# The Dark Side of Desire: Nietzsche, Transhumanism, and Personal Immortality

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# THE DARK SIDE OF DESIRE: NIETZSCHE, TRANSHUMANISM, AND PERSONAL IMMORTALITY

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Abstract: Nietzsche has become embroiled in two interesting twenty-first century debates about advancing technology and its impact on human life, especially its meaning/value. The first focuses on Nietzsche himself and is concerned with the extent to which his views align with those of transhumanism. The second involves the not so blatantly Nietzsche-centric question of whether or not immortality, or radical life-extension, is desirable. Given that the desire for immortality, or at least some more feasible (but not so permanent) approximation of it, is strongly associated with transhumanism, it seems that these two debates have some fairly significant overlap. Establishing what Nietzsche ultimately believes about such a core transhumanist issue will go a long way toward determining how sympathetic he would be to the transhumanist cause in general. I argue that while his views do not commit him to an all-encompassing disdain for immortality, his intolerance for immortality-seekers means that he might only be open to some of the more fringe understandings of transhumanism.

Friedrich Nietzsche has become embroiled in two interesting twenty-first century debates that have to do with advancing technology and its impact

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on human life and its meaning/value. The first focuses on Nietzsche himself, and it is concerned with the extent to which his views line up with those of transhumanism. The second involves the not so blatantly Nietzsche-centric question of whether or not immortality, or radical life-extension, is desirable. Given that the desire for immortality, or at least some more feasible (but not so permanent) approximation of it, is strongly associated with transhumanism, it would seem that these two debates have some fairly significant overlap. And yet, they mostly carry on within their own little scholarly circles, avoiding any meaningful interaction.[1] While the debate about Nietzsche's proximity to transhumanism is likely to rage on no matter what, because of the many different points of contention concerning several key concepts in his work (most notably the Übermensch and the eternal recurrence), I cannot imagine how it would be possible to come to a reliable overall conclusion without first determining how he would respond to the immortality problem. Establishing what Nietzsche ultimately believes about (what has become) such a core transhumanist issue will go a long way toward providing an accurate assessment of how sympathetic he would be to the transhumanist cause in general. I will argue that while his views do not commit him to an all-encompassing disdain for immortality, his intolerance for immortality-seekers means that he might only be open to some of the more fringe understandings of transhumanism. Before getting into Nietzsche's actual ideas, though, it will be helpful to have a better sense of the two debates mentioned above and the role he plays in each of them.

## 1. THE TRANSHUMANIST AGENDA AND THE DESIRABILITY OF IMMORTALITY

It would be a mistake to suggest that transhumanism has a universally accepted set of core beliefs and goals. However, most of the scientists, philosophers, futurists, and science fiction enthusiasts who consider themselves to be transhumanists would agree that they are interested in "the radical enhancement of human being, the enhancement of all its psycho-physical capacities and functions in the way that specifically presupposes the application of non-traditional means, those of biomedicine (neuroscience, genetics, pharmacology) and those of technology (molecular nanotechnology, informational technology, artificial intelligence, robotics)" (Agatonović

[1] In my fairly thorough engagement with the scholarly literature on the Nietzsche-transhumanism relationship, I have encountered only one brief endnote that makes even a passing reference to the ongoing philosophical discussion of the desirability of immortality (see Woodward 2017, 247).

2018, 430). More specifically, some common transhumanist goals—to be reached through hoped-for future medical/technological advances—include increased intelligence, physical strength and endurance, and longevity. In the latter case, the hope is that developments in cryonics, cellular medicine, cyborgization, and mind-mapping/-uploading will lead to much longer lives and (according to some) eventually to the elimination of necessary mortality.[2]

Given this brief characterization that highlights the transhumanist desire to overcome ordinary human capabilities and transition to higher forms of existence, one might start to notice certain parallels with the ideas found in Nietzsche's work. This is what happened to Stefan Lorenz Sorgner (2009, 29), who says, "when I first became familiar with the transhumanist movement, I immediately thought that there were many fundamental similarities between transhumanism and Nietzsche's philosophy, especially concerning the concept of the posthuman and that of Nietzsche's overhuman." But he is just talking about first impressions; upon further scrutiny, is it really fair to view transhumanists as aspiring *Übermenschen*? Well, it depends on who you ask. After his initial observations, Sorgner (e.g., 2010, 2017a, 2017b) went on to become the greatest champion of the Nietzsche-transhumanist connection, repeatedly replying to an ever-growing number of critics of his position. By focusing selectively on the elements of Nietzsche's thought that seem most compatible with transhumanist ideas (e.g., certain descriptions of the Übermensch, certain proscience claims, and his opposition to dualistic metaphysical views of the sort found in many traditional religions) and intentionally de-emphasizing or radically reinterpreting less compatible elements (e.g., the elitist aspects of the Übermensch, certain critical claims about modern science, his apparent embrace of human mortality, and his notion of the eternal recurrence of the same), Sorgner and the handful of others who see things his way managed to produce a few interesting arguments about views and values shared by Nietzsche and transhumanists.[3] The best example concerns a broad notion of education that encompasses both Nietzsche's more classical sense of character cultivation, as well as the

[2] The most optimistic prognosticators (e.g., Kurzweil 2005, 358, 486) even consider the possibility of advancing to the point of being able to hop from universe to universe in order to avoid destruction.

