

# NIETZSCHEAN MEDITATIONS

UNTIMELY THOUGHTS AT THE DAWN  
OF THE TRANSHUMAN ERA

STEVE FULLER

SCHWABE VERLAG





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**Stefan Lorenz Sorgner (ed.)**

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**Steve Fuller**

# **Nietzschean Meditations**

**Untimely Thoughts at the Dawn  
of the Transhuman Era**

**Schwabe Verlag**



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## Introduction: The path through Nietzsche to transhumanism

This is not a book about Nietzsche; it is a book for Nietzsche. It is inspired by the version of Nietzsche that inspired his early admirers, including Henrik Ibsen, George Bernard Shaw and Thomas Mann. Nietzsche had considerable albeit controversial uptake in the years just before and after his death in 1900, though more in the general culture than in academia itself. Nietzsche's biography was that of an academic shooting star who fell down to earth and never fully recovered – and arguably became more demented over time. Perhaps Nietzsche projected his voice where he was incapable of speaking his mind. This is the 'Zarathustrian' Nietzsche, the harbinger of a new sort of being – the *Übermensch*. Were Nietzsche reincarnated today, he would be the sort of person who requires an avatar in cyberspace to express himself fully. This 'Second Life' would be the vehicle by which he would encourage others to 'transvalue' their lives in the offline world.

This is the version of Nietzsche that I was first taught in the 1970s. It was the Nietzsche heralded in the opening of Richard Strauss' 1896 tone poem, *Also Sprach Zarathustra*, which featured so prominently in Stanley Kubrick's 1968 film, *2001: A Space Odyssey*. Moreover, this had been the dominant understanding of Nietzsche until the Second World War. But once the Nazis claimed Nietzsche as their own, the non-Nazi academic community made a concerted effort to downplay the significance of his 'trans-' aspirations. That arch Nazi sympathiser Martin Heidegger ironically aided the cause because like so many Nietzsche scholars today, he was more interested in Nietzsche's 'deep historical' sensibility than whatever Nietzsche might have had to say about the future. Nevertheless, I remain interested in the early twentieth century image of Nietzsche as someone who took literally the pros-

pect of transcending the human condition – a futurist who was unafraid to confront the puzzlement and even suffering that it would entail.

I say ‘literally’ because the twentieth century as such is best understood as a triumph for this original version of Nietzsche – during which science and technology massively improved the lives of those fortunate enough to survive the two world wars and the ironically ‘successful’ Cold War, all of which were the products of the very same science and technology. This is the path down which the movement known as *transhumanism* now half-knowingly travels. Nietzsche set the precedent for understanding our emerging transhuman condition as seen from humanity’s rear-view mirror. By that I mean that he provided an amplified sense of the sort of future that is likely to overtake us but in which we will have been complicit all along. It is the best way to understand not only Nietzsche’s appeal to *amor fati* but also his so-called ‘genealogical method’.

All of this contrasts with the Foucault-inspired academic tendency to think that the method to Nietzsche’s madness lay in showing that history is not purposeful in any overarching (‘teleological’) sense but rather is the product of many contingent moments, as in the successive opportunistic pairings of sexual mates from which one’s own family tree is then constructed. While this view accords well with today’s politically correct version of ‘Darwinism’, it lacks Nietzsche’s sense of having to deal with the ‘burden of the past’, be it understood in terms of Original Sin or, in its sophisticated eugenic translation, ‘genetic load’. Of course, while our future is somehow presaged in our past, we only prove our fitness for ‘being human’ by overcoming those default positions. We come to know and understand what we must stand against and overcome, regardless of the consequences. This captures the understanding of Ibsen, Shaw and Nietzsche’s other early admirers.

I first acquired a sense of the broad sweep of Western philosophy via Will Durant’s *The Story of Philosophy*, a set of biographical portraits of certain great philosophers. However, from the outset I was intrigued less by the philosophers’ actual views than how they came to have them. I was fascinated by how they managed to weave their understanding of their times into a ‘world-view’ (*Weltanschauung*) of potentially world-historic significance. This remains for me the essence of the philosophical imagination. And so I focus now on transhumanism, an emerging tendency in human collective self-understanding. In my student years, in the wake of my exposure to

Durant, I was drawn to the sociology of knowledge. And in light of my formal training in analytic philosophy, I developed my signature project, ‘social epistemology’. In the process, I came to conceive of the philosophical imagination as primarily an exercise in *translation* (Fuller 1988a: Part II).

