently—by some long dead philosopher. Summoning this famous figure as an expert witness can be a powerful rhetorical tool, even if some anachronistic distortions are required to match their views to your own. All too often, however, we squeeze the life out of these historical figures—they're reduced to little more than a name, a mustache, a short list of famous terms and ideas. In the process, we lose sight of our influencer's most interesting thoughts.

So, you have the phenomenon of Friedrich Nietzsche's quotes and ideas appearing dramatically out of context in the works of philosophers who in one way or another are supporting positions closer to those that Nietzsche argued *against*. Undoubtedly, Nietzsche himself, with his penchant for elusive language, irony, and prosopopoeia, bears some of the responsibility for this confusion, but the sheer variety of groups that have misinterpreted him since his death is as impressive as it is baffling. There have been Nietzschean existentialists, Nietzschean postmodernists, and Nietzschean fascists. More recently, there have been Nietzschean transhumanists.

Transhumanism is, roughly, a philosophy advocating the use of technology to dramatically alter the human body and nature into a new, *posthuman* form. Nietzsche is a popular source of inspiration for transhumanist writers, and some go so far as to argue that Nietzsche ought to be considered an "ancestor" or kindred spirit of the movement (Sorgner 2009; More 2010). Superficially, these claims seem compelling. Nevertheless, transhumanists who see much of themselves in Nietzsche are mistaken. In fact, Nietzsche's thinking poses serious

challenges to the transhumanist worldview that transhumanists writers ought to take more seriously.

I focus here on the topic of personal immortality—a favorite of transhumanists and a point at which the differences between them and Nietzsche are clear. Transhumanists seek to radically extend their lifespan, indefinitely if possible. Yet, it can be quite convincingly demonstrated that Nietzsche does not think that personal immortality is either desirable or metaphysically possible. A close examination of Nietzsche's criticisms of immortality brings out the degree to which transhumanists and Nietzsche differ in their values and philosophical commitments.

Of course, transhumanists are not the only people concerned with personal immortality. Fear, uncertainty, and confusion in the face of death are feelings we are all familiar with. The transhumanist approach to death is not so different from those of some traditional religions— new chrome and neon furnishings for old monasteries. A Nietzschean response to transhumanism then, may be of interest to a wide variety of people, whether or not they find the technological optimism of transhumanism all that plausible. In other words, examining what Nietzsche has to say about death allows us to focus on some oft overlooked features his philosophy that suggest to us a more radical way of viewing our own inevitable deaths and our usual desire for immortality.

2   WHAT'S IT LIKE TO BE A POSTHUMAN?

What does it mean to be a transhumanist? Descriptions of the movement, even those

given by its founding figures, are often so vague and inclusive that they fail to capture what

makes transhumanism either novel or controversial.[1] Compounding this problem is the existence

of a (much larger) group of people—cyberpunk enthusiasts, cyberfeminists, hyperpop fans, and

so on whose interests are aesthetic, metaphorical, or social but who make use of the same

trappings and concepts of transhumanism in order to explore what it means to be human, the

relationship between the person and the body, the effects of technology on our lives, and so on.

What separates transhumanists from those who merely have an interest in the philosophical

questions posed by technology is a normative commitment to the desirability of quite literally

altering—or "enhancing"—human beings and human experience through the significantly

transformative use of new or speculative technologies. The basic idea is that the technology of

the future—genetic engineering, brain-machine interfaces, virtual reality, and advanced artificial

intelligence are common topics of discussion—may provide us with the means of transcending

the current biological limitations of the human organism and open up to us new and more

desirable modes of existence.[2] Very often, this transformation is phrased in pseudo-Darwinian

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[1] Nick Bostrom, for instance, writes, "[Transhumanism] promotes an interdisciplinary approach to understanding and evaluating the opportunities for enhancing the human condition and the human organism opened up by the advancement of technology" (Bostrom 2005a).

[2] I should be clearer about what I mean by *significantly transformative*. Clearly, technology has already transformed the way that humans live their lives, and it will continue to do so. Many of the technologies that interest transhumanists have their uncontroversial uses. Genetic engineering, for example, may be used to treat a large variety of diseases. Such therapeutic uses of new technology are generally uncontroversial to all but the most extreme Luddites. At the same time, there are many instances in which the use of new technology for "enhancement" or cosmetic purposes might be equally uncontroversial.

Take, for a concrete example, transcranial direct current stimulation (tDCS), in which electrodes are applied to the scalp to stimulate the brain with a weak electrical current. When applied, tDCS modulates brain activity, and it's therapeutically effective in treating some psychiatric disorders (Philip et al. 2017). Yet, there is also evidence that tDCS can temporarily improve memory and attention in neurologically healthy people, raising ethical and practical questions about its application (Coffman et al. 2014). On the one hand, tDCS might be used by some to gain an unfair advantage in competition, similar

terms, such as when Max More, one of the movement's early proponents, describes

transhumanism as:

> Philosophies of life… that seek the continuation and acceleration of the evolution of intelligent life beyond its currently human form and human limitations by means of science and technology, guided by life-promoting principles and values. (More 1990)

Similarly, Nick Bostrom, transhumanism's most notable representative in academic

philosophy, writes that human nature ought to be seen as a work-in-progress—one that may soon

be under human control (Bostrom 2005a). Natural selection, of course, isn't an agent that *works*

on anything—the concept refers to a mindless, directionless filtering process—but the idea here

is that humans may, through technological ingenuity, gain control of the tools of design and their

own future development.[3] In this way transhumanism resembles a sort of futurist's existentialism

in which we might be free to redesign the species as we see fit. As the technological capability of

the species increases, the biological flaws and limitations of the human organism that serve as a

barrier to greater advances in knowledge, happiness, beauty—whichever ancient white whale

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to the use of performance enhancing drugs (PEDs) in sports. And like PEDs, long term use of tDCS might have deleterious health or cognitive effects (Jwa 2015). On the other hand, there are certain instances where someone having enhanced attention may be desirable—in the cases of surgeons and pilots and so on. One might suspect, given the mention of "brain modulation" that tDCS might be considered a "transhuman" technology. But while the use of tDCS by neurotypical people to improve attention would certainly count as an "enhancement" use of technology, you do not need to be a transhumanist to accept that there are conditions for which this nontherapeutic use might be ethical or desirable. Almost all of us accept the use of "enhancement" technologies to some degree—things as widespread as caffeine consumption would fall under this category. Yet the level of modification and "enhancement" provided by extant technology is far milder than the radical change the transhumanist project calls for. A person who uses tDCS, much like a person who drinks caffeine, retains their human character—transhumanists are interested in using technology to go *beyond* what any neurotypical human could now experience or even imagine.

[3] The use of teleological language is a recurring problem in the transhumanist literature. Species do not *improve* or become *more evolved*, populations merely change in response to environmental pressures and challenges, drift, and so on. Of course, most transhumanists do not claim that natural selection is actually teleological, and the problem of persistent teleology isn't unique to transhumanists—you can find many biologists and philosophers of all types slipping up. Nevertheless, the remnants and distortions of this thinking are often utilized for rhetorical effect in transhumanist writings.

floating in the Aegean Sea you find most enticing—or perhaps just plain pleasure, might no longer frustrate us. As such, transhumanist writers often assume, either implicitly or explicitly, a moral imperative—the human species *ought* to be improved upon.