[3] Sorgner's most prominent ally is the famous and foundational transhumanist Max More (2010), who claims that Nietzsche has long had an influence on his own views. Other thinkers who offer limited or qualified support include Paul S. Loeb (2017), Rebecca Bamford (2017), and Russell Blackford (2017).

technological interventions transhumanists propose for bringing about the enhancements they seek (see e.g., Sorgner 2010, 3–5; 2017b, sec. 8).

Sorgner's critics, on the other hand, tend to think that wanting to transcend ordinary human biological limitations demonstrates an interest in being a superhuman in the cape and tights sense, but it is not exactly what Nietzsche has in mind when he discusses the creation of new life-affirming values. In fact, transhumanism seems entirely compatible with the herd-like mentality that uncritically props up traditional values. Michael Hauskeller (2010, 5–6) claims that

> transhumanists may want to revaluate certain aspects of our existence, but they certainly do not, as Nietzsche did, advocate the revaluation of *all* present values. On the contrary, they emphasize the continuity between (past and present) humanist, (present) transhumanist, and (future) posthuman values and see themselves as defenders of the Enlightenment's legacy against its modern (bioconservative) enemies.

Furthermore, many construals of transhumanism actually seem predicated on the same sort of dissatisfaction with life and the suffering humans must endure while embodied in the world that is among the main problems for religions like Christianity and Buddhism. Numerous commentators point out that Nietzsche famously chastises the values of these and other traditional religions (not to mention several secular philosophies) for this very pessimism about, and hostility toward, life in the world (see e.g., Graham 2002, 75–76; Hauskeller 2010, 6; Aydin 2017, 320; Babich 2017, 123; Tuncel 2017, 223–24; Woodward 2017, 237; Lipowicz 2019, 205–6). One common religious strategy for coping with the misery of life that Nietzsche finds particularly disturbing is the invention of an afterlife in which the faithful—that is, those "ascetic" idealists who refuse to indulge in the goods of worldly existence—will be rewarded with a peaceful, pleasurable, and immortal existence.

This is where things get interesting when thinking about transhumanists because, although they seem motivated by pessimism about the way things are now, the salvation they seek is not in some other realm no one has ever seen. Does this divergence from the traditional religious strategy spare transhumanism from Nietzsche's withering criticism? Again, the answer seems to be: it depends on who you ask. Sorgner (2009, 40) apparently thinks it does. In considering Nietzsche's notion of eternal recurrence, he even suggests that "both Nietzsche and transhumanists reject the idea of an eternal afterlife in a transcendent world and develop concepts of a prolonged life within this world" (Sorgner 2010, 12). It is unclear how literally

Sorgner means to take this notion—which seems quite a bit further removed from the kind of radical longevity transhumanists seek than Sorgner acknowledges—but according to him, Nietzsche would not be opposed to transhumanists on the topic of life-extension.[4] At least one notable contributor to the debate about the desirability of immortality would beg to differ, but in order to appreciate the Nietzsche-related specifics of A. W. Moore's argument, it will be necessary to provide a little background on the larger debate.

The catalyst for this relatively heated exchange was Bernard Williams (1993), who famously claims that an immortal life—by which he really just means a radically extended life—would eventually end up irreparably boring for anyone who attempts to maintain a consistent character or identity. In the ensuing decades, a number of other "immortality curmudgeons" (Fischer 2013, 337) have followed his lead in arguing that an immortal life would necessarily be devoid of recognizable meaning, not only because of boredom, but also due to lack of a clear life structure, a sense of mortal danger, and an ultimate deadline (see e.g., May 2009, 50, 63–68, 72; Scheffler 2013, 95–101). While many of these curmudgeons are a bit friendlier to the possibility of radically extended (but still finite) lives, choosing instead to aim their arguments more explicitly at true god-like indestructability, several other thinkers who are more enthusiastic about the prospects of never-ending life defend even this extreme and rather unrealistic scenario, and thereby every other lesser version of extension (see e.g., Fischer 2013; Greene 2017).[5] It is on the side of the curmudgeons, and Williams in particular, that Moore situates Nietzsche.