In Durant’s hands, the relevant ‘translation’ occurred mainly between the idiosyncratic character of a philosopher’s life and the universal features of the human condition that the philosopher addressed. However, as a student at Cambridge I was exposed to a meta-level version of this translation exercise: between the uniquely universal features of the human condition and the equally unique universal horizon represented by God, at least as understood by Newton in classical mechanics: the proverbial ‘view from nowhere’. This version has increasingly interested me, again resulting in my interest in transhumanism.

My route passed through Michael Dummett’s (1978) presentation of the work of Bertrand Russell’s metaphysics teacher, Jack McTaggart, who had cleverly reduced St Augustine’s speculations in *Confessions XI* on the difference between how we understand God’s plan and how God himself understands it to a question about the nature of time. The difference is what McTaggart called, respectively, the ‘A’ and the ‘B’ time series (Fuller 2019). Analytic philosophers have mainly focused on possible contradictions between the two series – the fact that one’s subjective temporal positioning (i.e. the past, present, future, as defined by the A-series) can ‘change’ over some objective measure of time (i.e. a succession of moments, as defined by the B-series), which in some sense remains ‘constant’. However, truer to Augustine’s original intent would be to treat the A and B series as reversible perspectives, as in a Gestalt switch: We can occupy both the subjective and objective positions – to be sure, not at once and both fallibly. Indeed, that’s the calling card of humanity’s fallen status: that we find the two perspectives on time *prima facie* irreconcilable, even though they co-exist in God. My sense of ‘transhumanism’ proceeds from this starting point.

This Augustinian ‘irreconcilability’ sounds like Heisenberg’s uncertainty principle – whereby one can measure either the position or the momentum of a physical particle but not both at the same time. That’s not an accident. In his 1959 presidential address to the American Psychological Association, Wolfgang Koehler, a founder of Gestalt psychology, remarked that his old physics teacher Max Planck suggested that the Gestalt switch might assist in

unlocking the central interpretive mystery of quantum mechanics, which Heisenberg later described as an ‘observer effect’: namely, that taking a measurement in physics means that the measurer loses, metaphysically speaking, ‘half’ of the available information, simply because the measurer is also a physical object. The cost of acquiring knowledge at all is that you will never be able to acquire more than half of it. This is the quantum version of humanity’s fallen state as an animal who nevertheless remains capable of thinking like a deity whose existence doesn’t interfere with the absoluteness of the knowledge it possesses (Fuller 2017).

The human can either fixate on her current animal status (position) or on her aspiration to recover her former divine powers (momentum). In the balance is whether the significance of human experience is intrinsic or extrinsic? Is experience worth valuing for its own sake, in which case feelings of pleasure and pain are in themselves moral indicators of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ (as the many followers of Epicurus have maintained); or is experience no more than a kind of evidence to be weighed with other factors in determining the full value of a human life, which itself might not be fully realized until long after one’s own death (as Christians often seemed to maintain)? These stark alternatives in perspective became explicit in the early modern period through *theodicy*, the theological justification of evil in a world that is supposedly the best that God could have created. This discipline is most closely associated with Leibniz (who gave it its name), but the projects of philosophers as diverse as Kant, Bentham, Hegel and Marx can be understood as haunted by the need to reconcile theodicy’s alternative moral horizons. In this context, Schopenhauer’s equation of living and suffering aimed to reduce theodicy to absurdity by implying that never having been born constitutes the best of all possible worlds.

When Nietzsche introduced what he called ‘perspectivism’ into philosophy, he was operating against this backdrop. And before the rise of academic scholarship on Nietzsche, he was known as *the* philosopher of perspectivism. However, this understanding became increasingly obscured – first by ‘The Great War’ and especially by the Second World War. While no sensible thinker would blame Nietzsche for these events, which transpired long after he had died, Heidegger’s fascination with Nietzsche – and perhaps even more, others’ fascination with Heidegger – has added an unnecessary interpretive burden. Thus, I suggest that we turn back the clock in our under-

standing of Nietzsche, so that he's not read through Heidegger or the Second World War. My reason is simply that it puts us in a better frame of mind for appreciating Nietzsche as the godfather if not prophet of contemporary transhumanism. Following a path that stopped being taken in the past may be the most efficient way to reach a much better place in the future than simply carrying on the default path. This is the 'progressive' style of learning from history – which I recommend to everyone.

