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The Übermensch Cometh, Behold The Son of Man!

*“Tous les hommes sont mortels”** exclaimed French existentialist philosopher Simone de Beauvoir, and in that regard, she was most certainly correct. All men are mortal (33). In her novel by the same name she explores the life of a man condemned to live forever and the meaninglessness of his eternal life at seeing everyone he has ever loved demise before him. Certainly such premise would make any man or woman feel grateful and fortunate for the fact that one day, they too will die. However, this can also be the rationalization of a person going through the bargaining stage of the the five stages of grief, otherwise known as the Kübler-Ross model, which at some point or another characterizes the life of every human being who has ever pondered upon his own mortality. The stages are comprised of denial, anger, bargaining, depression and finally, acceptance. This phenomenon could also be summarized as “the human condition”—the disease every man has carried since the dawn of time, and one whose cure could be close at hand.

It is an undeniable fact that man craves immortality. It was from this primal longing that art itself was born as a means for man to immortalize his passing through the world. This in time gave rise to mythology and the belief in an immortal soul which would live on after physical death. Religion in turn entered our world as the concept of a soul assumed form and became our ideals as the anthropomorphic gods of the ancient world, and ever since, religion has been the

*All men are mortal (French).

main vessel of salvation for all men afflicted by the insurmountable anxiety of the knowledge of their mortality (Otto Rank 45-47).

When Charles Darwin introduced the theory of evolution to the modern world with the publication of *On the Origin of Species* in 1859, more was also implied than the mere origin of species, but also their inherit unending evolution through time—its destination. It was under the influence of this groundbreaking work that Friedrich Nietzsche conceived the image of the *Übermensch** in his 1883 book *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* in which he stated that man is a bridge between ape and the *Übermensch* (Nietzsche 11), which has since been understood to “suggest a further stage of evolution, beyond humanity” (Nietzsche xxi), and thus one of the earliest glimpses of transhumanism.

The concept of transhumanism itself has recently reentered our mainstream culture with the publication in 2005 of *The Singularity is Near: When Humans Transcend Biology* by futurist and director of engineering at Google, Ray Kurzweil where through the extensive explanation of the nature of human exponentiating knowledge and technology which he summarizes as “The Law of Accelerating Returns” he argues that by the middle of the twenty-first century we will possess the computing, medical, and robotic knowledge to extend human life indefinitely.

The prospect of such future has since gained substantial response. On one hand there are numerous scientists and skeptics who have found the idea plausible, likely and almost inevitable and who furthermore embrace it while expressing caution at the possible drawbacks we may encounter as the day nears. While others have likened it to a new form of cult-like belief by wannabe immortals who have embraced it as yet another form of techno-religious belief for deliverance from mortality.

* Overman, Superman, Super-human (German).

As in most things, there is some truth and reason to each of these arguments. Of most importance among them is man's astounding ability to deceive himself. And on this regard there is perhaps no greater authority than cultural anthropologist Dr. Ernest Becker who shortly before his death in 1974 left us with *The Denial of Death*, the culmination of his life's work and a priceless contribution to humanity in which he exposes his insight on man's necessary refusal to accept his own mortality and the main driving force behind his development as a being.

It is important to remark and understand certain basic functions of human character in order to warrant the claim that humanity must pursue all efforts towards a future where death is not a certainty but only a possibility. If the purpose of all our work and effort in life is the pursuit of happiness, and thus the diminishing of suffering, we inevitably would come back time and again to the body as the source of suffering for sentient beings. After all, it is for the body that we seek shelter, sustenance, clothes, and all other experiences which result in pleasure to be experienced by our minds.

We must recognize that our subjective experience of being is deeply embedded with the nature of our body, and that our bodies although the result of millions of years of evolution, are still very primitive despite its apparent greatness, and that it powerfully limits our possibilities for being as a manifestation of the fear of death. Psychologist Abraham Maslow who Ernest Becker said “had the keenest sense for significant ideas (48)” had this to say with regard to our fear of living:

We fear our highest possibility (as well as our lowest ones). We are generally afraid to become that which we can glimpse in our most perfect moments... We enjoy and even thrill to the godlike possibilities we see in ourselves in such peak

moments. And yet we simultaneously shiver with weakness, awe and fear before these very same possibilities. [...] We are just not strong enough to endure more!