Moore (2006, 327) claims that "for Nietzsche . . . a life in which life itself was not always at issue, that is to say a life in which death was not always a possibility, would be a standing invitation for meaninglessness to

[4] In addition to this interesting interpretive attempt to bring Nietzsche closer to transhumanism on the issue of radical "this-worldly" longevity, Sorgner also tries to make transhumanism more accommodating to Nietzsche by questioning whether the version of such longevity that is not based on the notion of the eternal recurrence is actually an essential aspect of the transhumanist agenda. Sorgner (see 2010, 13; 2017a, 251–52; 2017b, 158) is right to point out that, despite the frequent use of the word "immortality" in transhumanist literature, most transhumanists do not see true god-like indestructability as a realistic goal, but it is a bit odd to suggest that (the nonrecurring version of) radical longevity is not a core aim of transhumanism. Even Blackford (2017, 203), who is largely supportive of Sorgner, thinks he goes too far here. Of course, it is certainly possible to pursue other transhumanist objectives without caring about radical longevity, but this pursuit would cease to resemble what most transhumanists understand by "transhumanism."

[5] I explain many of the arguments of the curmudgeons and the enthusiasts in greater detail elsewhere (see e.g., Buben 2015, 206–10; 2016, 385–89).

reassert itself. Here . . . there would be some sort of convergence between Nietzsche and Williams." Along the lines of what the other curmudgeons mentioned above think about the conditions necessary for meaning or value in general, Moore believes that Nietzsche's notion of creating new values requires a kind of riskiness and urgency that might go missing in genuine immortality. But even when talking about merely extended lives, however long they might last, Moore still sees in Nietzsche a Williams-esque concern. On his view, for both Williams and Nietzsche, the problem is that preserving one's identity or character will inevitably preclude the novelty necessary to make life worth living. Although Nietzsche is not as concerned about boredom (more on this below), it would be difficult to generate new interpretations and values continually, while remaining firmly attached to the person one has been. In Moore's (2006, 327) words: "Where allowing the subject to die, in favour of those other subjects, would open up new possibilities of narrative, new opportunities for sense-making, and new ways of defying nihilism, preserving the subject would impose restrictions and constraints on subsequent interpretation that would constitute an overall burden." I am not entirely convinced by Moore's curmudgeonly view of Nietzsche, but I was not exactly persuaded by Sorgner's (somewhat careless) suggestion that Nietzsche might be ok with transhumanist life-extension ambitions either. At this point, it will be best to turn to Nietzsche himself, and see what he actually says about immortality and other relevant topics. Questions that will eventually require an answer include: Is he opposed to all longing for immortality/life-extension, or is it really just the longing for the otherworldly variety that bothers him? And is he opposed to immortality/life-extension itself, or just the pessimism and hostility about mortal life that lead people to desire something more?

## 2. NIETZSCHE'S CONTEMPT FOR IMMORTALITY SEEKERS

There is no doubt that Nietzsche is highly critical of philosophies and religions that posit some kind of life to come in another world. Throughout the works of his last lucid decade, he offers a remarkably consistent judgment about them. In one late statement of some of his main concerns, Nietzsche (1990b, sec. 43) argues:

> If one shifts the centre of gravity of life *out* of life into the "Beyond"—into *nothingness*—one has deprived life as such of its centre of gravity. The great lie of personal immortality destroys all rationality, all naturalness of instinct—all that is salutary, all that is life-furthering. . . . *So* to live that there is no longer any *meaning* in living: *that* now becomes the "meaning" of life. . . . Christianity has waged a

> war to the death against every feeling of reverence and distance between man and man . . . against everything noble, joyful, high-spirited on earth, against our happiness on earth.

The two main takeaways from this passage, and the many others like it in Nietzsche's writings,[6] are that he puts no stock in the metaphysical views that underwrite notions of a personal afterlife, and that he believes these "lies" are dangerous obstacles to a healthy life in the world. Moving forward, I will focus my attention on the latter problem, but it should be noted that Nietzsche (see e.g., 1990b, sec. 37; 1997a, sec. 72) spends a lot of time cynically engaged in heaping scorn on the Christian "lies" themselves and their origins in ancient myths, Platonic philosophy, and the "subterranean cults" that were active in the early days of the Church. He is particularly critical of the idea of hell, and the way Paul appropriated this fiction from preexisting movements, awkwardly appended it to Jesus's teachings, and used it to coerce obedience to his cause while disrupting what had been a flourishing social order.[7] According to Nietzsche (1990b, sec. 58), "he grasped that to disvalue 'the world' he *needed* the belief in immortality, that the concept 'Hell' will master even Rome—that with the 'Beyond' one *kills life*."