Our portal into this 'transhumanist Nietzsche' is H. L. Mencken, the colourful and controversial US journalist associated with the *Baltimore Sun* newspaper and the provocative magazine of politics and culture, the *American Mercury*. Historically typecast as a hard-drinking, wise-cracking, middle-aged cynic, the twenty-seven year old Mencken published in 1907 *The Philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche*, the first English book on its subject, after having translated *The Antichrist*. Mencken's style became indicative of what he himself christened as the 'American language' – and it demonstrated an elective affinity with Nietzsche's manner of address. Mencken did not rely on the British – and more generally European – disposition to irony, which is best seen as a blended emotion. Instead he made central to 'talking American' the decomposition of irony into its two essential elements – righteous indignation and droll sarcasm – by alternating between them in rapid succession.

Mencken's main target was *hypocrisy*, understood as that decadent form of high-mindedness that lets one see both inside and outside a frame of reference, playing one against the other as required, without appearing to be affected by the shift in perspective. Mencken's Nietzschean shift in emotional valence away from irony was designed to be a strike against the hypocrites. After all, irony is hypocrisy at its most exquisite. Throughout the modern period irony has provided the verbal equivalent of 'protective colouration' for those whose positions could be endangered were they to openly reveal a truth beyond the one displayed. It has been the default register for socially sublimating the dominant authority's repression of alternative perspectives. Thus, that most public of the arts – drama – has been the principal literary vehicle for irony in the modern period. Indeed, this is what made the more dialectically jagged plays of Ibsen and Shaw stand out in their day. They showed quite clearly the seams in the fabric.

In contrast, the Nietzschean mode of address approach, as popularized by Mencken, is to juxtapose discordant perspectives. While Nietzsche stands

out for the philosophical insight he generated from the resulting dissonance, a more obvious outworking of such perspectival dissonance was already being pursued in the visual arts by Nietzsche's contemporary Paul Cézanne, which became the signature twentieth century movement of 'non-representationalism'. It is often forgotten that non-representational art began as a 'revolt against illusion', namely, the set of clever techniques that enabled the viewer to see a 'reality' that nevertheless dissolves upon closer inspection – a sort of 'visual hypocrisy', or *trompe l'oeil*. In this respect, the brute juxtaposition of alternative perspectives in, say, a Picasso painting is designed to reveal how these tricks are done by forcing viewers to render the discordant perspectives into some coherent whole that then confers 'meaning' on the painting. Non-representational art is ultimately about inviting viewers of an artwork to shift from being a passive spectator to an active participant in something that is always 'under construction'. The onus is always already placed on the 'participant-observer' to make sense of it: One must assume some – if not all – responsibility for the world-view for which one then tries to account.

As an attitude towards knowledge, participant-observation is familiar across the academic spectrum from physics to sociology. On this basis, 'reflexivity' has acquired a metaphysical significance previously lacking in the word. However, this epistemological horizon reached its archest verbal expression in post-Second World War Existentialism as 'the absurd', to recall Albert Camus' point of view in *The Myth of Sisyphus*. But the absurdist style was already present – at least in vulgar form – in Mencken's prose. Consider what one of Mencken's more feline contemporaries, Walter Lippmann (1926), said while reviewing a book of Mencken's essays in the 1920s, since it could just as easily be said of Nietzsche's influence on Western culture, including philosophy:

You have to judge him totally, roughly, approximately, without definition, as you would a barrage of artillery, for the general destruction rather than for the accuracy of the individual shots. He presents an experience, and if he gets you, he gets you not by reasoned conviction, but by a conversion which you may or may not be able to dress up later as a philosophy.

Lippmann's review is worth reading in its entirety, not only for his appraisal of Mencken but also, by analogy, of Nietzsche, especially as read by someone without the 'benefit' of Heidegger's mediation.