Perhaps these sentiments of transhumanism are most perfectly expressed in Max More's mawkish "A Letter to Mother Nature" (2013), where the author addresses the above-mentioned mindless, directionless filtering process and writes, "we must say that you have in many ways done a poor job with the human constitution. You compel us to age and die… You were miserly in the extent to which you gave us awareness of our somatic, cognitive, and emotional processes. You held out the sharpest senses for other animals. You made us functional only under narrow environmental conditions. You gave us limited memory, poor impulse control, and tribalistic, xenophobic urges. And you forgot to give us the operating manual for ourselves!" (p. 449) What's more, Mother Nature has "lost interest in our further evolution." Transhumanists, however, will not accept this state of half-assembly, and More lists seven "amendments" to the human constitution, such as, "We will supplement the neocortex with a 'metabrain'," and, "We will no longer be slaves to our genes," and, "We will no longer tolerate the tyranny of aging and death" (p. 450).

Through technological transformation, transhumanists hope to bring about a new *posthuman* species—one with physical and cognitive capacities greatly exceeding those of humans. Exact clarity on what the posthuman life will be like is difficult to come by and varies depending on the author's preferences and depth of technical knowledge—though all authors agree they will live longer and more fulfilling lives than humans. As Bostrom writes, "If, aside from extended healthspans, the essence of posthumanity is to be able to have thoughts and experiences that we cannot readily think or experience with our current capacities, then it is not

surprising that our ability to imagine what posthuman life might be like is very limited"
(Bostrom 2008, p. 32). Posthumans may view us humans in the same distant way that we view
gorillas and chimps—or bats, lizards, and bees, for that matter. One is *transhuman* insofar as one
is part of the transition from humanity to the more desirable state of posthumanity (even if, given
current technological limitations, one is transhuman mostly in spirit and mindset).
Transhumanists either wish to become posthumans themselves or else set the stage for future
posthumans.

While prominent transhumanists like Max More have been claiming Nietzsche as an
influence for decades (More 1990; 2010), the contemporary debate about Nietzsche's connection
to the movement took off with Stefan Sorgner's essay, "Nietzsche, the Overhuman, and
Transhumanism" (2009). There, Sorgner argues that there are significant and fundamental
similarities between the concept of a posthuman and Nietzsche's *Übermensch* ("overhuman").
Analyzing this claim is, at first blush, difficult—Nietzsche scholars disagree on the details
concerning the *Übermensch* even more than transhumanists disagree on the details concerning
posthumans, and Sorgner's claim relies on his own idiosyncratic evolutionary understanding of
the *Übermensch* as a new species that Nietzsche believes may come about through the breeding
of "higher" humans (Sorgner 2009, p. 6). Sorgner argues that Nietzsche believed that evolution
took place in sudden, discrete steps, rather than gradually, so that, "If the conditions within one
species are such that an evolutionary step can take place, various couples at the same time give
birth to members of a new species" (p. 7). In other words, gather together Nietzsche's higher
humans, and they will produce the children of a new superhuman species. According to Sorgner,
Nietzsche believed that no *Übermensch* has existed yet, but that in the coming age of science a

new type of creature with "significantly different potential from that of higher humans" would emerge (p. 8).

Importantly, Sorgner also explains the appeal of the posthuman to transhumanists—claiming that "scientifically minded people" who have abandoned their belief in traditional religious doctrines might find comfort and meaning in transhumanism (2009, p. 9). This claim is not unique to Sorgner—other transhumanists such as More (1990) have argued similarly, though often hesitantly. Truly grappling with the theological implications of Darwinian evolution and the modern scientific worldview is a worrisome task. We can no longer tell the same stories of original sin and Heaven to give the struggling and suffering of life meaning. Instead, modern science continuously reminds us of the *smallness* of human life. The universe is no more *for* us than it was for any of the species we find fossilized remnants of in the ground. This smallness can get intolerable, and in the case of many writers, transhumanism might best be understood as a new way of conceiving ourselves as *more* than human, and certainly more than animals—or at least we can be. Like many (though, importantly, not all) religions, transhumanism effectively provides the adherent with hope of a new world and deathless life to come if they act correctly (in transhumanism's case, rationally and scientifically). The possibility of posthuman life—something *more* than human—might serve to give human actions some meaning. Sorgner believes that Nietzsche intended the *Übermensch* to function somewhat similarly.

When Nietzsche is interpreted the way Sorgner interprets him, the apparent similarities with transhumanism are obvious—just substitute "higher humans" with "transhumanists" and *Übermensch* with "posthuman," and the story remains mostly the same. And Sorgner's description of Nietzsche fits perfectly with his own endorsement of what he calls "liberal

eugenics" (2009, p. 5).[4] The question, of course, is whether Sorgner is right to interpret Nietzsche this way. Between you and me, I think there are some reasons to be skeptical.

3 DIE ÜBERMENSCHEN

While Sorgner's right about some things—Nietzsche, like transhumanists (and for that matter, like contemporary biologists), does not believe that species are immutable or that human nature is unchanging—his description of the *Übermensch* is seriously flawed. Nietzsche himself directly tells us not to interpret the concept as a new evolutionary species, writing:

> The word *Übermensch* to designate a type that has turned out supremely well, in antithesis to 'modern' men, to 'good' men, to Christians and other nihilists…has almost everywhere been understood with perfect innocence in the sense of those values whose antithesis makes its appearance in the figure of Zarathustra: that is to say as an 'idealistic' type of higher species of man…Other learned cattle caused me on its account to be suspected of Darwinism […] (*EH*, Books: 1). [5]

Like several of Nietzsche's (or, rather, Zarathustra's) most famous concepts, it's not clear whether or not the *Übermensch* is meant to be merely a literary device (Hauskeller 2010, p. 35). It's certainly not clear that Nietzsche thought the *Übermensch* would be radically biologically distinct from human beings, or that the *Übermensch* would have vastly superhuman physical and cognitive capabilities. One alternate interpretation of all the *Übermensch* talk is that the "*mensch*" part is just as important as the *"über"* part. In other words, that Zarathustra is ironically saying that "super" human lives can justify human life—that we don't need to look for otherworldly justification. In that case, interpreting the *Übermensch* as a *literally superhuman* creature would be entirely missing the point. And it's not clear why Sorgner thinks no

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[4] "Liberal eugenics" here is contrasted with "state regulated" eugenics: "In the case of state regulated eugenics, the state decides [what traits are desirable], whereas in the case of liberal eugenics, the parents have the right to decide what ought to be done to offspring. Transhumanists seem to identify a further type of eugenics which I suggest could be called autonomous eugenics. People may decide for themselves whether they wish to be transformed into posthumans by technological means" (Sorgner 2009, p. 7).
[5] With the exception of *EH*, Nietzsche's works are cited by section rather than page number. For *EH*, passages are cited by chapter title and section number.