Although Christianity is often the target of his barbed remarks, Nietzsche makes a point of calling out various other traditions—whether or not they have a sense of personal immortality in some "real world" to come—for a similar hostility to life in this one. Hinduism and Buddhism, for example, do not escape unscathed, nor do "Western" philosophical luminaries such as Socrates, Plato, Kant, and Schopenhauer.[8] Given all of this shared criticism, it seems pretty clear that it is not the metaphysical make-believe itself that ultimately worries Nietzsche about Christianity, but rather its use of the afterlife—both hellish and heavenly—to disparage our accomplishments in the here and now. Even our best and most "righteous" actions in this "corrupt" and impermanent realm, we are told, really only matter in light of what they mean for the next one. However, afterlife or no, any

[6] For some noteworthy examples, see Nietzsche (1968, sec. 224; 1979, preface, sec. 2, "Why I am a Destiny," sec. 8; 1990b, secs. 15, 18, 38, 42; 1997b, first essay, sec. 14, third essay, sec. 28; 2001, sec. 344; 2003, 240–41; and 2006, "On the Hinterworldly").

[7] For a detailed discussion of the debt Nietzsche thinks Christianity owes to earlier notions of an afterlife, especially hellish ones, see Rempel (2010, 2012).

[8] For important instances of his criticism of these traditions and thinkers, see Nietzsche (1990a, "The Problem of Socrates," "'Reason' in Philosophy," sec. 6; 1990b, sec. 7; 1997b, preface, sec. 5, first essay, sec. 6, third essay, sec. 17; 2001, secs. 340, 346; 2006, "On the Preachers of Death").

movement or outlook that devalues the body, the only world we have, or life itself, because of sinfulness, transience, or any other perceived shortcoming, seems likely to face Nietzsche's wrath.

Instead of allowing our complaints about ubiquitous suffering, physical limitations, social inequality, or human mortality to embitter us toward life, he argues that we ought to affirm "all that is questionable and terrible in existence," and do something creative and interesting with it (Nietzsche 1990a, "'Reason' in Philosophy," sec. 6; cf. 1979, "Thus Spoke Zarathustra," sec. 6). On the affirmation of our mortality in particular, Zarathustra proclaims, "The consummated one dies *his* death, victorious, surrounded by those who hope and promise. Thus one should learn to die; and there should be no festival where such a dying person does not swear oaths to the living! To die thus is best, . . . free for death and free in death. . . . Do not allow your death to be a slander against mankind and earth" (Nietzsche 2006, "On Free Death"; cf. 2001, sec. 278; 2006, "Zarathustra's Prologue," sec. 3).[9] Like his rejection of otherworldly immortality, his affirmation of worldly mortality is aimed at empowering and enriching life. But would it be possible to conceive of some worldly version of immortality, or even just radical longevity, that might also enrich life and encourage creativity?

Without access to transhumanist ideas, Nietzsche seems to have thought of personal immortality and life-extension mostly in terms of existence in some supernatural realm, but he does occasionally make some more general critical comments about immortality and its desirability. For example, in a section titled "To the dreamers of immortality," Nietzsche (1997a, sec. 211) states, "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!" While this passage, which sounds as though it comes straight from Williams, might seem to settle the question of whether or not Nietzsche was an immortality curmudgeon, there are a few important mitigating factors to note. First, Nietzsche tends to reiterate ideas he finds important over and over again, but the sentiment expressed in this passage is not one he is in the habit of repeating. Second, it is a claim from a relatively early book (*Daybreak*) that still shows signs of his rapidly fading appreciation for the pessimistic views of Arthur

[9] Not only does Nietzsche (1990a, sec. 36) affirm mortality, he also advocates for the right "to die proudly when it is no longer possible to live proudly. Death of one's own free choice, death at the proper time, with a clear head and with joyfulness." He even hints at physician-assisted suicide in cases where the alternative is "to vegetate on in cowardly dependence." It is painfully ironic that he expresses these views mere months before the mental collapse that led to his very own decade of "vegetating on."

Schopenhauer (1958, 491),[10] who had himself anticipated Williams in arguing that "the rigid unalterability and essential limitation of every individuality as such would, in the case of its endless duration, inevitably and necessarily produce ultimately such great weariness by its monotony, that we should prefer to become nothing, merely in order to be relieved of it."[11] Third, it is often hard to tell how straightforwardly to take Nietzsche in his more hyperbolic moments, and this somewhat isolated/unique passage—in which he also claims that everyone else would get so sick of an actual immortal person that they would be driven into a suicidal rage—seems especially hyperbolic.

