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Morality's Collapse: Antinatalism, Transhumanism and the Future of Humankind.

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Abstract: In the present work I explore the unignorably momentous responsibility of contemporary philosophy to conclude the project of humanism as inherited from Enlightenment-era thinking. I argue that there are presently two avenues open to us. On the one hand there is antinatalism, according to which humankind must be gestured towards self-imposed extinction and thereby overcome. On the other hand, there is transhumanism which inspires the hope that we may transcend any limitations to our being and flourish as a result of radical enhancement, thereby also overcoming humankind. On both accounts, the 'human' is something to be overcome, either negatively (antinatalism) or positively (transhumanism). As both have a common ancestor in radical Enlightenment-era humanism, this choice between radical resignation and affirmation becomes all the more pertinent now that we find ourselves in modernity's wake and in the ruins of morality's collapse.

Keywords: antinatalism; transhumanism; contemporary philosophy; humanism; pessimism; Enlightenment

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1. Introduction

In the eighth book of his *Metamorphoses* Ovid retells the story of Erysichthon, a blasphemous man bound to draw the ire of the gods. We read that he defiantly felled a sacred tree and thus became subject to the cruel calculus of divine punishment. The personification of hunger is summoned to visit him in his sleep and instill "...hunger in his hollow veins[.]" (8.820) Upon waking, Erysichthon was moved by a terrifying sense of hunger to gorge himself with all the food his money could buy, even going so far as to sell his own daughter into slavery in order to whet his insatiable appetite. Yet, his punishment was not just an immense hunger. It was the impossibility for him to *satisfy* this hunger no matter how hard he tried, and no matter how hard he ate. An asymptotic satiety was forever beyond his reach like the receding waters and escaping fruits in the more famous story of Tantalus. Ultimately, poor and driven to bodily insanity,

Erysichthon turned his hungry eye to his own body, which he then devoured piecemeal until he had completely disappeared.¹

Although the story of Erysichthon was meant to serve as a warning not to cross the event horizon of human hubris into the precarious realm of blasphemy,² the apotropaic message of the myth is not the only thing that makes the strange topic of self-erasure pertinent to the present work. For we ultimately read of an individual who *consumes* himself. While this can be seen as the maniacal height of (self-)sacrifice, it can also be understood as a final act of resignation. In the present work I take a look at a different, deeper kind of resignation: the overcoming of human existence as projected by the modern philosophy of antinatalism. I argue that this radical new philosophy totalizes the motif of self-annihilation of which Erysichthon is a prime, albeit tragic, symbol.

In addition to this harrowing act of autophagy, another Ovidian vignette attests to a different yet, as we will see below, not altogether unrelated mode of overcoming. In the thirteenth book of the *Metamorphoses* we are introduced to the fisherman Glaucus who, after a day's work, spread out his nets on an untouched shore in order for them to dry. When the fish in his nets came into contact with the grass below, they strangely came back to life again. Wondering whether this was brought about by the whim of the gods or by some magical potency of the grass itself, Glaucus "...plucked a blade and chewed it[.]" (13.946) As he did so, he was immediately impelled to change his human ways for good: "'Farewell, O Earth!' I cried, 'Farewell Forever!'" (13.951)

Extricating himself from the strictures of ordinary human existence, Glaucus descended into the water where he assumed godlike qualities: he was now "[a] different kind of creature, body and spirit." (13.959) Although the grass that he ate grew naturally, it bestowed upon him the capacity to transcend the ordinary boundaries that cordon off human possibility. While this divinization entailed that he gained some of the external characteristics of marine animals (13.963), Glaucus could now mingle freely with the gods who were formerly out of reach. His entry into the non-human realm is viewed here as emblematic of the pursuit for radical human enhancement comfortably embraced by contemporary transhumanism.³

¹ Ovid added much to the story as it was written down by Callimachus centuries before. One of the major differences is the plot twist of Erysichthon's ultimate self-effacement, which we do not find in the earlier version by Callimachus. Ovid concludes that Erysichthon continued his impossible quest for satiation "Till finally there was nothing, nothing, only His own flesh for his greedy teeth to seize, To gnaw on, and the wretch consumed his body Feeding upon a shrinking self." (8.874-8.878) Less dramatically, in the earlier version "Callimachus leaves an unhappy Erysichthon begging for crusts and garbage at the crossroads." (Griffin 1986, 62) The story then ends.