Übermensch has ever existed, when Nietzsche actually appears to use the very much human

Cesare Borgia as an example of one (*EH*, Books: 1). Yet despite these cracks in Sorgner's

analysis, the belief that Nietzsche and transhumanists have much in common persists. [6]

Not all transhumanists are so keen on rubbing shoulders with Nietzsche. Bostrom, for

instance, claims that transhumanism, with its enlightenment values and the general utilitarian and

libertarian leanings of its believers, has more in common with John Stuart Mill than Nietzsche

(Bostrom 2005b). If that's true, we almost certainly can't consider Nietzsche an early

transhumanist; Nietzsche reserves some of his harshest criticism for Mill and utilitarianism (e.g.,

BGE §225). More (2010) and Sorgner (2010) both respond to Bostrom by pointing out that

transhumanism is a heterogenous movement and that individual transhumanists need not be

utilitarians—though many are. Both authors identify Nietzsche as a virtue theorist, which is in

theory perfectly compatible with transhumanism.[7] Nevertheless, some transhumanists—while

apparently sharing Sorgner's interpretation of Nietzsche—view Nietzsche as a proto-

transhumanist of a rather nasty, illiberal sort.

By far, however, the harshest critiques of Sorgner's paper come from critics of

transhumanism. Of particular note, for my purposes, is Michael Hauskeller's (2010) response.

There, Hauskeller points to many passages in Nietzsche's works that directly contradict

Sorgner's interpretation and put Nietzsche at odds with transhumanism generally. In *EH*, for

example, Nietzsche tells us, "The last thing that *I* would promise would be to 'improve'

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[6] Others who support Sorgner's interpretation include transhumanists More (2010) and Blackford (2017), as well as Nietzsche scholar Paul Loeb (2010). That's not to mention *critics* of transhumanism, who also often make the connection with Nietzsche, such as Habermas (2003).

[7] "While Nietzsche viewed morality as essentially perspectival, we can easily enough fit him loosely within the virtue ethics approach classically represented by Aristotle" (More 2010). While being a virtue theorist may be compatible with being a transhumanist, it may not be compatible with being Nietzsche; see Jessica Berry (2015).

mankind" (*EH*, Preface, 2). Later, in the same book, he writes of "the holy pretext of 'improving'

mankind as the cunning to *suck out* life itself and to make it anemic" (*EH,* Preface, 8). Quotes

like these are the norm, rather than the exception in Nietzsche's work. Notably, Hauskeller also

notes Nietzsche's apparent opposition to personal immortality, citing passages in *The Antichrist*

where Nietzsche takes aim at the Christian belief in the eternal soul. There, Nietzsche is

particularly concerned with the effects of holding such a belief, writing:

> When the centre of gravity of life is placed, *not* in life itself, but in "the
> beyond"—in *nothingness*—then one has taken away its centre of gravity
> altogether. The vast lie of personal immortality destroys all reason, all natural
> instinct—henceforth, everything in the instincts that is beneficial, that fosters life
> and that safeguards the future is a cause of suspicion. So, to live that life no longer
> has any meaning: *this* is now the "meaning" of life.... Why be public-spirited?
> Why take any pride in descent and forefathers? Why labour together, trust one
> another, or concern one's self about the common welfare, and try to serve it? [...]
> Merely so many "temptations," so many strayings from the "straight path."—
> "*One* thing only is necessary." (*A* §43)

Hauskeller, however, believes that Nietzsche's primary reason for opposing personal immortality

is, "Not so much because he thought it was impossible for us to ever become immortal, but

rather because he believed that most of us are far too insignificant and worthless to *deserve*

immortality" (p. 35)—a point which is supported in *A* §43.[8] And Zarathustra tells us that more

people die *too early* than they do *too late* (*TSZ* §21). According to Hauskeller, Nietzsche

believes that at the right time, we should embrace our death, rather than fear it, "in order to

plunge again into the great ocean of becoming" (p. 35). Hauskeller gestures in the right direction

here, but his points are flawed and require significant expansion. Nietzsche has far more to say

about immortality that's of philosophical interest.

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[8] In fact, passages in *Daybreak* indicate that Nietzsche thinks *all*, not just the majority, of humans are
undeserving of immortality: "And you earth-dwellers, with your petty conception of a couple thousand little
minutes, want to burden eternal existence with yourselves everlasting!" (*D* 211)

Sorgner (2010) responds to Hauskeller in two ways: first, he argues that Nietzsche's criticism of immortality mainly applies to the *Christian* conception of immortality, which Sorgner claims Nietzsche dislikes specifically because of its *otherworldly* nature, and hence its non-existence (p. 61). Second, Sorgner argues that Nietzsche attempts to replace the Christian concept of immortality with a *this-worldly*, or naturalistic, immortality—that of the *eternal recurrence*. If that's true, Nietzsche might not be against personal immortality full-stop, just certain types of immortality that require otherworldly metaphysics.

4   DEAD THOUGHTS AND ETERNAL THINGS

Sorgner is wrong on both points. If you focus solely on the aphorisms Hauskeller cites, from *A* and *TSZ*, you might assume that Nietzsche is primarily concerned with the way the Christian promise of immortality diverts the believer's attention from enjoying and interacting with the real world to securing a nonexistent, otherworldly future. This point is certainly a part of Nietzsche's criticism, but it's only a small part. Even in the above passage from *A*, there is more going on that is worth unpacking.

The belief in eternal life, or eternal things in general, carries with it the belief that noneternal things are *lacking* in comparison. Perfect or higher things, so the reasoning goes, should not lack properties like immortality and immutability. Take any good thing, and it could always be made greater by making it immortal or permanent. This devaluation of ephemeral things becomes especially problematic if *all things that exist actually are ephemeral*. Couple this with a problem presented by the way in which people conceive of a thing or act's ultimate value as a function of that thing's lasting *end* or purpose, and we have a recipe for nihilism. In short, life seems *pointless*—all things, it seems, are fleeting, and everything will be forgotten. Religions

seek to deal with these problems in one way or another, either by embracing the fleetingness of things or by crafting some metaphysical realm of permanent things.

Traditionally, Christian writers have taken the devaluation of the ephemeral to the extreme. Blaise Pascal, for instance, asks us to seriously consider our lives being followed by infinite time, in which we either have been annihilated and do not exist, or else in which we exist in some alternate state (Pascal, XLVI). In both cases, the course of our Earthly lives takes up only an infinitesimal point on this infinite timeline, and the events of our lives are, consequently, infinitely trivial unless they have some sort of effect on our coming infinite state. For Pascal, Earthly existence is characterized by its pointlessness and unpleasantness—the only thing that has any meaning is securing salvation. All other activities amount to nothing. He writes:

> Let us think about it, then say whether it is not beyond doubt that the only good in this life lies in the hope of another life, that we are only happy the closer we come to it, and that, just as there will be no more unhappiness for those who were completely certain of eternity, there is no hope either of happiness for those who have no glimmer of it! (ibid.)