The legacy of Mencken's and Nietzsche's stylistic affinity – the product of their allergic reaction to hypocrisy – is alive and well, not in any branch of scholarship or even journalism but in American political comedians, starting with Lenny Bruce in the late 1950s and becoming increasingly mannered through the likes of George Carlin, Bill Hicks, Bill Maher, Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert.

The style aims to 'tell it like it is' or 'call out', which serve to remind us that Nietzsche's 'radicalism' had less to do with discovering something that no one had ever noticed than with violating the politeness that normally discourages people from saying something obviously reasonable and perhaps even true. Academia's lack of outspokenness – which indeed makes it easier for academics to describe Nietzsche as a 'public intellectual' or 'cultural icon' than as one of their own – goes beyond any claims to the sophistication of, say, Biblical hermeneutics, which might make it difficult for non-adepts to follow. In fact, many of the basic points established by such scholarship are readily accessible to the literate public, if not already half-accepted. However, the political implications of those points are regarded as so disruptive that the scholars themselves – for reasons ranging from fear to self-regard – prefer a life of hypocrisy, refusing to declare what their colleagues would be at a loss to disavow, were it to be made generally known.

In this regard, I have felt most 'Nietzschean' in my own career when in a Pennsylvania courtroom in October 2005 I openly defended intelligent design theory as worthy to be taught alongside Darwin's theory of evolution in high school science classes. Two theses were central to my testimony. First, science would not be as it is today, including the current state of biological science, had intelligent design theory not been operative as the meta-physical backdrop to the Scientific Revolution in seventeenth century Europe. Second, the dominant paradigms in science – not least in biological science – have such a lock over training, resources and rewards that nothing short of 'affirmative action' would be required to enable intelligent design theory to have a fighting chance against Neo-Darwinism today. In effect, the state needs to front-load heterodoxy. Of course, I was roundly condemned by my colleagues – and continue to be condemned to this day. But if you



examine closely the arguments informing the condemnation, they are less concerned with the correctness of my claims than my effectively licensing ‘bad people’ to dupe gullible ‘good people’ in what would turn into an epistemically indeterminate situation. Moreover, this prospective threat seems to know no limits, overwhelming my opponents’ ability to speak the truth in public. At that point, one can only laugh, as these supposed ‘Children of the Enlightenment’ reveal themselves to be no more than children. They promote a paternalistic ‘double truth doctrine’ – the Platonic idea that there is one ‘truth’ for the rulers and another ‘truth’ for the ruled (Fuller 2018: chap. 2).

The philosophical voice crafted by Nietzsche and popularized by Mencken and today’s comedians is that of the outraged semi-insider. It certainly approximates my state of mind when I addressed the courtroom during *Kitzmiller v. Dover Area School District*. Several factors have come into play over the past generation to produce a ‘perfect storm’ for this ‘Nietzschean’ voice to enjoy mass adoption and appeal. Indeed, the predominance of this voice is emblematic of our current ‘post-truth condition’ (Fuller 2018a). It consists of the following three factors: greater formal academic training across the world, which in many places has resulted in the underemployment and hence frustration of the overeducated; virtually universal access to the internet, which has turned it into a global public depository for all forms of knowledge; and finally an academic establishment that has uncreatively responded to if not openly resisted these two changes in the global knowledge ecology. An interesting bellwether of the times is that notwithstanding generally warm feelings that people have for ‘disruption’ in business and politics, they are indifferent if not hostile to ‘critical theory’, which is understood as more of the same old academic blah-blah. The name already gives away the game. ‘Critical theory’ is *not* first-order criticism, which when successful transforms its targets – as criticism across the arts and politics has done, sometimes painfully. Emile Zola is the patron saint of criticism in this ‘first-order’ sense. Instead, ‘critical theory’ is largely about impressing other critical theorists and like-minded academics about a sense of ‘political correctness’ that once the verbal fog has settled leaves the putative socio-economic-political targets undisturbed.