² For Jill Da Silva the tale of Erysichthon has contemporary relevance in that it can inspire us to treat nature nicely. We should have a more balanced relationship with all that around us, or bear the brunt of our imperiousness. She argues that "...the ancient myth of Erysichthon speaks to the greatest ecological disasters of the present[.]" (Da Silva 2008, 115) On this reading, the hubris of Erysichthon becomes the domineering hubris of the modern human, and the punishment of the gods becomes nature's epic kickback. Interesting as this is, the important thing here is not Erysichthon's motivation or recklessness, but the autophagy that concludes the punishment meted out to him by the gods as imagined by Ovid. As will become clear, while we can read this autophagy as a solution to the human predicament, it must be *willed* from within, not forced from without.

³ The first to associate the apotheosis of Glaucus with transhumanism was, technically, Dante. Peter Harrison and Joseph Wolyniak write that in his *Divine Comedy*, Dante used the verb 'trasumanare' to describe "...his heavenwards journey with Beatrice[.]" (Harrison and Wolyniak 2015, 467) In his English translation of the work, Henry Francis Cary rendered this 'transhuman' for the first time (*Ibid.*). In order to express this incommunicable transhumanisation, Dante connects it to the (more well-known) transformation of Glaucus. For Heather Webb, however, Dante's use of the story reveals not so much the desire to transform into something new and, perhaps, better, but the potential to establish and enter into a sort of ethical comradeship otherwise unattainable. On this view, the word translated by Cary as 'transhuman' actually "...means achieving a transmortal community in which the plenitude of each individual's person is realized in and through recognition of the personhood of other individuals who constitute that community." (Webb 2016, 26) She further writes that for Dante, "[f]acing Beatrice...is facing Christ." (*Ibid.*, 177) This extra-experiential vis-à-vis

These two sketches from the *Metamorphoses* are used here to reveal that we are torn between a glimmer and a mistake; between undying optimism and strangely recurring pessimism; between the belief that humankind as a whole can be overcome, and the conviction that it cannot even overcome its own obstacles; between the transhumanist overture, and the antinatalist finale. On the one hand, perfection is viewed as an achievable goal: it is only when we reach a certain plateau in the future that current limitations no longer impede us. On the other hand, perfection is found only in non-existence. Accordingly, we can only avoid the pitfalls of ordinary human existence when we are *not* in existence anymore. While it may seem that the choice between the two is confined to the realm of philosophy, it is clear that it transcends the concerns and sensitivities of present-day philosophers. As transhumanism and antinatalism have a common ancestor in radical Enlightenment-era humanism, this choice becomes all the more pertinent for us now in modernity's wake and in the ruins of morality's collapse.

2. Antinatalism

Antinatalism refers to the position that human reproduction carries with it an unrecognized but no longer ignorable moral weight and should, as a consequence, be radically re-evaluated or, at its most extreme, stopped altogether. The role that reproduction plays in the exacerbation of many of the large-scale problems faced in the twenty-first century is so foundational that the part cannot be separated from the play. In order to ward off cruelly persistent curses like overpopulation, intergenerational poverty and climate change, it is held that we have to target their root cause, which is located in the blindfolded perpetuation of the human species. Anything less and we simply waste time managing symptoms. It is clear that this radical calibration of our focus has drastic implications not only for would-be parents but for humankind as a whole.

For reproduction is the only meaningful medium of futurity.⁴ Without the (re)production of new human beings, the future might as well not exist, because it could never come to 'us'. It is the constant perpetuation of the human species that dynamises the otherwise static, material universe. Consequently, with reproduction barred, humans are disqualified from participating in the very flow of time. There is, therefore, an ergodic potentiality inherent in the (simple) act of procreation that places it in the forefront of the development of all that is. Human reproduction, thus, is the eye through which things pass from the past and into the future.⁵ The choice, therefore, no longer to uncritically accept it as a fact of life is not easy to make. The choice to remain childless that may result from this acceptance is even more difficult. In spite of this, an increasingly large group of people are willing to make it, even celebrating its implications. While people do so for a variety of reasons, the ultimate consequence of the willful abstention from reproduction is extinction—either the end of one's own bloodline, or, when adopted *en masse*, the end of humankind as a whole.

While fantasies of human extinction cannot but result from a type of evolutionary mutation (since it counters the very thing that evolution is programmed to achieve), they are strangely seeping into the mainstream. A few decades ago, radical environmentalist Christopher Manes affirmed: "I take it as axiomatic that the only real hope for the continuation of diverse ecosystems on this planet is an enormous decline in human population." (Manes 1987, 32) For people like Manes, the stubborn increase in human

betrays the limits of the exploratory potential of ordinary language. In evoking the metamorphosis of Glaucus, Dante thereby leaves a farewell letter to the human community as he departs for the beyond. While Webb's interpretation is interesting, it fails to observe the functional difference between the terms 'transhumanism' and 'posthumanism'. The ethical community that she refers to is more in line with the goals of posthumanists than with those of transhumanists. Another case in point is Lauri-Lucente (2016). See Ferrando (2020) discussed below for more on this.