If we remove the possibility of an otherworldly happy ending from Pascal, we find a view that is, I think, quite similar to Schopenhauer's—that is, a view of life as a period of pointless and unpleasant distractions. For Pascal, happiness is possible in a miraculous other life, but for Schopenhauer, lasting happiness in just plain impossible and life is a curse. As he writes, "To the hope of immortality of the soul there is always added that of a 'better world'; an indication that the present world is not worth much" (Schopenhauer, p. 467). Schopenhauer even goes so far as to argue that *time* is the way in which the pointlessness of existence is revealed to us, writing:

> [Time] is the form by whose means the vanity of things appears as their transitoriness, since by virtue of this all our pleasures and enjoyments come to naught in our hands…our life is primarily like a payment made to us in copper coins, for which we must then give a receipt; the coins are the days, and the receipt is death…. (p. 574)

But we don't need to go as far as Pascal or Schopenhauer to find this sort of reasoning at work. Such a stance may be summed up by an argument like, "If there's no God or possibility for an eternal, better life to come, and my existence and humanity's existence will someday end, all of our actions will have been for nothing and forgotten. Therefore, life is ultimately meaningless." One often finds this sort of reasoning accepted, but it's interesting to note that the conclusion doesn't follow from the premise. Why should life have to go on forever in order for it to have meaning? Nietzsche, as we'll see below, tries to reverse this devaluation of transitory things by arguing that the rare, fleeting, raw experiences of life are the most precious, and that it is instead eternal things that would be lifeless. Nietzsche's critique of Christian immortality is not merely that it's an otherworldly justification of life, but a critique of the belief that the individual life requires this sort of eternal justification at all.

At any rate, Nietzsche is clearly thinking of *this-worldly* immortality when he remarks, "A single immortal man on earth would be enough to drive everything else on earth to a universal rage for death and suicide out of *satiety with him*!" (*D* 211). And how are we to understand Zarathustra's statement that death is the "consummation" of life, and his instructions that we "die at the right time," if not as criticism of *this-worldly* longevity (*TSZ* §21)? Sorgner is clearly wrong to suggest Nietzsche is only concerned with the specifically Christian conception of immortality, even if Christian immortality represents a particularly extreme example.

As for the importance of immortality to transhumanism, the desire to overcome death is, as More and Vita-More write, "one point on which all transhumanists agree" (2013). [9] The vast majority of writers identifying as transhumanists consider the radical extension of the human

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[9] Sorgner tentatively suggests that the desire for immortality may not be a *necessary* feature of transhumanism, though he concedes that most transhumanists *do* desire it (2010, p. 61). Other commentators, such as Blackford (2017), doubt that transhumanism can be separated from the quest to defeat death—a view I suspect is correct.

lifespan one of the essential goals of the movement. Some authors have gone so far as to label it the *primary* goal of the movement.[10] Given the frequency with which the topic appears in the literature, it's hard to argue otherwise. In *The Transhumanist Reader*, for instance, compiled by Max More and Natasha Vita-More, 20 out of the 42 collected essays either deal primarily with or have large sections dedicated to the possibility of escaping death, by far beating out other favorite topics like eugenics and the singularity.[11] Perhaps more importantly, the possibility of a scientific answer to death is, it seems, the main selling point of transhumanism—the first thing to mention when going door-to-door with your copy of *The Age of Spiritual Machines*. Unlike the obscure, frequently off-putting, and occasionally dull descriptions of posthumanity, immortality seems concrete and immediately soothing.

Transhumanists hope that the technological means of escaping death are coming in the near future. Advances in genetics and a better understanding of the aging process, for instance, may allow us to slow or reverse senescence. Molecular nanotechnology, following the famous Richard Feynman quote that we might someday "swallow the doctor," is another commonly suggested anti-aging tool (Bostrom 2005b). These technologies alone wouldn't be the end of death—maintaining health and defeating aging is vastly more complicated and unpredictable than a pill here and a shot there, and healthier cells won't do much for car crashes, gunshot wounds, famine, etc.—but they may expand the upper limits of the human lifespan. More radical suggestions involve discarding the human body for good, either by replacing one's fleshy bits with mechanical bits or by uploading one's consciousness—perhaps many copies and save states—into a computer. Such is the future predicted by Ray Kurzweil (1999), who paints an

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[10] Damien Broderick, for instance, writes, "The true goal of transhumanism is the defeat of aging and death" (2005, p. 434).

[11] The hypothetical point at which artificial intelligence takes over the development of new technology, leading to an explosion of rapid technological growth (see Vinge 2013).

eschatological picture of humans merging with machines to become godlike entities. As this sort

of technology is unlikely to be rolled out for any of this year's consumer electronics trade shows,

transhumanists often hope to prolong or suspend their own lives until the day in which such

technology exists. Here, much hope is placed in the dubious science of cryonics and alternative

diets.[12]

True immortality, such as the immortality of the soul in Christian theology, is not

necessarily what is on the table here. If you desire to live *literally forever*, the outlook is not

good. Current cosmological models of the universe give us reason to question whether there will

even be a forever to live in. Even supposing that some cyclical or multiverse model of the

cosmos turns out to be accurate, there's little reason to believe that the breakdown of our own

neighborhood of the cosmos will be survivable.[13] One might object, then, to the use of the term

"immortality" when we are really talking about extreme longevity. Nevertheless, transhumanist

writers themselves frequently use "immortality" and "forever" to describe what they are talking

about.[14] Perhaps this is because, emotionally speaking, the difference between living *forever* and

having the date of one's death postponed to an unimaginable date is negligible. Or perhaps it is

due to the scientific optimism characteristic of transhumanism—one cannot say for certain what

will or won't be possible for the scientists of the future, and this opens up the possibility for faith

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[12] See the discussion of cryonics in Wowk (2013); the paleo diet in Rose (2013); and calorie restriction in Kurzweil and Grossman (2004).

[13] Cf. The Transhumanist FAQ (2003): "The heat death of the universe is thus a matter of some personal concern to optimistic transhumanists!" (p. 37).

[14] E.g., Minsky (2002), "I'm sure that most of us feel that it's only another 100 years until we have nanotechnology and downloading and immortality…maybe it's 200, who cares, with cryonics it might not matter. The question is, if we're within a century or two of immortality—now I don't just want longevity…" (p. 167); Kurzweil and Grossman's book titled *Fantastic Voyage: Live Long Enough to Live Forever* (2004); the name of The Immortality Institute; Prisco (2013), "Mind uploading, the transfer of a human mind, memories, personality and 'self' (whatever 'self' is) to new high-performance substrates is the ultimate technology for immortality," (p. 235) and so on and on. In some instances, sure, this enthusiasm is salesmanship— "*Live Long Enough to Live Even Longer*" doesn't have quite the same ring to it. But very often, the hope for literal immortality appears genuine.

that true immortality may, in fact, end up being possible. At any rate, the emotional draw of

transhumanism is the promise of a superhuman state in which fleshy imperfections are a thing of

the past. Chief among these imperfections, and the driving obsession in the transhumanist

literature, is mortality.