As a good student of the Bible, Nietzsche might have said here that critical theorists are simply the Pharisees to their academic opponents, the more

Sadducee-like positivist social scientists – to recall the two main Jewish sects that the Gospels say vexed the mission of Jesus. What lurks here is the idea that the emancipatory light of knowledge is already present but it has been hidden under a bushel, to recall Jesus' strategic message to his disciples. More to the point, academics 'in the know' too often prevent non-academics from acquiring the sort of knowledge that might lead them to reassess their lives and their world. Instead academics manufacture a 'cultural lag' associated with acquiring the relevant 'expertise'. The attendant rituals, ranging from mastering manners of speech (aka 'jargon') to conventions of deference (aka 'citations'), discourage all but the most determined to fathom the current state of academic knowledge. Nietzsche understood very well the complex psychology that informs this academic sensibility, which I have elsewhere described as a form of *rentiership* (Fuller 2016a: chap. 1; Fuller 2018a: chap. 4). It is the mix of condescension and fear by those who ultimately *don't* believe that 'the truth shall set you free', to recall Jesus' challenge to the Jews in John 8. All that seems to concern academics is the erosion of their own power base. That psychology, as it pertained to Christian religious authorities, had been exquisitely dissected by Dostoevsky in 'The Grand Inquisitor' episode in *The Brothers Karamazov*.

Perhaps the most straightforward route from Nietzsche to transhumanism is to read *Beyond Good and Evil* and *On the Genealogy of Morals* as offering a naturalistic reinterpretation of Augustine's account of humanity's fallen nature, for which he coined the phrase 'Original Sin'. In terms of Augustine's secular successors, Kant had already done half the work for Nietzsche – but equally Hegel and Schopenhauer had in their different ways shown Nietzsche how *not* to finish the job. Augustine's decisive first step was to define the 'fallen' state of humanity as Adam's free act to degrade the divine image in which he had been created. In this sense, the fall amounts to a privation, a moral distancing from God. Thus, all the qualities that distinguish humans from animals are in fact profoundly weaker versions of qualities that God possesses to the greatest extent. As Nietzsche might put it – and transhumanists would recognize – we are not superior animals but failed gods. If we think of 'humanity' as a two-dimensional Cartesian coordinate space, 'animality' and 'divinity' are, respectively, the 'X' and 'Y' axis, the orthogonal dimensions along which our fate is plotted. We shall shortly return to this imagery when discussing Nietzsche's tightrope walker parable,

and also in the first chapter when proposing a ninety-degree rotation of the ideological axis from left-right to up-down.

What gives humanity the illusion that we are literally suspended between ‘animal’ and ‘divine’ along a single axis is that even after the fall, humans retain free will, which from a Biblical standpoint only God and humans have. However, in our case, it is a freedom to make choices, which involves seeing much more than animals see, which gives us a richer and more comprehensive understanding of reality – but crucially, without knowing the consequences of the choices we make, especially in the terms that matter most. Thus, while Augustine holds that humanity is not free to regain its former godlike standing on its own – that is a gift that only God himself can bestow (aka ‘Grace’) – humans may freely fall into a further degraded state, which may include regarding their degradation as satisfactory if not superior to the time when they were close to God. Both Nietzsche and transhumanists – to be sure, for somewhat different reasons – would contest the first part of this Augustinian claim, but they can largely accept the second part.

Nietzsche most obviously adapts Augustine’s reasoning in his account of the difference in moral perspective between masters and slaves. From the standpoint of a master who finds the master-slave relationship fair, the slave looks like a deficient version of his own excellence, just as Augustine said God regards the fallen humanity. However, from the standpoint of the slave who sees the relationship as unfair but whose power is restricted to his own imagination, a kind of revenge can be wreaked by overturning the value hierarchy on which this relationship is based. Thus, the slave comes to see his apparent inadequacy as disguised virtue, while the master’s presumptive excellence now appears as the epitome of evil. Unlike the ironist who would leave the story’s punchline implicit, Nietzsche quite explicitly presents it as a quasi-empirical genealogy of *Christian* morals, in which the masters eventually come to adopt the slave morality for themselves. In short, the religion that wants us to return to God owes its historical success to having adopted a moral stance that does everything in its power to reject the very idea of a divine point of view. It seems that we have now become stuck in Dostoevsky’s ‘Grand Inquisitor’ episode.