⁴ For a controversial, and at times annoyingly contrarian, exposition of this argument, see Edelman (2004).

⁵ There is a very clear 'speciest' element here that has recently been discussed by MacCormack 2020a and 2020b.

numbers over the ages has led to a technological and scientific despoliation of the environment that cannot be ameliorated anymore. The harrowing trend of nature's slow destruction can only be reversed by the most radical measures. Manes continues that, "[o]f course, such a decline is inevitable. Through nuclear war or mass starvation due to desertification or some other environmental cataclysm, human overpopulation will succumb to ecological limits." (*Ibid.*) It is only a matter of time, therefore, before Mother Nature has the last laugh.

But, while nature fights back, it does so at a snail's pace and cannot keep up with current net reproduction rates. Although human-made weapons like nuclear bombs could do the trick much faster, these would destroy much of the environment along with the annihilation of humans. Manes therefore opts for a weapon of choice against humankind that is much more efficient and much less damaging to nature (or even not at all). He writes that "[i]f radical environmentalists [like himself] were to invent a disease to bring human population back to ecological sanity, it would probably be something like AIDS." (*Ibid.*) Writing in the mid- to late 1980s, Manes may have been strangely hopeful that this (at the time) mysterious disease would remove a large pustule of human secretion from the face of the earth, but alas.

In his satirical 1983 *Das Untier*, Ulrich Horstmann also welcomed the possibility of human annihilation. Unconcerned with environmental collateral damage, however, Horstmann gave weapons of mass destruction the benefit of the doubt. Writing at a time when such weapons presented a real existential risk, he championed the inevitability of nuclear self-destruction. Where Manes was concerned about saving the environment, Horstmann sought to relieve humankind of the unbearable burden of existence with a blind disregard for nature. This is the core of his so-called 'anthropofugal philosophy', described as a "...signature blend of nihilism and anti-humanism[.]" (Roessler 2014, 98) According to this view, human evolution is a downwards spiral of needless pain and suffering that benefits absolutely no one. Given this, it would be a pity if the world's stock of weapons of mass destruction would not be put to good use. For Horstmann,

...the question is not if humanity will survive the nuclear age but why humanity should even try to do so. Horstmann argues that it is not evil but in fact good to let humanity eradicate itself. It would be evil not to do so since life on earth only symbolizes the perpetual repetition of suffering and plight. (Lueckel 2010, 94)⁶

Although Manes and Horstmann are not (officially) on the antinatalist roster, their thoughts on the possibility of human extinction (and even the need thereof) emerge from the same dilemma that keeps contemporary antinatalists occupied. This is the unfeasibility of perpetuating the processes set in motion by Enlightenment optimism. These revolve around the endless conquests of rationality and consciousness, and of human ambition more generally. This creates an atmosphere in which the constant incursions into nature are celebrated as civilizational victories, and the non-human is just waiting to be dominated (all for its own benefit, of course).

It might be conjectured that the incessant and militarized criticizing of all that is contained in this admittedly vague umbrella-term of the 'non-human' has now opened the way for a sustained offensive against the other term in the equation, namely the equally vague umbrella-term of the 'human'. In other words, none of the characteristics, dispositions, traits, feelings and aspirations of the 'non-human' have been spared the critical assessment of specialists and lay-people over the ages and millennia. These assessments have all been necessary preparatory work for the critical assessment (now

⁶ Lueckel attributes Horstmann's desire for annihilation to his being desensitized by the Cold War. Lueckel writes that "...those that had lived under the nuclear threat for three decades had unlearned how to be frightened all the time. This loss of fear leads to sarcastic mockeries in the 1980s like Ulrich Horstmann's *Das Untier*[".]'" (Lueckel 2010, 271)

under way) of the 'human' itself. As we have seen with Manes and Horstmann, this re-evaluation might result in the ultimate rejection of the 'human' altogether, and the drawing of a blueprint that might lead to its disappearance.

Contemporary antinatalists like David Benatar partake in this rejection of the 'human' but seek to bring an end to humankind voluntarily and non-violently. Since the 2006 publication of Benatar's *Better Never to Have Been*, his brand of antinatalist philosophy has received a cult following (Zandbergen 2021a). In the work, Benatar writes that "[n]obody is disadvantaged by not coming into existence." (Benatar 2006, 179) This does not just mean that people in general are merely disadvantaged by coming into existence: they are significantly harmed by it. The relationship between birth and harm is so strong that the latter can only be avoided by preventing the former. Benatar continues by saying that

...as long as procreation continues, some of those people who are brought into being will lead lives that are not worth living (read 'worth continuing'). The only way to improve their position is not to bring such people into existence, and the only way to guarantee that such people are not brought into existence is not to bring anybody into existence." (*Ibid.*, 180)