What about Sorgner's claim that Nietzsche puts forward the eternal recurrence as his own

theory of immortality? Despite the attention that's paid to the eternal return in the scholarship,

Nietzsche only very rarely alludes to it in his published works,[15] giving us good reason to be

suspicious of the claims that Nietzsche took himself to be putting forward some important

metaphysical truth. Whether Nietzsche intended the eternal return to be a useful myth (the most

common view among scholars) or had something more literal in mind matters little here. What's

interesting is how well the idea fits the views I attribute to Nietzsche above.

The idea is simple enough. It is illustrated in the familiar story about probability—an

immortal monkey (or perhaps infinite mortal monkeys), sitting and typing away at a typewriter

for an infinite amount of time, will eventually type out *Hamlet* in its entirety. Not just *Hamlet*,

but *Blood Meridian, Beyond Good and Evil, Neuromancer*—the total library, as Borges says, and

more—our monkey would type out this library of all possible books an infinite number of times.

Or, in other words, any possible event in an infinite sequence will occur an infinite number of

times. Given an infinite universe (or an infinite number of universes), we'd have an infinite

number of people resembling you and me and every other possible thing. These would not be

numerically identical selves, of course, but copies—recurring patterns in an infinite web of stuff.

It will become clearer in the following sections why Nietzsche would find the idea of

eternal recurrence appealing, but a little can be said here. There are many religious traditions that

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[15] The most direct example is in *GS* §341, though it also plays a prominent role in *TSZ*.

have not relied on the idea of personal immortality to give life meaning but have instead

emphasized that the individual is only a part of an everchanging whole. Though Nietzsche rejects

what he sees as nihilism in some of those traditions, his views don't appear to be so far removed.

In *Human, All Too Human*, for example, he writes:

> If one considers, then, that a man's every action… in some way becomes the
> occasion for other actions, decisions, and thoughts; that everything which is
> happening is inextricably tied to everything which will happen; then one
> understands the real *immortality*, that of movement: what once has moved others
> is like an insect in amber, enclosed and immortalized in the general intertwining
> of all that exists. (*HH* § 208)

The idea of eternal recurrence is meant, in part, to emphasize this connectedness of

things. Max More (2010), in his defense of Sorgner, writes that the eternal recurrence is one

Nietzschean idea that is incompatible with transhumanism, "Both for its inherent implausibility

and for its opposition to progress…" (p. 28). And More is right (about the progress part anyway),

but this is an excellent example of why Nietzsche makes a bad transhumanist. The eternal

recurrence is *not* suitable to serve the Christian or transhumanist desire for an extended or

infinite individual life. One does not fall asleep at death and wake up in the next life. Thoughts,

experiences, narratives, these are the recurring things. As a myth, the eternal recurrence provides

us with a means of evaluating our lives and dealing with the threat of nihilism outlined above—

and it does so *without* falling prey to Nietzsche's criticisms of personal immortality.

5   THE UNDESIRABILITY OF IMMORTALITY

Nietzsche's most direct comments on immortality come in *D* §211, where he writes, "Let

us be indulgent towards a being of a mere seventy years! —he has not been able to imagine the

'everlasting boredom' he *himself* would experience—he has not had enough time to do so!" (*D*

§211). The idea here is a familiar one, both in philosophy and fiction—immortality is thought to

be undesirable in part because life would become unbearably *boring*. Nietzsche also adds his

own twist, remarking that everyone *else* would grow sick and bored of the immortal person, as well (ibid.).[16] Such remarks are what lead Hauskeller to conclude that Nietzsche's primary objection to immortality is the unworthiness of the recipients. Nietzsche's point, however, is more complicated than it might first appear.

We can start with the suggestion that the immortal life would grow boring enough to be undesirable. The most famous philosophical analysis of this concern is found in Bernard Williams's "The Makropulos Case" (1973). Williams's essay takes its name and topic from the Karel Čapek play, in which a woman named Elina Makropulos has taken an elixir of everlasting life. At the time of the play Elina is 342 (she has been 42 for 300 years) and has grown tired of living. By the play's conclusion, she stops taking the elixir and dies. Williams writes that Elina's trouble was "a boredom connected with the fact that everything that could happen *and make sense to one particular human being of 42 had already happened to her*. Or rather, all the sorts of things that could make sense to one woman of a certain character…" (Williams 1973, p. 90, emphasis added).[17]

Williams's paper is sometimes responded to flippantly, perhaps because of his use of the word "boredom," to describe some more extreme state.[18] If we assume that her character has remained constant enough for her to remain recognizably the same person over time, Elina will have repeated her favorite experiences again and again, each moment in time becoming a smaller and smaller—and thereby less memorable or impactful—part of the totality of her life. New

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[16] "Are you not mindful of all the other things which would then be obliged to endure you to all eternity, as they have endured you up to now with a more than Christian patience? Or do you think to inspire them with an everlasting sense of pleasure at your existence?" (*D* §211)

[17] Bostrom (2008) actually accepts something along these lines: "It is clear that in order for an *extremely* long life to not become either static or self-repeating, it would be necessary that mental growth continues" (fn. 24).

[18] Cf. Nagel's (1986) response, "Can it be that he is more easily bored than I?" (p. 224).

experiences and goals then begin to seem altogether familiar, dull, utterly trivial, and ephemeral. Williams suggests that even the patterns of personal relations, falling in love, forming new friendships, "must take on the character of being inescapable" (p. 90). Oddly enough, there's also something of an inverse of Pascal's earlier point going on here. Earthy actions may gain meaning insofar as they lead us to Heaven, but why does any experience in Heaven matter when it's followed by infinite time in which that same experience is repeated infinitely? I suppose Heaven could be a pleasure machine, where the experience of singing hymns is so pleasurable that we can think of nothing else. Elina's not in Heaven, of course, quite the opposite. But her experiences are shrinking in importance.

Much of what Nietzsche has to say on immortality is remarkably similar to Williams. Nietzsche frequently stresses that the most valuable experiences are the rarest, and he claims that we lose interest in what we love once it becomes common to us.[19] In the final aphorism of *BGE*, for example, he complains that the thoughts he has committed to paper have lost their novelty and look "so immortal, so pathetically decent, so dull!" (*BGE* §296). When these thoughts first struck him, they were "colorful… full of thorns and secret spices" (ibid.). Yet even the simple act of putting these thoughts into words carves them into lifeless stone, so to speak. Williams imagines living long enough that the cycle of excitement and boredom itself becomes predictable and boring. People grow close then drift apart, goals are achieved or abandoned, worlds are fully explored, games grow stale. Repeat, repeat, repeat, until, to quote Elina Makropolus, "everything is the same…singing and silence" (Williams 1973, p. 82). The things

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[19] See *GS* §14, "We gradually become satiated with the old, the securely possessed, and again stretch out our hands; even the finest landscape in which we live for three months is no longer certain of our love, and any kind of more distant coast excites our covetousness: the possession for the most part becomes smaller through possessing."

you and I love are not somehow immune. By wishing for more, we do a kind of violence to what we love.

