

Book Review

Edgar Landgraf: *Nietzsche's Posthumanism*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2023. Pp. 280.)

doi:10.1017/S003467052400055X

In one of Nietzsche's more celebrated passages, man is likened to a rope suspended over an abyss linking beast to overman. "What is great in man," Nietzsche's Zarathustra proclaims, "is that he is a bridge and not an end: what can be loved in man is that he is an *overture* and a *going under*." Nietzsche is unambiguous that there can be no going back, not to the beasts nor to some earlier, nobler incarnation (the ancient Greeks, for example). If there is no choice but to press on, man's transcendence would appear all but fated. If ever there was a posthumanist in the Western canon, Nietzsche would seem to fit the bill.

And yet, Nietzsche's reception by posthumanists has been "motley," as Edgar Landgraf argues in his new book, *Nietzsche's Posthumanism*. While Nietzsche's influence on posthumanism is palpable, his enduring relevance is much disputed. The reasons for this themselves are motley. Some argue that Nietzsche's philosophy, with its emphasis on the human will, remains mired in the sort of anthropocentrism that posthumanists are eager to cashier. Perhaps more problematic is Nietzsche's "sometimes troubling rhetoric" (5) and the unsettling ethical and political implications to which it points. In this regard, he might be likened to a Columbus who altered the course of history only to be, per the demands of propriety, consigned to the dustheap of it.

Landgraf sets out to provide an in-depth, if somewhat desultory, analysis of Nietzsche's posthumanism, one that will shed light on a forgotten, if not deliberately buried, chapter in "the genealogy of posthumanism." The aim is not only to serve posthumanists by better illuminating the roots of their ideas and some of the tensions that inhere in them, but also to "open[] up new vistas onto Nietzsche's thought," exposing readers to "lesser-known aspects of his writings" (6).

It is an ambitious and intriguing effort that runs into problems from the start. Nietzsche's variegated reception by posthumanists is in some ways but a(n inevitable?) consequence of their own lack of cohesion. In the first chapter, ten or so distinct variants of posthumanism are listed; half a dozen or so antecedents are thrown in for good measure. It is hardly any wonder then that a thinker as provocative, prolific, and protean as Nietzsche would be difficult to neatly pin down in the posthumanist fold.

If there is a thread that binds, however loosely, these various strains of thought, it is a longing to redraw and decenter "the human" (6). What the

posthumanist seeks to correct is the alleged hubris that inheres in humanism, which, so the allegation goes, is responsible for, and incapable of, addressing so many of the ills that litter the present day, those of the ecological variety paramount among them. Tellingly, whereas neither God nor religion net any entries in Landgraf's twenty-page index, climate change and ecology (or ecological) do.

This ought to put the reader on guard. Though nominally the principal concern of environmentalism is the natural world, its fundamental concern is the human one. Climate change is a problem for humans. The world, as it has been for the overwhelming majority of its existence, will be just fine without them. As Nietzsche pointed out in *On Truth and Lie in an Extra-Moral Sense*, humans are specks of dust in a cosmic abyss, born from an eternal oblivion to which they must return. Of all the sound and fury that riddles their existence, nothing will remain and none of it will matter. Thus, even for those who ostensibly prioritize the ecological above the anthropological, man remains the center of all things.

For Nietzsche, it could not be otherwise. This is not because humans enjoy some privileged position, but because humans—and not just humans—cannot but make the world in their own image. On Nietzsche's understanding, all beings interpret the world in a manner that is good for them. Even science itself, which Landgraf heavily relies on and scarcely questions, is an effort to *humanize* the world.

The real question then is not so much what is man's place, but what is man's good? It is a question that Landgraf studiously neglects perhaps because the answer to it is presupposed. When Landgraf includes among the most pressing problems of the day inequality, exploitation, and war, it becomes evident that Landgraf's answer to that question is irreconcilable with Nietzsche's. It would seem that the very sort of world that filled Nietzsche with dread—a world without suffering and strife—inspires Landgraf, and posthumanists more broadly, with hope. In this regard, posthumanism seems more in keeping with the humanism it aspires to supersede than a radical break from it.

Landgraf does effectively call into question a number of humanistic conceits and the erudition he displays in doing so is nothing if not impressive. From matters of epistemology to entomology to technology, Landgraf ranges far and wide across nineteenth-century thought, drawing connections to Nietzsche's own thinking in the process. For example, the reader learns of Nietzsche's "epistemology being infused with findings from nineteenth-century physiology" (49), most notably Johannes Müller's "principle of specific nerve energies" (28), according to which the "output of our senses" (29)—what typically would be reckoned reality—speaks more to our organs of perception than the objects of perception. Regarding insects, references to which are, by Landgraf's own admission, "few and far between" in Nietzsche's writings (63), nineteenth-century research on the spontaneous and organic emergence of complex insect colonies afforded insights into human sociality and the prospect that human society too might be effectively constructed in "bottom-up processes" (63). On the question of technology, Landgraf turns to Marx

(of whom Nietzsche's knowledge "was at best cursory") and Ernst Kapp (though "there is ... no evidence that [Nietzsche] had read" him) (110) to help elucidate the reciprocal role of technology in shaping, if not determining, those who rely on its developments.

All of this may be interesting in its own right and all of this may serve the aim of posthumanism to redraw and decenter man (humans are no different from insects; they are but tools of tools; their rational faculty is not all it is cracked up to be), but the connections made to Nietzsche's own thought are dubious. To take a glaring example, the notion that nineteenth-century entomology might have suggested to Nietzsche that "the border between human and animal sociality" could be erased, so that, like ants and bees, humans too might evolve organically, "not steered from the outside, but ... in response to [their] own movements and ... environments" (76), seems woefully misguided. For one, it ignores that for Nietzsche, human sociality, unlike insect sociality, is *not* organic. Moreover, it posits as a goal to strive for the very denouement Nietzsche strove to avert: a shepherdless herd.

Nietzsche endeavored to transcend modernity not because man is the center of it—it would be odd if the human drama had a different protagonist—but because the values of the type of man at the center of it are inimical to life (understood as that which perpetually overcomes itself). Landgraf clearly laments the deleterious forces of a technocratic humanism, but the values themselves that undergird and animate that humanism—equality, security, pacificism, tolerance—are ones that he, *contra* Nietzsche, shares and celebrates.

In belaboring to redraw and decenter the human, Landgraf effectively effaces any distinction between man and man, subsuming all humans within some amorphous herd or swarm (to employ Landgraf's preferred term). Even the sovereign individual, whom Nietzsche extols, gets taken down a peg or two. Nietzschean sovereignty proves to be nonsovereignty owing to the relational nature of his existence (139), as though Nietzsche were arguing that the sovereign individual reposed in a vacuum or was an island unto himself. Like Plato's philosophers, even Zarathustra is obliged to return to man. But for Nietzsche there is a distinction and that distinction makes all the difference. The greatness of man is determined by the greatness he achieves; but greatness is achieved only by, or at the hands of, the few. "Every enhancement of the type 'man'" has not been the work of a swarm, but "of an aristocratic society—and it will be so again and again." What was in some ways Nietzsche's central concern—preserving the possibility of greatness in an age that had no aptitude for it—appears to be of no concern for Landgraf.

A genuinely Nietzschean posthumanism would be incompatible with the pieties of today's posthumanists, as Landgraf's book inadvertently makes plain. Upon putting it down, one is compelled to conclude that posthumanism portends a future better suited for last men than for overmen.

—David A. Eisenberg
Eureka College, Eureka, Illinois, USA