

Blank and Pitiless

ROBERT FRODEMAN

Steve Fuller grasps the apocalyptic spirit of our times. Millenarian religions seem to have been always present in human culture; now add to this human-caused environmental changes so great that they potentially define a new geologic era, the Anthropocene. Every anomalous weather event feels ominous. Our social and political life has also been disrupted. The center cannot hold: one person's truth is another's fake news, as social media offer new ways to manipulate people. The COVID-19 pandemic now encapsulates all our fears: is nature striking back? Is the novel coronavirus an engineered bioweapon? Can government pronouncements be trusted?

Amid these dark portents, transhumanism stands out by offering a positive view of humanity's future. Transhumanists argue that a new, self-directed stage of human evolution is at hand, one where, thanks to a host of soon-to-be-developed technologies, we will live longer, healthier lives, perhaps to the point of immortality. What's not to celebrate in that?

For Fuller, transhumanism isn't just some fringe ideology. At least in the developed world, we're already partially transhuman. We've adapted ourselves to a cyborg existence of artificial hips and cochlear implants, stents and blood pressure pills and ear buds, to say nothing of the ubiquitous presence of handheld supercomputers (aka smartphones).

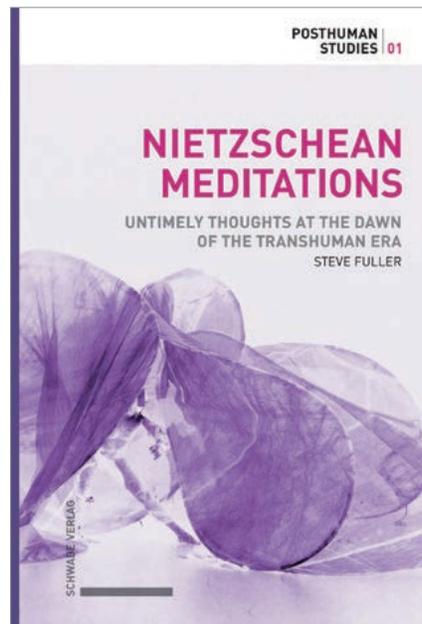
We don't acknowledge transhumanism as our tacit societal goal. But how else to describe the pursuit of scientific progress with no stated end goal? The US National Science Foundation places no limit on its programs of scientific and technological advance, just as the

National Institutes of Health seeks to overcome every human illness. In some quarters, aging is itself being redefined as a disease. This is deification on the installment plan: transhumanists simply make our trajectory explicit.

The virtue of Fuller's *Nietzschean Meditations* is that it draws out the philosophical implications of where we're headed. Across a series of works Fuller has made himself into the leading philosopher of transhumanism. *Nietzschean Meditations* is his most thorough account to date, a wide-ranging philosophical exploration of what he hopes will be our transhuman future.

Fuller is agnostic about which of two versions of transhumanism should be pursued—the improvement of our simian form, where we would live markedly longer and healthier lives, or the entire transcendence of our carbon-based physicality into a form of artificial intelligence. These differing views are represented, respectively, by the gerontologist and author Aubrey de Grey's indefinite life extension project and the futurist Ray Kurzweil's belief in a coming "singularity" where an individual's consciousness will be uploaded into a super-powerful computer. For Fuller either one will do, as long as the goal of theosis (the divinization of humankind) remains the goal.

Fuller's deepest commitments are theological in nature. But the book has many parts: it's at once a heterodox Christian theology, a philosophy of nature, a paean to technological progress, and a rethinking of the economics of death. He begins with an account of Friedrich Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1883), which Fuller sees as announcing the inevitability of the transhumanist project. Nietzsche's proclamation that "God is dead" (in his *Gay Science*) requires the creation of a new set of values where humans become godlike via their own efforts. Science and technology become the



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

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means for realizing goals—everlasting life, for one—that traditionally have been the domain of religion. "Science does not eliminate religion but replaces it," Fuller writes, "and maybe even redeems its promises."

The Nietzsche references, however, are only scene setting. ("This is not a book about Nietzsche; it is a book for Nietzsche.") Fuller defines transhumanism as consisting of "the indefinite projection of those qualities that most clearly distinguish humans from other natural beings." He does not define what those qualities are, which speaks volumes, for there is only one area where animals can't match humans: our skill at manipulating the world via science and technology.