Our organisms are just too weak for any large doses of greatness... (Becker 48-49)

Transhumanism could thus be the cure to our fear of living. Imagine a future where the knowledge of genetics, nanotechnology, artificial intelligence and robotics have matured substantially more, keeping in mind that such maturation occurs at an exponential rate (Kurzweil 396), and where our bodies have been enhanced beyond disease and aging, our minds enhanced by even faster processing power and even accessible to virtual-realities where we can explore being in endless ways, experience infinite love and have no fear of losing a loved one to death ever again, no hunger, no poverty, and an end to suffering. A staggering claim, granted. But if it were possible, would we not want it?

Despite such high and worthy endeavour there are voices who challenge a future where radical life extension is a reality. Some argue that “radical life extension would make people less human” being that “such ‘posthuman’ radical enhancements could very well turn us into different beings and change the basic meaning of what it means to be human (Agar 1).” While it is true, and even the purpose of this undertaking to change what it means to be human, it seems that those who make such arguments identify humanity's qualities with its weaknesses (vulnerability, suffering, frailty, powerlessness, &c) and not its strengths (hope, resilience, curiosity, imagination, love, &c). The fallacy following such argument is that achieving higher intellectual reasoning would entail a lack of emotions and assuming that by shedding our weak attributes we would no longer “‘deserve’ to be called human (Agar 1-2).”

Another common argument against transhumanism is that by pursuing such future we

would be playing God. A difficult argument to counter given that first we would have to establish valid proof of the existence of a Creator. However, we could ask: would playing God be inherently a bad thing? Ramez Naam, a technologist and author of *More Than Human: Embracing the Promise of Biological Enhancement*, offers his insight on this regard:

“Playing God” is actually the highest expression of human nature. The urges to improve ourselves, to master our environment, and to set our children on the best path possible have been the fundamental driving forces of all of human history. Without these urges to “play God,” the world as we know it wouldn't exist today. A few million humans would live in savannahs and forests, eking out a hunter-gatherer existence, without writing or history or mathematics or an appreciation of the intricacies of their own universe and their own inner workings (Kurzweil 299).

Certainly there will be valid ethical and safety concerns to be weighted as we move forward, as each powerful technology we develop has the capacity to be used to bring good as it can to bring bad whether deliberately or accidentally, as has already been our experience with the nuclear era.

Today many experts in the field project the tipping point in human longevity to about 15 years away where per each year passing one would be gaining more than a year of life expectancy, a term labeled by gerontologist Aubrey de Grey as “longevity escape velocity” (Bailey 1). And still to them one question kept arising: “Why are so many people unaware of the tantalizing possibility of soon achieving extreme human life extension?” To which they concluded that perhaps living hundreds of years sounds creepy to most people (Bailey 6). Understandable if we thought these hundreds of years would not be lived with youth and beauty.

Faced with such prospect one cannot help but recall the words of Abraham Maslow cited above, perhaps “we [truly do] fear our highest possibility.” But this must not deter us from advocating and advancing more powerful health and medicine. In the years to come there will be challenges, I suspect the most difficult to overcome may be those from religious fundamentalist and far right political ideology.

These changes will occur gradually, perhaps we will not notice the exact moment we entered a world where being human did not automatically mean being mortal. Ray Kurzweil goes on to argue that pass the mark of transcending our biology progress will not stall, but continue expanding fantastically across space. An imagery difficult to conceive of as he explains that eventually not only man would achieve immortality but that the whole universe (inanimate matter) would become conscious. To which when asked the question if he believed in God he replied: not yet (Kurzweil).

If this is the future we could achieve in the next centuries, then what happens over the next three decades hold a paramount importance for the question of the importance and meaning of life. Then Zarathustra would be correct in proclaiming that the “Übermensch shall be the meaning of the earth” (Nietzsche 11), and we would have a moral obligation to pursue the next stage of human development and seek to achieve new ways of being and existing in the universe.

In the meantime, dissemination of current advancements in science pointing towards radical life extension seems to be the least the layman can do to bring awareness and have the important debates we must have on the future of our species. At the end of a summit on radical life extension a question was posed: “Will you be part of the last generation to die from aging, or will you be part of the first generation to enjoy open-ended youth and vitality?” (Bailey 7).

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