Nevertheless, Nietzsche is ambivalent about whether this doubly fallen state of humanity – that we sin against God yet in practice hold God in con-

tempt for his judgement against us – was a conspiracy of Jesus' disciples or, as the word 'genealogy' suggests, a largely unintended consequence of how Jesus' message was received by the various Mediterranean cultures originally exposed to it. Unsurprisingly, given the choice, St Paul tends to figure as Nietzsche's scapegoat. In either case, the source of the problem lies in the default Christian strategy of seeing strength in weakness, as in 'the meek shall inherit the Earth', a claim that Jesus makes in the 'Sermon on the Mount' (Matthew 5). It has been institutionalized as a preference for humility over arrogance, witnessing over assertion, resistance over aggression, grievance over compensation. In the aftermath of the First World War, Max Scheler famously developed a philosophy of modern populist sentiment around this value inversion, which he dubbed *ressentiment* – and remains relevant to our own times.

For transhumanists, the relevant inversion of weakness to strength relates to *mortality*, which virtually every philosophical tradition has understood as giving meaning to a human life. Generally speaking, mortality forces us to organize our preferences into a value hierarchy. If we can't 'have it all' now, ever or forever, how should we allocate the finite time and energy allotted to us to make life 'meaningful'? For transhumanists, this entire line of thinking rests on the conversion of a liability into a virtue, what the political theorist Jon Elster (1983) calls 'sweet lemons', the opposite of 'sour grapes'. It effectively exalts our fallen state, as epitomized by Heidegger's resonant Existentialist phrase, no doubt adapted from Kierkegaard, 'being unto death'. One way to look at this mode of mortality management – the only way that would have any chance of satisfying Nietzsche – is that it defines the meaning of life as self-contained. In other words, you can lead a 'good life' by becoming clear in your own mind what is worth pursuing, regardless of the consequences after one's death. But Nietzsche is not Epicurus – far from it.

Transhumanists propose to 'transvalue' the traditional philosophical fixation on mortality, but they are profoundly divided on what it means to 'overcome mortality' or 'conquer death'. To be sure, many transhumanists 'simply' aspire to live forever in the bodies of their birth, perhaps with some degree of cyborg enhancement. However, others entertain the intriguing idea of 'mind uploading', a translation of consciousness into digital form that can potentially self-enhance indefinitely, perhaps by plugging into global computer networks. While this prospect continues to appear science-fictional to

most people, it has recently acquired a more concrete definition in the ‘digital afterlife’ industry, whereby people self-archive their data so that they can be assembled into an algorithm capable of interactive learning with users after their bodies have died. This results in a kind of posthumous personality development. The *reductio ad absurdum* of this position – which may nevertheless become the ‘new normal’ – is that one’s ‘being unto death’ amounts to spending one’s physical existence preparing for ‘digital immortality’ (Bassett 2015, 2019, 2020). It provides clear evidence for transhumanism as a science-based religion. Indeed, it might even be a worthy successor of Auguste Comte’s positivist ‘Religion of Humanity’, given the sacramental role played by scientific practices.

Would either version of transhumanism meet with Nietzsche’s approval? That is an open question, which I don’t plan to answer in these pages – and ultimately may matter only to Nietzsche scholars. Nevertheless, Nietzsche had got the measure of the issues at play in the famous tightrope walking episode in the first part of *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, which is where Zarathustra introduces the concept of the *Übermensch*, seemingly with reference to the tightrope walker, who soon falls to his death, plunging Zarathustra into a series of observations and introspections that set the tone for the rest of the book – and arguably the rest of Nietzsche’s writing. In any case, the tightrope walker may be understood as a metaphor for the human condition in some kind of risky project of self-improvement, which lends his activity to two possible interpretations.

On the one hand, the tightrope walker may be simply trying to make his way across a rope tied between two mountains without falling into the valley that separates them. If successful, he will have defeated the odds in a way that can be fully explained in terms of his skilled capacities relative to the environment in which they are deployed. And if we take the tightrope walker to be a synecdoche for the human population and then describe his predicament in evolutionary terms, ‘he’ will have successfully navigated a ‘fitness landscape’, consisting of its own ‘peaks’ and ‘valleys’. And of course, if the tightrope walker fails to make it across, he will very likely die. Neo-Darwinists have no problem with that happening to entire populations at the macro-level. In fact, they expect it to happen at some point to every species – even to *Homo sapiens*. It’s called extinction.