Nonetheless, this last caveat actually points to a different Nietzschean problem with desiring immortality: very few of us would be worth preserving, despite what the democratic impulses of Christianity have to say. The vast majority of humans are not particularly impressive or interesting insofar as we just propagate traditional values uncritically, and there is little reason to believe we would do anything differently if we had more time (cf. Hauskeller 2010, 6–7; Stambler 2010, 17). In Nietzsche's (1997b, third essay, sec. 22; cf. 1990b, sec. 43) words: "Finally, they even want to have the 'crown of eternal life,' all these little provincial people: what for? why? it is the ultimate in presumption. An 'immortal' Peter: who could stand *him*?" If one's mortal life is not being used to create new values and meaning, to push at the boundaries of what has hitherto been thought and achieved, then it seems like immortality is simply beside the point. I believe that this is an absolutely crucial issue for understanding Nietzsche's views on immortality, and I will say more about it after discussing one other possible worry.

As it turns out, there might be some reason to believe that immortality is, in fact, not beside the point, and that Nietzsche actually thinks a life that goes on too long would end up stunting creativity. The problem is

[10] Of course, it also shows many signs of Nietzsche's (see e.g., 1997a, secs. 132–34) movement away from Schopenhauer's thought, especially from the latter's emphasis on the notion of pity as a foundational ethical principle.

[11] In an even earlier book, with an even stronger Schopenhauerian flavor to it, Nietzsche makes some other claims that might have implications for personal immortality. For example: "In becoming, everything is hollow, deceptive, shallow and worthy of our contempt; the enigma which man is to resolve he can resolve only in being, in being thus and not otherwise, in the imperishable" (Nietzsche 1997c, "Schopenhauer as Educator," sec. 4). He obviously does not have such a negative view of becoming—usually associated with the flux of ordinary temporal existence where persons are found—in his later work (see e.g., Nietzsche 1979, "The Birth of Tragedy," sec. 3; 1990a, "'Reason' in Philosophy," secs. 1–2, 5), but this passage does resonate with Schopenhauer's views about an indestructible, impersonal reality and the transient insignificance of human individuality.

that evidence for this interpretation—Moore's interpretation—is somewhat scant and obscure. Consider the following passage from *Beyond Good and Evil*:

> Oh, what are you anyway, my written and painted thoughts! It was not long ago that you were still so colorful, young and malicious, so full of thorns and secret spices that you made me sneeze and laugh—and now? You have already lost your novelty, and I am afraid that some of you are ready to turn into truths: they already look so immortal, so pathetically decent and upright, so boring! And was it ever any different? So, what subjects do we copy out and paint . . . we immortalizers of things that *let* themselves be written—what are the only things we *can* paint? Oh, only ever things that are about to wilt and lose their smell! Only ever storms that have exhausted themselves and are moving off, and feelings that are yellowed and late! Only ever birds that have flown and flown astray until they are tired and can be caught by hand. . . . We only immortalize things that cannot live and fly for much longer, only tired and worn-out things! (Nietzsche 2002, sec. 296)[12]

Here, Nietzsche claims that thoughts grow stale as time goes by and that novelty is required to keep thinking fresh, creative, vibrant, and exciting. Nowhere, however, does he say that one must literally die in order to make way for a new thinker who will bring about this requisite novelty; affirming death and destruction generally, perhaps in the service of physiological development or progress of the species (cf. Nietzsche 1979, "The Birth of Tragedy," sec. 3; 1997b, second essay, sec. 12), does not imply that some particular individual must actually die. It may well be the case that some future being who takes my place will generate new and exciting ideas, but it is also conceivable that a future version of myself, free of rigid adherence to old and stale views and values, will be just as creative and productive of novelty. Williams would obviously not agree that this future self would still be "me," but I see little in Nietzsche to suggest that he would get hung up on such concerns. What he actually says seems compatible with the notion of a life that continuously overcomes—or metaphorically "dies

[12] Moore (2006, 328) sees an "intimation" of a similar sentiment in a similarly ambiguous passage from *Twilight of the Idols* (Nietzsche 1990a, "What I Owe to the Ancients," sec. 5). An anonymous referee raises some interesting questions concerning what Nietzsche's ideas might imply about transhumanist hopes for mind-uploading. Just as it is only tired thoughts that "let themselves be written," is it only tired minds that would let themselves be mapped and uploaded? Then again, once equipped with sophisticated computer processing power, would an old, tired mind be rejuvenated and capable of thinking new energetic thoughts not possible for biological humans? I doubt clear answers to these questions are to be found in Nietzsche's work, but as I discuss a little further on, there seem to be other reasons why Nietzsche might not be such a fan of uploading.

to"—old values that have run their course (cf. Nietzsche 1979, "Thus Spoke Zarathustra," sec. 5; 1996, "Assorted Opinions and Maxims," sec. 17). In fact, this seems like a good way to describe the Übermensch (cf. Aydin 2017, 313–14).