For this reason, Nietzsche often extolls forgetfulness as a virtue, a capacity necessary for life and the "digestion" of experience (*GM* II 1). He remarks that a bad memory can be an advantage, as "one enjoys the same good things for the first time" (*HH* §580). A person incapable of forgetting, he suggests, "would no longer believe in his own being… he would in the end hardly dare to raise a finger" (*UM* I, p. 62). I find that understanding Nietzsche's remarks on forgetfulness, and the complexities tied to the notion of boredom in both Nietzsche and Williams, is made easier through a discussion of artistic influence. I'm thinking of Harold Bloom's theory of poetic influence, and a problem that Bloom sums up with a line by John Keats about John Milton: "Life to him would be death to me" (Bloom 1973, p. 32). Bloom argues that young poets discover themselves—their styles, thoughts, things they wish to say—in the works of others, and that this is what inspires them to write poetry themselves in the first place. Here they are faced with a problem: the poets that influence them have already mastered the style and subject they wish for themselves—they find themselves as having arrived, as Nietzsche frequently says, "too late" (*BGE* §269). The realization of this influence causes the young poet anxiety, and she is faced with the choice between rebelling against her predecessor or accepting her own redundancy. In order to carve out space for herself— "to rally everything that remains"—the young poet begins to misread and distort her influences and define herself as a revision and alternative (Bloom 1973, p. 22).

There is a more general principle that can be drawn here: artists tend to define themselves in opposition to their influences—as an improvement, revision, something that has not yet been tried, and so on. Successful artists become old-fashioned in service of the new—artworks and

movements are forgotten to clear the stage. If they were not, then our cultural memory would be so inundated as to make the production of any more art redundant—a tiresome exercise of the past. Personal growth is not too dissimilar; we grow bored and dissatisfied, and this feeling drives us to change.

Zarathustra tells us that we should die at the right time, using an analogy of apples hanging from a tree (*TSZ* §21). Some fall too early, but most too late. The message here sounds harsh, but Nietzsche has something like aesthetic bad taste in mind—something is around long enough to grow boring. A more relatable modern example might be that of a television show that carries on for seasons after its major plot points have all been resolved and the original cast replaced. At any rate, Williams adopts the too early, too late, framework. He argues that there are good reasons for dying, like Elina Makropolus, before one becomes so bored with oneself and the world as to lose the desire to live. At the same time, there is reason for not dying before that point. Williams writes, "Necessarily, [death] tends to be either too early or too late. EM reminds us that it can be too late, and many…need no reminding that it can be too early. If that is any sort of dilemma, it can, as things still are and if one is exceptionally lucky, be resolved, not by doing anything, but just by dying shortly before the horrors of not doing so become evident" (Williams 1973 p. 100).

Of course, we've been considering the case of Elina Makropolus as she might be *if* her character remains relatively stable. Williams, for his part, asks whether forgetfulness taken to its extreme might solve Elina Makropolus's problem—perhaps her character might change so completely that she avoids boredom—and this will lead Williams (and us), to a discussion of identity, and what it means to survive at all.

6   THE "I" IN IMMORTALITY

So much for the reasons Nietzsche finds immortality undesirable. We can now examine the ways in which Nietzsche would think the personal immortality desired by transhumanists is impossible. By this I don't mean *technologically* impossible—Nietzsche obviously doesn't have anything to say on that subject—but metaphysically impossible, given the assumptions most transhumanist writers are making.

Nietzsche's analysis of forgetfulness is prescient—it reminds me of a paper *critical* of transhumanist aims: Walter Glannon's, "Identity, Prudential Concern, and Extended Lives" (2002). There, Glannon considers the life-extending potential of recent advances in genetics and argues that "a lifespan significantly longer than the present norm would be undesirable because it would severely weaken the connections between past- and future-oriented mental states and in turn the psychological grounds for personal identity and prudential concerns" (p. 1). Glannon supports this claim with an explanation of how memory is controlled in the brain, which routinely discards useless memories to avoid clutter—maintaining equilibrium between learning and forgetting. If Glannon's account of memory is correct, it seems like the psychological character important for survival can persist only for a limited time. We cannot keep memories around forever without overloading the brain's storage system, thereby impairing learning and decision making. Glannon concludes that "the connections between mental states like anticipation and memory that ground personal identity hold only for so long and gradually weaken and fade…" (p. 280). Nietzsche, of course, does not talk about the brain, but in his own way—with his frequent use of digestion metaphors to describe the way that memories and experiences are processed—he believes something similar. Consider his suggestion in *HH* §41 that, "If a man of eighty thousand years old were conceivable, his character would in fact be

absolutely variable, so that out of him little by little an abundance of different individuals would develop."[20]

Of course, transhumanists might respond by claiming that some neural upgrades are in order. Theoretically, we might alter the limitations of human memory, the way the self is perceived over time, and so on. In fact, they might respond to *all* of what was covered last section in this sort of way—we may be adjusted so as not to become like Elina Makropulos—perhaps adjusted to be incapable of feeling anything wholly negative at all. Many transhumanists anticipate that extreme modification of the brain will be necessary in order to realize their vision. David Pearce (2005), for example, advocates for the development of technologies that will eliminate pain altogether.[21] Posthumans in this sort of utopia would be incapable of boredom or sadness altogether. As Pearce writes, "Against boredom even the gods struggle in vain', said Nietzsche; but he failed to anticipate biotechnology" (Ch. 4). Glannon doubts such an easy route exists, but the transhumanist spirit is one of optimism. At any rate, once we start discussing radical modifications of the brain and the ways in which we typically find meaning in everyday experiences, we begin to run into issues of personal identity. Would it really be possible for me to undergo such a radical transformation and still be *me*?

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[20] Ironically, this may be why transhumanists writers seem to feel extreme longevity is as good as, or interchangeable with, literal immortality. The psychologists Daniel Bartels and Lance Rips (2010), for instance, have shown that people attach more value to future goods when they feel more closely linked, psychologically, to the future self that will receive the goods. If the decision maker's future self is described in such a way that indicates less psychological connectedness, the decision maker attaches less value to the reward. Bartels and Rips suggest that this tendency may help explain why people attach less value to goods when they know a delay will occur before that good can be obtained. The longer the delay, the less psychologically connected one feels to the person obtaining the good. Switch goods out for some ill, like death, and the same may apply. Saying "I will die in 5000 years" is, emotionally speaking, almost as good as saying "I will never die," because one feels, on some level, that the death that will occur is some other person's problem.
[21] Of course, Nietzsche has much to say about the quest to eliminate pain and suffering as well. For instance, in *D* §174: "Are we not, with this tremendous objective of obliterating all the sharp edges of life, well on the way to turning mankind into *sand*? Sand! Small, soft, round unending sand!"