He recognizes that this is no child's play. Since humans are programmed to reproduce, they are naturally averse to any suggestion that it might be harmful or wrong. Therefore, humankind will not easily be convinced by Benatar's antinatalist conclusions. Nonetheless, if humans have learned anything from their past (and from their own personal histories), they would certainly be less stubborn in this regard. For Benatar affirms that "[i]f my argument is right, it is always irrational to prefer to come into existence. Rational impartial parties would choose not to exist and the upshot of this is zero population." (*Ibid.*, 182) In other words, far from it being realistic, abstaining from reproduction would be the most rational thing to do because, in this case, it is the surest way towards a world without suffering.⁷

This does not mean that (Benatar's) antinatalism should inspire some hysterical, circumcellion frenzy.⁸ An easy objection to antinatalism revolves around the accusation of pro-mortalism. It might be held that antinatalists like Benatar hate humans and therefore seek to annihilate them by inspiring some kind of mass-suicide. This accusation, however, is misguided. Benatar insists that antinatalism, far from springing from a cruel, calculated hatred of humans, actually emerges from a deeply-rooted concern about them. In a strangely paradoxical sense, this even makes antinatalism optimistic. Benatar writes that "[a]lthough things are now not the way they should be—there are people when there should be none—things will someday be the way they should be—there will be no people." (*Ibid.*, 195) While his conclusion is difficult to accept, Benatar argues that it is all for the better: reproduction must be stopped so as to stop suffering once and for all.

⁷ Although Benatar deals in moral absolutes, other antinatalists take a more nuanced view on matters pertaining to procreational ethics. For Gerald Harrison "...there is nothing remotely incoherent or surprising in the idea that someone can be wronged, even wronged quite seriously, yet benefit by the wrong, be happy that the wrong was committed, and not want things to have been otherwise." (Harrison 2012, 100) Although Harrison argues in favor of antinatalism, he does not agree with Benatar that birth can only be harmful, because people might still derive some form benefit from it in the end.

⁸ On this obscure group of overzealous Christian North Africans in late antiquity, Bernard D. Shaw writes that "[t]hey were particularly associated with a peculiar form of martyrdom: a propensity to commit suicide, to take their own lives by drowning themselves, by self-immolation or by throwing themselves of great heights." (Shaw 2004, 229) Bands of these devotees would, allegedly, even provoke strangers to kill them out of self-defence. Furthermore, antinatalism should also be disconnected from so-called 'childism', or prejudice against children. This term, which emerged in the 1970s, is gaining renewed traction now (Barbre 2012, 409). Elisabeth Young-Bruehl has recently drawn attention to the fact that such prejudice might ultimately serve as "...justification for eliminating children by physical abuse, neglect or infanticide[.]" (*Ibid.*, 410)

Eventually, this makes his particular brand of antinatalism “...philanthropic, not misanthropic.” (*Ibid.*, 223) Given this, antinatalists do not necessarily hate existence or the children that carry it into the future, but merely resent the unintended damage that the (re)production of such children invariably brings about. Since the impact of this damage cannot in any way be lessened, we can only get rid of it by not bringing anyone into existence to experience it.⁹

Phrased as such, antinatalism represents the most radical attempt to overcome the many intricate problems that constitute our human predicament, by overcoming the human itself. This is a powerful embodiment of philosophical resignation that, moreover, will continue to influence the world of thought and (if people like Benatar are right), the realm of practice as well. Although we are unlikely to opt for extinction any time soon, the fact that such aspirations can be formulated and propagated at all is a clear sign that drastic measures are being called for. Returning now to poor Erysichthon with whom we began, we can view this prospective self-extinction as an act of self-cannibalism: the human will consume itself in order to redeem itself. While it is strange to speak of redemption in the case of ‘someone’ non-existent, people like Benatar believe that non-existence can never be a disadvantage to anyone, because everyone is disadvantaged by coming into existence. Extinction, therefore, would only even the score, and conclude the spectacle once and for all.

While the overcoming of the human can proceed along the violent and cruel route of the autophagy of Ovid’s Erysichthon, there is also an ungrudging course of action more easily associated with the contemporary philosophy of antinatalism and its insistence that humanity goes extinct voluntarily and non-violently. It is argued here that this is one of the avenues in front of us. The other, while also leading to the eventual overcoming of humankind, is lighted by a last glimmer of hope to salvage what little we can of the battered remains of the human. This is transhumanism, to which we now turn.