Having said all of this, I do not mean to give the impression that I think Nietzsche is secretly harboring hopes for the right form of immortality (for the right people) in the here and now. I think that even a form of immortality that manages to avoid the myriad difficulties plaguing the Christian version, if Nietzsche could have envisioned such a thing, *would* simply be beside the point for him. Since he is consumed with living intensely and creatively, how long life lasts just is not all that important (cf. Stambler 2010, 17–18; Steinmann 2017, 187–88). In a slightly different context, in a late unpublished note, Nietzsche (1910, sec. 864) asserts that "'*Permanence*' in itself, can have no value: that which ought to be preferred thereto would be a shorter life for the species, but a life *richer* in creations." Not only does this idea fit in well with what he has said about individual life in the published writings cited above (also cf. Nietzsche 2006, "On War and Warriors"), but it also gets at what I believe is his ultimate indifference to long life and (this-worldly) immortality. However, despite all we have seen so far, some would still argue that Nietzsche actually has a more invested disposition toward a certain kind of eternal life. Understanding this argument involves looking closer at one of his most significant and famous concepts.

## 3. ETERNAL RECURRENCE AND IMMORTALITY

There is a small contingent of Nietzsche scholars, led by Paul S. Loeb, which holds that he believes in the metaphysical reality of the eternal recurrence of the same—the idea that every event in the universe will repeat itself over and over again in exactly the same fashion. This is a somewhat controversial position that is difficult to defend, given that the eternal recurrence is usually put in hypothetical and allegorical terms when it comes up in Nietzsche's published writings (cf. Anderson 2017, sec. 6.3). In the earliest and most famous expression of this idea (in *The Gay Science*), Nietzsche (2001, sec. 341) poses the following scenario:

> What if some day or night a demon were to steal into your loneliest loneliness and say to you: 'This life as you now live it and have lived it you will have to live once again and innumerable times again; and there will be nothing new in it, but every pain and every joy and every thought and sigh and everything unspeakably small or great in your life must return to you, all in the same succession and sequence . . .' Would you not throw yourself down and gnash your teeth and curse the demon

> who spoke thus? Or have you once experienced a tremendous moment when you would have answered him: 'You are a god, and never have I heard anything more divine.' . . . how well disposed would you have to become to yourself and to life *to long for nothing more fervently* than for this ultimate eternal confirmation and seal?

Relying in part on an excessively literal and straightforward reading of such hypothetical and allegorical presentations of the eternal recurrence idea, Loeb makes his case that Nietzsche is actually a supporter of the kind of immortality in which one lives out the exact same finite life infinite times. Loeb (2017, 86–87, 90–99) focuses quite a bit on the various allusions to the idea in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, which is a fictional tale involving fictional (or at least fictionalized) characters whose words drip with metaphor, poetry, and symbolism. In sections such as "On the Vision and the Riddle" and "The Sleepwalker Song," one can indeed find characters referring to the eternal recurrence, but it is far from clear whether the reader is meant to take from these interesting, but rather obscure, discussions some indication of Nietzsche's actual metaphysical beliefs. Furthermore, there is nothing in these passages that definitively rules out the more common interpretation of the eternal recurrence scenario as a thought-experiment meant to demonstrate the intensity of one's appreciation for life.

Loeb (2017, 87, 90) also relies pretty heavily on Nietzsche's (see e.g., 1968, sec. 1066) unpublished notes as evidence for the view that the scenario is no mere thought experiment. Setting aside the fact that repeating the same life over and over again just is not the kind of personal immortality that most transhumanists or immortality enthusiasts are interested in (cf. Moore 2006, 318–19; Smuts 2011, 143–44), the evidence that Loeb finds in these notes is hardly beyond reproach. Acknowledging some of the same passages Loeb points to, Moore (2006, 319) thinks he can "lay to rest any notion that Nietzsche wants to defend the idea of a recurring cosmic cycle as a theory about the actual nature of the universe." Moore goes on to say that "there are issues about what exactly Nietzsche is doing with these arguments. And in any case, the passages in question occur in *The Will to Power*," which is a text cobbled together from his notes by his sister without his awareness.

Besides the evidentiary issues, the main problem I have with Loeb's account is that he makes it sound like Nietzsche is engaging in precisely the kind of metaphysical wishful thinking about immortality that he criticizes in other philosophers and philosophical/religious traditions. According to Loeb (2017, 86–88), this particular bit of metaphysical speculation is not problematic for Nietzsche because it is based on the science of the day. But even so, I am not sure such speculation would essentially differ from that of