The metaphysics of personal identity are commonly discussed in transhumanist writings, particularly in the context of posthuman neural augmentation. Most transhumanists accept a neo-Lockean view of the self—one in which a person in the future can be said to be *you* if a certain psychological pattern is shared between you and this person in the future.[22] In this way, survival amounts to the continued preservation of this psychological pattern. It's easy to see how things might get complicated, however, when considering that many of the technological upgrades discussed in the literature are supposed to be desirable precisely *because* they modify the psychology of the person. Questions then arise as to how much modification would be *too* much, in the sense that undergoing the procedure would effectively be suicide. On the other hand, the neo-Lockean view is useful for transhumanists in other ways—one might survive the process of uploading if the resultant simulated mind preserves one's psychological pattern.

It's important to note, however, that Nietzsche does not believe in the existence of any unified, consistent, psychological self that would satisfy transhumanist desires. Instead, Nietzsche describes the individual as an oligarchy of warring and shifting drives.[23] "I" do not *have* thoughts, rather, thoughts come and go (*BGE* 17). The same goes for memories and impressions (*WP* 502). The "I" here is only a grammatical fiction (*BGE* §17). That's not to say, of course, that there's no room to talk about persons, or that one might not, through self-reference, tell a narrative about oneself, have goals, hopes, and so on. Instead, what's under attack here is "I" as a constant, singular thing, whether physical, psychological, or metaphysical.

Susan Schneider, in "Future Minds: Transhumanism, Cognitive Enhancement and the Nature of Persons" (2009), groups Nietzsche with Derek Parfit, as well Hume and the Buddha, as

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[22] E.g., Bostrom (2004); More (1995); Kurzweil (2005).

[23] See *BGE* Preface, §16-19. For a collection of the scholarly literature on the topic, see *Nietzsche and the Problem of Subjectivity* (2015), eds. João Constâncio, Maria João Mayer Branco, and Bartholomew Ryan.

holding a "no self" view. The comparison to Parfit is spot on. Parfit (1984) argues that we are not

persistent selves over time, but more like a succession of more or less psychologically connected

selves. For him, survival is a matter of degree—the question of whether "I" have survived is

comparable to asking whether a nation is the same as a nation in the past. In both cases, there's

not always a clear answer. Parfit claims that after accepting this view, he began to care less about

his own inevitable death. [24] He writes, "Instead of saying 'I shall be dead,' I should say, 'There

will be no future experiences that will be related, in certain ways, to these present experiences"

(Parfit 1984, p. 281). Yet there will still be experiences—these will simply be less closely

related.

Like Parfit Nietzsche describes people as being like nations (*BGE* §19) and seems

skeptical of *all* talk of numerical identity.[25] It makes sense, then, that Nietzsche occasionally

speaks of death as if it does not exist in any real sense at all. Take, for example, *GS* §109, "Let us

be on our guard against saying that death is contrary to life. The living being is only a species of

dead being, and a very rare species." In fact, Nietzsche also has his own version of Parfit's view

that after his death there will continue to be experiences more or less related to his present

experiences—Nietzsche expresses this same idea with the eternal recurrence.

Transhumanists occasionally reference Parfit in the context of uploading. Parfit's most

famous thought experiment involves *Star Trek*-like teleportation machines.[26] Step into

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[24] This may also be the case with Hume, whose cheerful rejection of immortality and lack of concern about death during his final days apparently disturbed his friends (Boswell 1777). Hume, like Nietzsche and Parfit, compares people to nations: "I cannot compare the soul more properly to any thing than to a republic or commonwealth…" (*Treatise* I.VI).

[25] "From the period of low organisms, man has inherited the belief that there are identical things (only experience which has been educated by the highest science contradicts this tenet). From the beginning, the first belief of all organic beings must be that the whole rest of the world is One and unmoved" (*HH* §18).

[26] See *Reasons and Persons*, pt. 3.

teletransporter *E* on Earth, and it will break down your body and send information about the placement of every one of your body's molecules to teletransporter *M* on Mars, where a copy of your body will be made. For Parfit, stepping into teletransporter *E* is death, insofar as there will no longer be a body and brain numerically identical with the body and brain that stepped into *E*. Yet Parfit also argues that the continued existence of a qualitatively similar copy of you on Mars is as good as survival under normal circumstances. So, if the process of uploading is thought of as being similar to Parfit's teletransporter case, then it seems like Parfit provides an argument for thinking uploading is as good as survival.

But it's crucial not to miss the actual point here that this science fiction thought experiment is used in service of. Imagine a further scenario, in which teletransporter *M* doesn't produce an exact copy, but just a very similar one. How similar does this copy have to be for the transportation to be as good as survival under normal circumstances? Certainly, there's a point where we'd intuitively say there's been too much change, but it's difficult to imagine some hard cutoff point where one person has become another. The end goal of these thought experiments is expressing that difficulty. Parfit describes coming to his views of the self like this:

> My life seemed like a glass tunnel, through which I was moving faster every year, and at the end of which there was darkness. When I changed my view, the walls of my glass tunnel disappeared. There is still a difference between my life and the lives of other people. But the difference is less. Other people are closer. I am less concerned about the rest of my own life, and more concerned about the lives of others. (Parfit 1984, p. 281)

While Nietzsche would almost certainly never let the sentence, "Other people are closer," near any of his writing, one can see a similar idea underlying this Parfit quote as that in *HH* §208. The individual is understood as a part of whole, rather than atomized. What Nietzsche and Parfit have to say about the self follows from the view of a person as physical thing—a brain and body—going through constant physical changes and constantly interacting with other physical

things. The transhumanist writing on uploading, however, smacks of transporting a ghost between machines, such that my subjective view, my thinking thing, survives the process. Though almost no transhumanist writers will openly cop to dualism, at the very least they tend to view and describe death as the annihilation of the subjective self—like the movie screen going permanently dark in the mind's theater.[27] But that's exactly the "glass tunnel towards darkness" view Parfit describes above. And if we *are* thinking of copies, why should it matter so much that copies of me, qualitatively identical to me for a moment until we diverge, are uploaded to a computer? And what good does it do, after I've died, to have a computer carry on what my brain was up to? I suspect the answer is actually supposed to be something like, "It feels to me like my subjective self will continue on existing in the computer, and that the glass tunnel would be extended," but even if there's *not* these sorts of feelings at work, why is it so important that the computer simulates a continuation of *my* brain? It would be a terrible loss, I suppose, if my elementary school memories were lost to the world.

At any rate, if we take what Nietzsche—and Williams, Glannon, and Parfit—say seriously, and we dismiss talk of abstract essences and psychological patterns, why should it matter so much if there is someone who identifies as *me*, 3000 years from now? If that someone *is* me by virtue of having a character sufficiently close to mine, we might suspect this person to be living a rather repetitive, Makropulos-like life (and they presumably wouldn't be keeping up with the times very well). If this future person is very different from me, as would be expected after so much time and it such a different context (and after posthuman upgrades), in what

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[27] E.g., More on death, "It is nothing. It is simply the end of experience" (2013, p. 15). I most associate this sort of "lights out" view of death with Thomas Nagel (1986), who describes death: "my world will come to an end, as will yours when you die…one day, this consciousness will black out for good and subjective time will simply stop" (p. 225). Yet Nagel's description of death comes at the end of a full book defending his dual-aspect theory of mind and requires that he reject what Parfit has to say, both about the self and death.

substantial sense are they *me* at all, any more than others who are very different from me? Is it that they can construct a hazy memory or two that resembles my treasured moments—moments of a narrative they must feel little real connection to? Is that what the fuss is about? Photographs of people you can't remember, stored in a dusty attic?