3. Transhumanism

Where antinatalists seek to overcome human existence *negatively*—that is, by voluntarily abstaining from reproduction, so as to eventually shrink humankind into non-existence—transhumanists aim to overcome it *positively*—that is, by structurally enhancing the very core of that existence, so as to finally elevate humankind as a whole. While the autophagy of Erysichthon served as a dreadful metaphor for the antinatalist quest for non-existence, the story of the apotheosis of Glaucus was used in the introduction above to symbolize the transhumanist mission to overcome the traditional limitations of human essence. Although this mission is rapidly gaining in popularity in the twenty-first century, its objectives have long marinated in the aromas of human progress and change.

⁹ Benatar also affirms that in as much as his “...arguments apply not only to humans but also to other sentient animals, [his] arguments are also zoophilic (in the non-sexual sense of that term).” (Benatar 2006, 223) In other words, he does not only seek to terminate human suffering, but suffering more generally. What Benatar fails to recognize, however, is that the prospective termination of non-human animal suffering by preventing these animals from reproducing can only ever constitute an (indirect) act of specicide. Key to Benatar’s mission to end suffering is the voluntary path towards extinction. This path can never be imposed upon anyone, including non-human animals. It can only ever be chosen voluntarily and, it may be added, sincerely. Since non-human animals cannot meaningfully be said to have this capability, they can only be expected to, somehow, come up with their own non-human antinatalisms in due time, without the pernicious influence of humans continuing over them. For a critique of animal antinatalism see also Zandbergen (2021b)

Contemporary transhumanism is a radical, modern outgrowth of earlier and more familiar humanisms.¹⁰ It shares with these the ideal of perfection, but not the object of this perfection (Baumann 2010, 70). The earlier, more familiar humanist ideal was the domestication of nature by technology and science. Applied reason furnished the opportunity for the human to assume near-dictatorial powers over the non-human. This puppeteering of nature was ultimately to improve the human condition in the world at large. Transhumanism goes beyond this and foregoes the mere streamlining of human existence. It is now human existence (as we know it) that must be overcome. Transhumanists do not aim to produce good, or better-off human beings, but a new type of being altogether. The prospective transhuman, or post-human,¹¹ is to be related to the human in the way that the human is (presently) related to the ape.¹² While the striving to surpass limits might be inherently human, the striving to overcome a human existence that is itself limited goes far beyond the variables of the otherwise quite natural and adventurous drives for competition and innovation, nurtured from an early age on.

Thus, while transhumanism (via humanism) is rooted in the striving to overcome obstacles and make life better, it also fundamentally radicalizes this quest for improvement, blurring the line between functional improvement and improvement for improvement's sake.¹³ Moreover, in spite of allusions to, and associations with, space travel and other futuristic pursuits (Bostrom 2015, 6), transhumanism is intended to sterilize the painter's palette of earlier, more fanciful possibilities of thinking. Nick Bostrom writes that

Big-picture questions, including ones about our place in the world and the long-term fate of intelligent life are part of transhumanism; however, these questions should be addressed in a sober, disinterested way, using critical reason and our best available scientific evidence. (*Ibid.*, 8)

¹⁰ In modern times, the term 'transhumanism' is mostly attributed to Julian Huxley. Peter Harrison and Joseph Wolyniak claim that Huxley's first use of the term 'transhumanism' occurred in a 1951 lecture (Harrison and Wolyniak 2015, 466), although he likely found the term in a 1940 work by the Canadian thinker W.D. Lightall (*Ibid.*, 467)

¹¹ The terms transhuman and posthuman are often used interchangeably. Francesca Ferrando points out that this is problematic. While both "...share a common perception of the human as a non-fixed and mutable condition...they generally do not share the same roots and perspectives." (Ferrando 2013, 27) While transhumanism aims to overcome the human by science, technology and reason, and thus radicalizes traditional secular humanism, posthumanism operates in an overall post-modernist and post-colonialist atmosphere (*Ibid.*, 29; Ferrando 2020, 2) as it aims to solidify recognition of the traditional limits inherent in the very concept or ideal of the 'human' taken for granted in transhumanism and earlier (radical) humanisms. Posthumanism, then, is equally aimed at the past as it is to the future and does not necessarily share the techno-centric pursuits of transhumanism. Ultimately, "[t]he goal is not to perpetuate human discriminations (in its various forms), nor to replace them with other forms of discriminations, such as anthropocentrism, speciesism or biocentrism, among others. Sustained by this awareness, we can eventually achieve a posthuman society based on co-existence and multi-species justice." (Ferrando 2020, 3)

¹² While this might sound like a futuristic regurgitation of Nietzsche's philosophy of the Übermensch, there is quite some scholarly disagreement about this. See Sorgner (2009) for an affirmation of the Nietzschean link, and Aydin (2017) for its rejection.