This definition of what makes us human—that we are *Homo faber*, the toolmaker—typifies the entire transhumanist movement. Transhumanists define human beings in terms of our abilities for manipulation

and computation rather than by, for example, the compassion and solidarity that we show for one another. Rather than trying to increase our honesty, empathy, or kindness, transhumanists focus on questions of human cognitive and technological enhancement. The theosis that Fuller is interested in references a god who is all-knowing and all-manipulating rather than all-caring.

Defining humans in terms of *Homo faber* raises two problems. First, it oversells the upside and underestimates the dangers of continued technoscientific development. Second, it sums up a philosophical anthropology that fails to account for essential aspects of human experience. Altogether, transhumanism ignores the real issue that lies before us: whether the idea of progress that Western culture has been operating with since the Enlightenment still makes sense.

Fuller has a practiced reply to the first of these points, via his argument for what he and others call the "proactionary principle." If the precautionary principle argues that you should look before you leap, proactionaries advocate leaping into the technological unknown and hoping for the best, in the confidence that we can clean up any mess that results. In Fuller's view, this is how humanity has always progressed. Sure, this thinking goes, the industrial revolution harmed large numbers of people, but in hindsight we can all agree that it was worth it.

Count me dubious on this point. There's a hint of Whiggish history here, where past events both good and bad are necessary preludes to our glorious present. There's also a willful naiveté: it's unlikely that the workers whose lives were sacrificed to what the poet and artist William Blake characterized as "dark Satanic Mills" would have agreed to their martyrdom for the pleasure of future generations.

But more to the point, Fuller

ignores the differences in scale that characterize today's developments in technology. The creation of the atom bomb marked a turning point: our technologies could now destroy humanity. Since then our technologies have continued to grow ever more powerful. Fuller doesn't take seriously the possibility of a "gray goo" scenario where the losses involved—say, the extermination of humanity by a colorless ooze of self-replicating nanomachines that consume all of the earth's biomass—trump any possible benefit further down the road.

In part this reflects Fuller's Olympian attitude toward suffering. It's a curious position for someone who holds the Auguste Comte Chair in Social Epistemology in the Department of Sociology at the University of Warwick. As a nineteenth century philosopher of science, Comte paid close attention to the social dimensions of scientific advance; you might expect that Fuller would pay greater heed to the untoward aspects of technological advance.

Take an obvious example: the despair and anger that many Americans feel at having been left in the wake of technological progress can be connected to both the 65,000 annual fatalities from opioid overdoses and the election of Donald Trump as president. Fuller's account is at points brilliant, but it operates on a theoretical level soaring far above our tumultuous social scene. Fuller is comfortable with the German philosopher G. W. F. Hegel's description of history as a slaughter bench, but it's not his ox that's getting gored.

Fuller's argument passes over the possible real-world consequences of transhumanist advances. He says nothing about the potential financial costs of human enhancement or related concerns that these augmentations could be restricted to the rich. Nor does he discuss what type of political mechanisms might be needed if augmented humans are to be kept from

dominating the "normals." Nor does he include any account of how society would deal with the threat of massive population growth, or restrictions on having children, or the lack of workplace turnover as people stay in jobs into their second century.

To my mind, however, it's the second problem facing the transhumanists that is the decisive one. Fuller and transhumanists view human limitations as solely a matter of weaknesses to be eliminated. They do not appreciate that our limitations and frailties are a central part of what it means to be human. The German philosopher Martin Heidegger made the point nearly a century ago in *Being and Time* (1927): to be human is to care for things, and to be cared for in turn. But it is impossible to care for things that are immortal. In such cases the idea of care becomes a category mistake: immortals take care of themselves. Similarly, solidarity and political action come not only from shared interests but also from a shared sense of vulnerability, where we must prop each other up through rough or dangerous times.

This point fatally undermines the transhumanist project. Transhumanism may fail, perhaps catastrophically so (i.e., the gray goo scenario), but its success would be equally dire. Even the lesser goals of transhumanism—doubling our life span, connecting our brains to the internet—would take us into unknowable territory. A successful transhumanism would mean the end of humanity, since whatever creature that resulted would no longer be recognizably human; no matter what we might gain, we would lose ourselves.