medieval Christian apologists who relied on the dominant Aristotelian worldview to support their claims about all variety of dubious religious doctrines that Nietzsche mocks, including the existence of an afterlife.[13] Loeb also seems to think that because the notion of eternal recurrence does not involve a "better world" in the great beyond, it is less likely to encourage complaining about this world. However, in his account of *Zarathustra*, Loeb (2017, 90) suggests that one of the reasons Nietzsche needs the notion of eternal recurrence to be true is to provide comfort in the face of mortality. Why would such comfort be necessary unless one was disappointed by, or had a complaint about, at least this one aspect of bodily life, as it appears in the world? In this case, the complaint stems from the apparent impermanence of the achievements of mortal existence, which has historically been one of the main motivations for the invention of immortality fantasies. The supposedly comforting idea here is that the endless repetition of one's existence would guarantee that one's accomplishments could not be swallowed up by an objectionable eternal nothingness. Given everything we saw in the previous section about embracing mortality and refusing to engage in denigrating the body, the world, and life itself, this seems like a very implausible account of what Nietzsche is up to in discussing eternal recurrence. If Loeb had his way, he would make Nietzsche into just another metaphysician with a highly speculative theory about a reality that includes posthumous preservation of individuals—just like Plato or Paul, but without the additional problems that come with the dualistic elements of their views.[14]

But Loeb is not the only thinker to offer a somewhat unorthodox reading of Nietzsche's eternal recurrence. Moore is also unconvinced by the standard thought-experiment reading and puts forward his own rather interesting take. Like Loeb, he supports his position with unpublished notes from work Nietzsche never completed and likely never meant to, and Moore even relies on the same part of "On the Vision and the Riddle" from *Zarathustra*, although he sees in it something very different than Loeb does. (It should go

[13] It is also important to keep in mind that eternal recurrence was hardly considered established scientific fact in Nietzsche's own day, and its prospects as a viable scientific theory have not changed much since then.

[14] Against the thought-experiment interpretation of the eternal recurrence scenario, Loeb (2017, 87) says, "if actual reality and life are not repeated at all in any way, then this theory would simply be a new fantasy whereby the actual fleetingness and finitude of reality and life would be denied all over again." I honestly cannot understand how a simple thought experiment, which makes no claims at all about metaphysical realities and emphasizes the affirmation of life in the world, could be guilty of such a thing. On the other hand, it is quite clear how Loeb's interpretation makes Nietzsche into precisely this kind of life-denying spinner of fantasy.

without saying that the same concerns raised above about taking *Zarathustra* too literally, or the unpublished notes too seriously, still apply.) On Moore's view, eternal recurrence in Nietzsche is not really about a recurring cosmic cycle, even if only intended as a thought-provoking scenario. Instead, the important idea (especially in "On the Vision and the Riddle") is that each moment of life reflects the eternal past and the eternal future, but always from a slightly different perspective (Moore 2006, 322–23; cf. Parkes 1998, 95–96). Since eternity stretches in both directions, everything that can happen has happened and must happen again, but the "continual generation of new perspectives . . . allows for the continual generation of new interpretations and new evaluations. Through these the past can be continually transformed, so that, although it keeps returning, it keeps returning differently. The past can be continually lived, continually developed, continually cultivated" (Moore 2006, 324). Moore's fascinating account—of what he believes is Nietzsche's attempt to attribute meaning to an existence that is always just more of the same—has the virtue of not betraying Nietzsche's other views in the way Loeb's account does. However, it does depend quite heavily on a single, somewhat obscure, passage from one of Nietzsche's most metaphorical, poetic, and symbolic texts.

In the end, even if there is some merit to what Moore (or Loeb, for that matter) says, there is simply no denying that the dominant thought-experiment interpretation of Nietzsche's discussion of the eternal recurrence is much harder to dismiss.[15] This interpretation holds that he intends to use the idea, as the passage quoted above from *The Gay Science* suggests, to determine "how well disposed . . . you have . . . become to yourself and to life." The goal is to live a worthwhile life, which (according to the criteria Nietzsche introduces) is one that you would be proud and joyful to have preserved in an endlessly recurring cycle, whether or not it actually will be (cf. Wrathall 2015, 437). And this brings us back to Nietzsche's ultimate indifference to (nonrecurring) long life and this-worldly immortality. What the eternal recurrence thought experiment helps to illustrate is that however long life lasts, the most important thing is that one must be able to affirm and take ownership of it in its entirety. Although Nietzsche would not be a fan of immortal life, or even want a particularly long one, I cannot see any good reason to think he would necessarily disapprove of such a life. In fact,

[15] Lawrence J. Hatab (2005, 2, 9) seems to think that the thought-experiment interpretation and something like Loeb's more metaphysical interpretation actually coexist in Nietzsche's thought.

such disapproval would seem like an indication that he had failed to meet his own criteria for a worthwhile existence.