7   A POSTHUMOUS LIFE

What are we besides human brains and bodies, thinking human thoughts, with human fears and feelings, speaking human languages, telling human jokes, with human relationships and tastes? I can no more imagine myself being transformed into a posthuman than into a chimpanzee, and neither can transhumanists.[28] In both cases, it seems I lose those things that define me and give life meaning.

All this, it seems, is a case of "cruel optimism"—in wishing for a life without human limitations, I end up wishing my own destruction and replacement—I wish to be someone *else*. [29] Transhumanists talk—rightly so—about the extinction risks posed by future technology, but visions of posthumanity are visions of a future *without* humans. And while it seems inevitable that someday there will be no more humans, transhumanists dream of accelerating us towards this conclusion. When talking about "enhancement," "improvement", and "evolutionary steps," they remain committed to the same tired values of the past, treating human life as something to be fixed or redeemed, not embraced.

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[28] From *The Transhumanist FAQ:* "Posthumans may have experiences and concerns that we cannot fathom, thoughts that cannot fit into the three-pound lumps of neural tissue that we use for thinking…Posthumans might shape themselves and their environment in so many new and profound ways that speculations about the detailed features of posthumans and the posthuman world are likely to fail" (2003).

[29] I'm borrowing a term here from Lauren Berlant (2011), who defines *cruel optimism* as "a relation of attachment to compromised conditions of possibility whose realization is discovered either to be *im*possible, sheer fantasy, or too possible, and toxic." As such, the optimistic desire one feels is actively harmful to one's goals and flourishing.

Babette Babich (2017), commenting on Sorgner's original article, writes that transhumanism is the latest version of Nietzsche's hated *ascetic ideal*. She writes that the transhumanist "wants a videogame style life…without suffering, without illness, without permanent death…" (p.123). Babich is mainly concerned with Sorgner's arguments on eugenics, but her conclusion here is similar to my own. Transhumanists may respond that they aren't after absolute perfection, but there's no doubt that they're involved in the business of Nietzsche's *ascetic priests* by looking to the promise of another existence to justify our own. And this existence *is* otherworldly. The clean and simplified science fiction musings of transhumanism bear little resemblance to complex, messy reality, where hundreds of interacting genes are linked to even simple traits and cryonics companies go bankrupt and their bodies—which are in all likelihood damaged far beyond any possibility of recovering information—thaw out. Much as in Nietzsche's criticism of Christian immortality, transhumanism diverts attention from the concrete to the fantastical—*science will solve it*. Yet here we are with plastic in our blood, scrolling through news of anti-vaxxers, fascist political parties, burning jungles, with minimum-wage money, dreaming of individual escape into the metaverse.

The truth is that transhumanism is more intimately entwined with Christianity than may be assumed. In the nineteenth century, the Russian monk Nikolai Fedorovich Fedorov taught that the Christian resurrection of the dead was a scientifically realized, physical resurrection, and that we the living have a duty to pursue the means of physical immortality and resurrecting all those who have died in the past. Fedorov is cited as an influence on transhumanism by More and Vita-More (2013). The philosophy of the Jesuit paleontologist Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, who, in his posthumously published book *The Phenomenon of Man* (1955), describes evolution as a teleological process in which higher levels of consciousness develop and eventually unify into a

universal consciousness, bears a conspicuous resemblance to Kurzweil's visions. The introduction to *The Phenomenon of Man* was written by the biologist Julian Huxley, who himself coined the term *transhumanism* in his book *New Bottles for New Wine* (1957), writing, "The human species can, if it wishes, transcend itself…. We need a name for this new belief. Perhaps *transhumanism* will serve: man renaming man, but transcending himself, by realizing new possibilities of and for his human nature."[30] More recently, the physicist Frank Tipler has continued in Fedorov and Teilhard's footsteps, speculating about a future intelligence of the future harnessing the power of the collapsing universe to resurrect all life to live in a heavenly simulated world (Tipler 1994). Tipler identifies this intelligence as "God"— (flipping through the pages of the Bible, you might be skeptical). Other transhumanists, such as Giulio Prisco, advocate a transhumanist religion. According to Prisco, in the coming decades we will develop the technology to upload human minds, and "we will be free to roam the universe and grow beyond limits as 'software angels'" (p. 235). Perhaps, he speculates, we already live in a simulation in which miracles (performed by those who run the simulation) may be possible. Perhaps we can reach these simulation masters by calling out to them. Thus, "It seems that the supernatural, which we have kicked out the back door of superstition, may come back through the main doors of science" (p. 237). Prisco refers to his church as "The Turing Church" (!), but it is quite clearly Christianity in a new skin. Heaven is promised in Silicon Valley clouds; this fleshy prison must be renounced. When Sorgner suggests that transhumanism serves a religious function, he states the obvious.

Yet the project of researching transhumanism reveals a strange irony. Many crucial online manifestos are now difficult to find, their websites defunct, the web design decades out of

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[30] According to Huxley, Teilhard quoted Nietzsche approvingly (*The Phenomenon of Man*, Introduction, p. 13)—one more reason to view Teilhard as a proto-transhumanist, I suppose.

fashion. Many of the books on the subject in the university library have yellow pages, and cover art that might now be described as "retro". We're forced to manufacture more new bottles for old wine. Whatever the technology of the future will look like, it will be, like all things human, messy, flawed, prone to error, far from ideal—and all the fuller of life for it. It will grow old, too.

> Yet *The Transhumanist FAQ* states:
>
> It is so easy to forget how good things can be when they are at their best. But on those occasions when we do remember – whether it comes from the total fulfillment of being immersed in creative work or from the tender ecstasy of reciprocated love – then we realize just how valuable every single minute of existence can be, when it is this good. And you might have thought to yourself, 'It ought to be like this always. Why can't this last forever?' Well, maybe – just maybe – it could. (p. 34)

But it can't; life is change, movement, conflict—life is "that which must always overcome itself" (*TSZ* §34). More and Sorgner interpret this Nietzsche quote as an imperative to take up some Promethean project of human improvement, but life overcomes itself when cattle eat grass, when the immune system fights off a virus, and when one memory vanishes to make room for another. Experiences are here for a moment, then gone. How we choose to spend our time and what gives us pleasure makes us who we are, and someone with infinite time and maximum pleasures will be no one in particular— "absolutely variable." Instead of dreading death we might instead recognize it as just another instance of life overcoming itself—the end of our narrative, then, but not the end. And our ephemeral existence need not be meaningless but can be all the more meaningful bookended by infinity—secret words written in the sand before the tide moves in.

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