¹³ Ilia Stambler (2010) begs to differ and argues that transhumanist tendencies manifestly operate to conserve the status quo of any given ideological, national or social situation. Especially in the *fin-de-siècle* period we witness a change in aspirations, from the domination of nature (a common goal in earlier centuries) to the conservation of the current ideological milieu, whether autocratic, aristocratic, liberalist or otherwise. The transhumanist aspirations, therefore, "...derive not from a desire for change for the change's sake, but from the conservative drive for self-preservation and indefinite continuity." (Stambler 2010, 22).

Human growth (in whichever direction) is thus subjected to the dictates of science and reason. Development is decided, not merely desired.¹⁴ For Fred Baumann this takes away the essential human component of inwardness, marked by things like self-reflection, and risks opening the door to narcissism (Baumann 2010, 76). If we cannot nurture the thought of living spontaneously, our human pursuits, pleasures, disappointments, etc., all turn to dust that settles on the motherboard of a transhumanist super-future.

Although transhumanism follows traditional, secular humanism in many ways, it also contains a religious gist that would stifle any hope for a truly atheistic, human-centered philosophy of the future. It would, therefore, be vain to claim that transhumanism replaces faith with anything more down-to-earth (Lipowicz 2019, 203). In fact, the goal of transcending the limits of ordinary human existence has a peculiar religious and mystical ring to it, even in the absence of any professed faith in God or other forms of divinity. This is why Mikael Leidenhag even writes that transhumanism "...can and should be considered as an emerging secular religion." (Leidenhag 2020, 2)

Transhumanism is not merely occupied with the streamlining of society or the individual parts of it. Its aim to overcome humankind (as we know it) is much loftier than this. Although the goal of the techno-scientific perfection of being might seem asymptotic as of yet, it is argued that it will hit the solid axis of reality sooner, rather than later. For religious transhumanists, this coincides with prophecy. There is, then, a great sense of urgency underlying their specific transhumanist project(s) (Hauskeller 2016, 171).¹⁵ It is held that our lives cannot just be enhanced aesthetically or practically—in that we could have better looks and faster brains—but that it *must* be altered in a more fundamental way as well, in order to prevent the many bad side effects of ordinary human existence. Michael Hauskeller writes that transhumanism is fueled by the

...conviction that the kind of life that is open to us now is not only worse than it could conceivably be and worse than it shall be in future, but that a mortal life, filled with all kinds of pain and suffering and overshadowed by the certainty of a never-far-off death, is not really worth much at all. (Hauskeller 2016, 171)

In other words, transhumanism might be the panacea for the human predicament as we know and experience it. On the transhumanist view, overcoming human life also means overcoming the traditional obstacles that seem inevitable from the point of view of the human. First and foremost among these is death. Whatever meaning we may find in life vanishes when we die. It is, therefore, held that removing the terminus of our biological life (or pushing it back significantly) will greatly improve (or even guarantee) our chances of creating a meaningful life. On this view, the radical overcoming of human existence and all its inherent limits is an absolute necessity. We need to drastically overhaul our earthly existence as soon as we can in order to save ourselves from unnecessary suffering, ultimately brought about by death.

This means that our present lives are mere instruments in the craft of meaning. We owe it to ourselves to improve. Only when we overcome our traditional existence can we begin to think of living meaningful lives. The other side of this coin is that "...if we have

¹⁴ Because of this, Anders Sandberg argues that "...transhumanism forces meaning-of-life questions to the foreground as engineering targets." (Sandberg 2015, 4)

¹⁵ Apocalyptic conspiracy thinkers have come to view transhumanist developments as the epitome of evil and decadence that must be stopped—with violence if necessary. Opposition to transhumanism mostly revolves around the (not unrealistic) idea that once started, we will have no more control over the processes set in motion. Images of artificial intelligence and robots taking over humankind have been a science fiction staple for years. There is the additional issue of hubris—we simply should not play God. For James J. Hughes, the increased tension around transhumanism presents the opportunity to preach a more democratic, egalitarian unfolding of transhumanist ideals that would mitigate the risk of, for instance, robots taking over (Hughes 2012, 773).

no choice but to live our lives as mere humans, it might be better for us not to have been born at all.” (*Ibid.*, 172) Only if (and when) we pursue the transhumanist goal of transcending the traditional limits of human life can we lay claim to a meaningful life at all. In other words, if we cannot overcome human life as it is, it would have been better if we had not come into existence in the first place.¹⁶ While the antinatalist takes this insight to serve as ultimate confirmation of the desirability of (non-violent and voluntary) human extinction, it inspires transhumanists to re-calibrate their focus to radically transform human existence so that it becomes immune to the suffering naturally contained within every single human life. While this may seem grand and highly agreeable, transhumanism casts a dangerous shadow over human aspiration.