To be human is to be caught in—and limited by—a web of relationships across the generations. The rhythms of life would be disrupted if our elders lived a life of perpetual youth and refused to exit the stage. To be human is to possess only a finite

amount of knowledge and skill; if all of humanity's knowledge is instantly accessible to each of us, our existence becomes unrecognizable—closer to *Star Trek's* hive-minded Borg than individual *Homo sapiens*.

Our ultimate limitation is death. Although Fuller doesn't confront Heidegger's arguments directly, some of his most interesting reflections concern how the character of death changes under a transhumanist regime. Fuller's term for these changes is *necronomics*—the economics of death. Transhumanist advances may make it possible to speak of the reincarnation of the self, as a person is fitted with a new or improved body. (It's questionable whether being uploaded into a computer would count as reincarnation, since in that case there's nothing fleshly.) Fuller argues that transhumanism would make our death a matter of choice, and in that sense make it an economic decision, as we weigh how to make our death into a statement affirming our life.

Fuller's book raises provocative questions, but not all of them are ones that he means to highlight. If we are on a trajectory toward a transhumanist future, perhaps it's time to question that path. Kurzweil, the paradigmatic transhumanist, is an accelerationist who foresees science and technology continuing to grow at exponential rates. But shouldn't we be thinking about decelerating technological advance to give us a chance to better integrate its changes into our lives?

Although we're habituated to the idea of endless scientific progress, it's possible that humanity is approaching the point where science and technology have completed the bulk of their work. Perhaps it's time to move on to other challenges, to tasks that have been earlier set aside as hopeless. Our energies have gone into technical rather than humanistic achievements. What if we were to put

the same effort into increasing a sense of generosity and fellowship that we put into scientific advance?

Fuller's allegiance to a particular notion of progress—with its faith in science and technology to shape the human and natural world—is shared across the political spectrum. A recent book by the conservative *New York Times* columnist Ross Douhat, *The Decadent Society: How We Became the Victims of Our Own Success* (2020), is surprisingly similar in outlook. Douhat is concerned with the lethargy of Western culture, its institutional and cultural sclerosis. In Douhat's account, a decadent society is one that has reached a certain level of success

but does not know where to head next.

Douhat sees this decadence and stagnation as tied to the loss of a frontier. He cites the historian Frederick Jackson Turner on the closing of the American frontier by 1890, and notes that “unexplored frontiers and fresh discoveries and new worlds to conquer are not just desirable but the very point of life.” He laments the loss of space exploration as a new, meaningful frontier. Douhat raises the possibility of spiritual renewal, but his focus is on the identification of a new technological goal, such as a mission to Mars, and he begins and ends his book with talk of exploring outer space.

Fuller and Douhat assume that

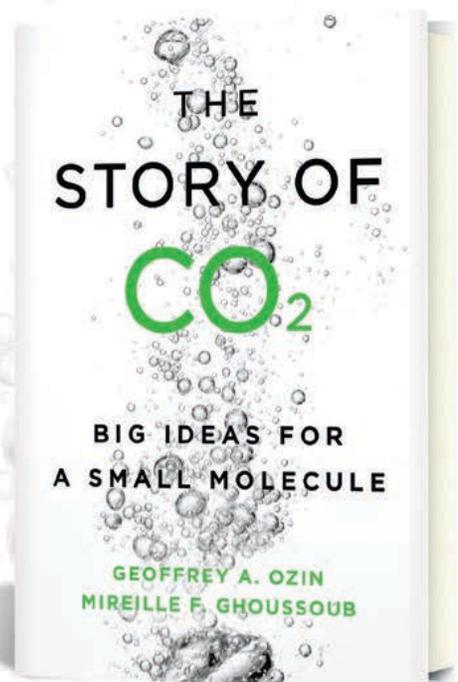
individuals and society need to be on a path of endless progress; otherwise they stagnate. Greater respect for the natural arc of life might be in order. What's more, the coronavirus offers a reminder for all of us: nature bats last, holding possibilities that always exceed our grasp. Nature contains a chaotic energy that will wreck rational plans for the future. Fuller and the transhumanists demonstrate a dangerous, youthful naiveté concerning our ability to control the world.

Robert Frodeman is an independent writer in Hoback, Wyoming. His latest book is Transhumanism, Nature, and the Ends of Science (2019).

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