On the other hand, the tightrope walker may be engaged in a rather different task, albeit under the same conditions. He may be seeking the moment to take a leap into the air, which may result in either an ascent into the heavens or a plunge to the ground. The tightrope walker effectively makes what Zoltan Istvan (2013) has rightly called the ‘transhumanist wager’, a materialist version of Pascal’s Wager. Thus, the tightrope walker is not trying to beat the odds as they have been defined, which is in terms of reaching the other mountain to which the rope is tied. Rather, the tightrope walker has entered a special cognitive state that enables him to entertain an unusual level of risk to his own well-being – indeed, to put his entire life at risk. After Max More, I have called this turn of mind *proactionary* (Fuller and Lipinska 2014). In Pascal’s case, the relevant cognitive state was a ‘leap of faith’ in God’s deliverance. Scientific psychology nowadays would diagnose many of Pascal’s followers as delusional. However, Istvan and other transhumanists not only believe but also expect that science and technology will deliver on such ‘delusions’. It is perhaps no accident that Blaise Pascal himself was both a man of faith and a man of science – and saw no conflict between the two. Thus, science does not eliminate religion but replaces it, and maybe even redeems its promises. Loaded with scientific capital, transhumanists operate in the spirit of a *nouveau riche* who refurbishes a mansion abandoned by a noble family that has fallen on hard times. Auguste Comte would be pleased.

The airborne superhero image of the ‘superhuman’ first popularized in 1930s’ comic books – and later in television and films – lives up to the second interpretation of the tightrope walker. In this sense, Superman and Batman are reasonably seen as ‘transhumanists’, who have decisively transcended humanity’s ape-like origins, albeit in interestingly different senses. Superman is ‘always already’ genetically modified by virtue of his extra-terrestrial ancestry, a fact that he disguises in human company. In contrast, Batman dons and doffs superhuman enhancements of his own creation. This difference in *modus operandi* helps to explain their rather different psychologies, something that should be of more interest to transhumanists. Indeed, if discussions about the future of humanity continue to be dominated by thoughts of evolution, they are likely to turn on the relative merits of *altering the genotype* (Superman) vis-à-vis *extending the phenotype* (Batman). It would be an updated version of the ‘nature vs. nature’ controversy that Fran-

cis Galton launched with the project of eugenics, which Julian Huxley rebranded as ‘transhumanism’ in the 1950s for obvious political reasons but which remains very much at the heart of the science we call ‘genetics’ (e.g. Silver 1997, Church and Regis 2012).

Whether the ‘transhumanist wager’ is defined as a leap of faith or an ascent into the heavens, and whether its *modus operandi* is genetic modification or prosthetic extension, one thing is clear: The transhumanist tight-rope walker is not tethered to humanity’s ape-like evolutionary origins. One should not underestimate the metaphysical seriousness of this move. After all, the only thing connecting a creationist like Linnaeus and an anti-creationist like Darwin is their jointly held belief that the primate species are the animals that most closely resemble humans. Thus, the Linnaean coinage, *Homo sapiens*, remains the name of our species without bothering too many evolutionists. Yet, before the eighteenth century, this view was not widespread in the West, largely because ‘humanists’ – regardless of religious persuasion – had not encountered enough apes to make the comparison with humans especially luminous. To be sure, there had been general agreement from ancient times in the West that only animals potentially qualified as ‘human’. But as Aesop’s fables illustrate, the range of animal species that might display ‘human’ qualities was quite broad – and apes hardly figured at all (Fuller 2017). The Darwin-driven pejorative spin on ‘anthropomorphism’, which indirectly privileges apes over other animals, serves to obscure this important historical point. Nevertheless, as we shall see, a more open-minded view to other animal species is key to launching the signature transhumanist doctrine of *morphological freedom*, more about which in the pages that follow.

Now, setting aside all the above metaphysical differences, it is clear that at the most general level the Zarathustrian tightrope walker is engaged in an act of defiance against having to be earthbound. This is the mentality that first led to the off-the-ground constructions, including tall buildings, high bridges and corresponding forms of transport, culminating in wireless communication and space travel. It is the mentality that thinks of human culture as what Richard Dawkins (1982) originally called an ‘extended phenotype’, a ‘second nature’, consisting of ‘smart environments’ that consolidate humanity into a ‘superorganism’, which is sometimes envisaged to reach out to the heavens to constitute what Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (1961) dubbed the