Arguably the biggest danger inherent in human enhancement is the formation of radically stratified societies. We can easily imagine a world in which the potential benefits of transhumanist enhancement are the prerogative of an elite. Accordingly, there will be vast, seemingly unsurmountable differences between such a prospective transhumanised elite and the rest of the (unenhanced) population. Damien Broderick rightfully refers to this as a “...most frightening apartheid[.]” (Broderick 2013, 436) However, he remains optimistic and believes that such a dreadful state of affairs can simply be avoided by “...thinking hard, feeling deeply and wisely, debating the issues together, and acting as free men and women.” (*Ibid.*) While this pays lip service to the understanding that some degree of what we now call transhumanist enhancement is a natural part of life, it seems cruelly naïve.¹⁷

Critics of transhumanism often reveal a similar naivety when they fall prey to a choreographed blitheness that marks as puerile any technological and scientific aspirations to radically enhance life. The argument is that people really should stop whining and start to accept life as it is. In spite of his pioneering work cited above, elsewhere Hauskeller writes that “[a]ll this constant moaning what a poor hand life has dealt us...evokes the image of a pampered child wailing about the unfairness of it all[.]” (Hauskeller 2019, 18) It is all-too easy to disqualify the other side from level-headed maturity, but this is also a tad immature itself.

But, it might reasonably be averred that some dose of what we now call transhumanism has attended human evolution throughout. This is why most of us did not die during childbirth, for instance. Contemporary transhumanism, then, is a novel phenomenon only in the sense that we can speak of it as a somewhat organized movement whose members actively identify as transhumanists. An additional factor contributing to its novelty is the exponential advances in science and technology over the past few centuries. This makes it feasible at all to think about things like functional

¹⁶ It is exactly this shared concern with humankind’s malleability that makes “...the spirit of anti-natalism...congenial to the transhumanist understanding of life and the human condition.” (Hauskeller 2016, 172)

¹⁷ Fear of transhumanist optimism can be traced back to the as-of-yet unbridgeable gap between technological enhancement and moral improvement. Developments in science and technology can happen exponentially without a corresponding increase in moral awareness and sensitivities. This divorce of technology and morality is dangerous because it clears the way for unrestrained technological and scientific progress with little regard for human worth. This could lead us to the dark side of the human experience where slavery, torture and murder run rampant. For M. David Litwa this danger can be corrected by attuning ourselves to classical, (Neo-)Platonic views on enhancement that rely on sustained moral cultivation. Accordingly, “...posthuman enhancement must never be defined apart from morality, but always in terms of it” and, he continues, “...justice and the virtues apply to all gradations of being.” (Litwa 2021, 159-160) In one way or another, this demands a degree of self-restraint from enhanced humans that is grossly unrealistic. This would be like sitting a child next to an opened cookie jar and demanding that it does not have a peek inside. The shaky foundation on which such restraint is built is reason enough for people who support transhumanist enhancement in principle, to desist from pursuing it in reality. While thus recognizing the potential of various forms of enhancement, transhumanism might condense into another quasi-mythological pipe-dream.

immortality, which would merely be a radical extension of previous developments in medicine and nutrition, rather than a far-fetched, sci-fi fantasy.¹⁸

In spite of its momentum, transhumanism is set on a collision course with its more sinister companion-philosophy, antinatalism. While both are rooted in radical, Enlightenment-era humanistic thought, both also seek to overcome humankind, either negatively or positively. As heirs to this misfortune, contemporary philosophers are tasked with, if not choosing between the two, at least seriously considering the harrowing trajectory of radical thought presently. This will echo outside the academies of formal philosophical practice and impact humankind at large, as both antinatalism and transhumanism seek to conclude the outdated project of humanism, either in rejection or affirmation.

4. Collision.

Since humans naturally adapt to changing circumstances and constantly seek to sharpen their resolve to live and live prosperously, transhumanism may seem like a more 'natural' option than antinatalism. But, the excruciatingly slow pace of both prospective (antinatalist) extinction and ongoing (transhumanist) enhancement render both avenues highly problematic. In spite of this, the idea that we do have a choice between the two reveals much about the metaphysical standing of humans as ultimately surmountable beings, whose fugacity must either be hopefully fortified or conclusively weakened. It is my contention here that we, collectively, must choose between the two sooner or later. In itself this already highlights the failure of the modern project to uncritically propel humans to unfathomable greatness. Charting the rise of so-called 'dataism', Yuval Noah Harari writes that

...the rise of humanism also contains the seeds of its downfall. While the attempt to upgrade humans into gods takes humanism to its logical conclusion, it simultaneously exposes humanism's inherent flaws. If you start with a flawed ideal, you often appreciate its defects only when the ideal is close to realisation. (Harari 2017, 66)

For Harari, the inevitable implosion of humanism and its overemphasis on a sacred anthropocentric worldview will soon clear the path for an all-encompassing "...data-centric view." (*Ibid.*, 395) Humans will become bits and pieces of information in a data-cloud that covers the cosmos. While Harari does not refer to antinatalism, he views 'dataism' as the natural conclusion of centuries of transhumanist fine-tuning. Although this might spell progress to some, it is clear that nothing could be a slap in the face of Enlightenment thinking quite like this grossly impersonal, cruelly inhumane development towards dataism. But, it is my contention that the failure of humanism simultaneously leads to the antinatalist conclusion of voluntary and non-violent extinction (Zandbergen 2021a).