## 4. NOT QUITE A CURMUDGEON OR A TRANSHUMANIST

After considering Nietzsche's various claims about immortality, eternal recurrence, and other relevant issues, the evidence largely suggests that he does not find immortality, or even life-extension, desirable. Is it, then, fair to say that he is an immortality curmudgeon, as Moore (in more sympathetic terms) claims? I think the answer to this question is: yes and no. Insofar as the curmudgeons previously discussed are characterized as finding immortality, and in some cases even very long life, undesirable, Nietzsche seems to fit right in. However, while these curmudgeons predicate the undesirability on the meaninglessness of an existence that either cannot end or does not end soon enough, this is not really an issue that bothers Nietzsche all that much. As I have argued, his sense of meaning and value does not seem to be dependent on chronological finitude, let alone some specific number of years. His problem with the desirability of immortality is the desire itself, and the petty and hateful attitude toward mortal life that seems to accompany it every time it comes up.

So, what does Nietzsche's stance on the desirability of immortality tell us about his proximity to transhumanism? Well, it seems highly unlikely that he would support any formulation of transhumanism that includes, as one of its central hopes or desires, the extension of the human life span. Even though transhumanism obviously does not posit a traditional supernatural sense of an afterlife, some of its ideas are not so easy to distinguish from what Christianity or other traditions have in mind. For example, when it comes to mind-uploading, the hope is that we can live on (roughly) forever in a virtual realm in which we will be free of all the suffering and limitations that plague human beings in this unfair and corrupt world. The danger of such a hope, according to Nietzsche, is that it leads to a diminishing, disparaging, and devaluing of this world and the embodied life one is currently living in it.[16] Indeed, as this example illustrates, the hope and the devaluing seem to go hand in hand. Furthermore, it is not at all clear, given both technological and conceptual problems (e.g., about the nature of personal identity), that this kind of nonsupernatural "otherworldly" immortality is

[16] There is also the more hellish application of the uploading scenario, which would use the threat of (roughly) never-ending virtual torment to control and restrict (and thus diminish, disparage, and devalue) what one does with one's body in the everyday world.

any more likely to be realized than the supernatural version propagated by Christianity and other religions.[17] Thus, Nietzsche might view it as just one more troubling lie about the "beyond."

But mind-uploading is a pretty extreme example of what transhumanists hope to achieve. What about hoping for a more modest body-bound sort of life-extension (perhaps with cyborg enhancements)? On the off chance that it is somehow possible for certain transhumanists to maintain the intense life of affirmation and creation in the here and now that Nietzsche recommends while continuing to harbor hopes that it will not end, or at least not yet, then he might not be critical of these particular individuals. However, this attitude would seem to be a pretty uncommon and unstable one, and I think Nietzsche would always be suspicious that their hopes are coming at too high a cost, that transhumanism is leading them, in some sense, into the old bitter Christian trap (cf. Woodward 2017, 239). Of course, it is always possible to adopt a version of transhumanism that abandons hope for life-extension, and perhaps Nietzsche would be more amenable to it. As mentioned in an earlier note, Sorgner (see e.g., 2010, 13) might be willing to bite this particular bullet, but it seems fair to suggest that most transhumanists would sooner call off the quest for the proverbial stamp of approval from Nietzsche than jettison one of their most dearly held goals.

Throughout this paper I have argued that, when it comes to living a worthwhile life, Nietzsche's emphasis is on certain qualities and not at all on quantity (which he is predominantly indifferent about). If a person just happened to be immortal, this fact alone would not determine, one way or the other, the potential for cultivating value in his or her existence. For Nietzsche, so long as a life is lived affirmatively and creatively, it makes no difference if the individual living it continues to exist or not. Short life, long life, radically extended life, immortal life, or eternally recurring life—it simply does not matter; Nietzsche advocates making something of oneself that is worth having around for any length of time, or any number of times. And this is what really distinguishes him from transhumanists, or at least *most* transhumanists, because for them the amount of time matters a great deal.

## 5. CONCLUSION

Without his support for such an important part of their agenda, it is hard to believe that transhumanists would find in Nietzsche a genuine ally.

[17] Babich (2017, 112) makes some interesting general claims about the vacuousness of transhumanist promises based on technologies that do not, and may never, exist.

However, none of my conclusions rule out the possibility of transhumanists using aspects of Nietzsche's thought to stimulate and defend all kinds of ideas. In the course of suggesting that the notion of eternal recurrence might not be very helpful to transhumanists, Russell Blackford (2017, 203) makes a similar point: "this in no way precludes them from taking inspiration from whatever they find attractive in any of Nietzsche's work." Sorgner is obviously someone who finds a great deal attractive, and he invests a lot of time and effort in trying to tie Nietzsche and transhumanism together. While not every one of his arguments is entirely compelling (in part because he engages in a bit of cherry-picking), he makes a few really interesting connections. It would appear that he will need to be satisfied with this somewhat limited accomplishment, because his larger project flounders once radical life-extension and immortality come up. Given a more even-handed overview of Nietzsche's thoughts on these topics, and the fact that most transhumanists are unlikely to abandon their core concerns, Sorgner's broader claims wedding Nietzsche and transhumanism just cannot be true.[18]

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