This is so because the radical movements of antinatalism and transhumanism both respond to the humanist narrative: in the case of the former, negatively, in the case of the latter, affirmatively. After these past centuries of hopeful anticipation in which humankind collectively worked towards the brightest future imaginable, we must now brace ourselves for impact. For the ideals championed from the Enlightenment era onwards are now turning back upon themselves. No longer can we uncritically march on. Either we overcome the circumstances that this has led to, or we reject any such optimism

¹⁸ Rejecting this, people like the later Hauskeller dabble in trendy, bubblegum rhetoric persuasive to people to whom any and all striving to surpass traditional limitations is only ever the task of others. Rather, they take the task upon themselves to disgustingly regurgitate rotten pop-lit wisdom that "...we can also enjoy and celebrate our very vulnerability. Instead of constantly dwelling on our own finitude and letting ourselves be dragged down by it, it is much wiser to just live with it[.]" (Hauskeller, 2019, 19)

and end the species once and for all. Whether in negation or affirmation, humans will no longer be able to traverse the twenty-first century swimmingly.¹⁹

As such, it can be argued that the biggest legacy of the Enlightenment is the current dilemma that forces us to choose between transhumanism and antinatalism. Given its pedigree, we cannot simply refuse to solve this problem. The implications are too vast. Harari writes that “[w]hen cars replaced horse-drawn carriages, we didn’t upgrade the horses—we retired them. Perhaps it is time to do the same with *Homo sapiens*.” (Harari 2017, 393-394) When we follow this metaphor, we arrive at the conclusion that either the human will persist as a type of simulation of earlier, now outdated, lifeforms, or that even this minimal continued existence must be avoided by the eradication of the human species in favor of total, silent non-existence. This choice seems absolute: either we live as concept, or not at all. Either way, humanism must be concluded in modernity’s wake and in the ruins of morality’s collapse.

5. Conclusion

While the indelible pessimism of antinatalists like David Benatar stands in striking contrast to the persistent optimism of many transhumanists, there is an important parallel between these two radical, new philosophical movements. The most basic observation made by both antinatalism and transhumanism is that human existence as it is is not worth it. On the antinatalist view, this warrants the radical conclusion that human life itself should not have emerged in the first place. But, since we are, as it were, stuck with it, second best would be the retroactive dismantling of the human project. We are to contribute to the slow, but sure, extinction of humans in order to make up for the damage done by the species and prevent any future humans from being exposed to the gratuitous suffering that marks our lives.

Agreeing with this basic observation, transhumanism adds that this does not mean that human life should not have emerged in the first place. Rather, the fact that our lives are so miserable invites us to transcend the boundaries of our lives that cause this suffering. Rather than reject life, we are to embrace all its possibilities. These possibilities, it is held, are what we make them. Ultimately, we should not resign to the terrible state of the human condition but transform it. Only then can we waive the basic observation that life is not worth living.

In spite of their seeming dissimilarities, both movements emerged from the same humanistic attitude that has crowned human aspiration for centuries. This trajectory that shaped modernity must now be brought to a halt. Either we overcome it negatively (by contributing to the slow but sure extinction of humankind by non-violent means), or positively (by radically transcending any ‘normal’ limits to our human existence). In either way, contemporary philosophy is tasked with overcoming humankind and the humanism that has empowered it for centuries. What comes next is either non-existence or a different existence altogether. Neither of these are presently intelligible to us in the shadow of the tail of the Enlightenment.

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¹⁹ From a human rights perspective, there is another important parallel between antinatalism and transhumanism in that both, in their quest to overcome the human, pull away that which we presently base our human dignity and worth on. Human rights are rooted in a conception of the human incommensurable with either striving to overcome the human. When this basis falls, decades of progress in human betterment cannot stand anymore. Although the push to ban forms of (radical) human enhancement like cloning and designed babies is felt hardest, we can imagine a similar backlash against antinatalism that re-enforces people’s reproductive rights in the decades and centuries to come.

the Diaphysis of the Human Predicament as the Conscious Condition" written and successfully defended at the University of Macau.

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