

# NIETZSCHE'S HUMANISM IN *THUS SPOKE ZARATHUSTRA*

## Interpreting and translating the word *Übermensch* in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century

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Abstract: Stefan Lorenz Sorgner's articles on posthumanism and transhumanism have actively brought Nietzsche's *Thus spoke Zarathustra* and its notion of the "overhuman" ("Übermensch") into a modern discussion of eugenics. In a critical reading of the text, I argue that Sorgner's mixing of cultural and biologist arguments cannot be supported by Nietzsche's text. Contrary to his reading, I propose a new reading which claims that Zarathustra's teaching of the "Übermensch" is primarily a lesson in linguistic expression – he teaches a way of *speaking*, not of *living*. Sorgner's reading thus not only relies on a biologist reading, but furthermore and in a more general sense, on an ethical reading (arguing that Zarathustra teaches us, the readers, how to live). In a second step, I discuss the relation between interpretation and translation, specifically looking at the problem of translating the term "Übermensch" and other related words, which form a semantic network in the text. Sorgner's argument is then paralleled with Sloterdijk's provocative reply to Heidegger's *Letter on Humanism, Regeln für den Menschenpark*, where Sloterdijk extensively quotes *Thus spoke Zarathustra*. While both Sorgner and Sloterdijk turn to similar (biologist) arguments, this article sets out to refute their interpretations from a strictly philological and hermeneutic point of view.<sup>1</sup>

Keywords: Nietzsche, Übermensch, hermeneutics, metaphors, biologism.

Nietzsche's concept of the "Übermensch" in his *Zarathustra* is still much debated and has recently given rise to a discussion of theories of posthumanism, transhumanism, and the related question of if and to which extent Nietzsche may be their proclaimed precursor. Stefan Lorenz Sorgner, defender of the view that Nietzsche gave major incentives to the concepts of posthumanism and transhumanism, relates the concept of the "Übermensch" to eugenics, which he tries to wash clean from its National Socialist

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imprint by casting it as a liberal kind of eugenics.<sup>2</sup> Thus, the contemporary debate of Nietzsche's so-called posthumanism or transhumanism recalls a very popular and highly dubious political tradition of Nietzsche interpretations in the first half of the 20th century.<sup>3</sup>

In this article, I argue that these posthumanist and transhumanist debates lead away from the primary text, Nietzsche's *Thus spoke Zarathustra*, and that they rely on a biologist interpretation of cultural phenomena. By giving a close reading of the relevant passages in Nietzsche's *Zarathustra* and other related texts, I argue that Nietzsche's notion of the "Übermensch" is essentially a vindication of humanism – a skeptical, but nevertheless philosophically serious one.

I start by interpreting the most relevant passages mentioning the "Übermensch" and related concepts in Nietzsche's *Zarathustra*, showing that the term "Übermensch" is meant as an ideal definition of the term "human". Instead of a biologist literal reading, I propose a metaphorical reading. Questions of interpretation are closely related to problems of translating Nietzsche's text, and therefore the most important translations are shortly discussed. In a few examples, I show how interpretative claims build the premises of each translation. Finally, I return to Sorgner's argument of transhumanism and frame it with a discussion of Sloterdijk's reply to Heidegger's famous *Brief über den Humanismus* (*Letter on Humanism*). Above all, I will argue that Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* should be read as a plea for humanism, if it should be read to carry a political message at all.

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<sup>2</sup> Cfr. Stefan L. SORGNER, *Nietzsche, the Overhuman, and Transhumanism*, in Y. TUNCEL (ed.), *Nietzsche and Transhumanism: Precursor or Enemy?*, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, Newcastle upon Tyne 2017, pp. 14-26.

<sup>3</sup> The idea of technological enhancement of the human body leads back to the poetic movement of Futurism and its protofascist elements: cfr. Emilo GENTILE, *The Struggle for Modernity: Nationalism, Futurism, and Fascism*, Praeger, Westport/London 2003. The implications of a political reading of Nietzsche become even more explicit in the 1930s in Ernst Jünger's view of Nietzsche as messenger of a new technologically enhanced humanity. Jünger's political view is expressed most radically in his 1932 essay "Der Arbeiter. Herrschaft und Gestalt" (*The Worker: Dominion and Form*, ed. Laurence Paul Hemming, tr. Bogdan Costea and Laurence Paul Hemming, Northwestern University Press, Evanston 2017), cfr. Reinhard WILCZEK, *Nihilistische Lektüre des Zeitalters. Ernst Jüngers Nietzsche-Rezeption*, Wissenschaftlicher Verlag, Trier 1999; Steffen MARTUS, *Ernst Jünger*, Metzler, Stuttgart 2001.

## 1. Nietzsche's concept of "Übermensch" in *Thus spoke Zarathustra*

As first evidenced by one of the editors of the critical edition of Nietzsche's works, Marie-Luise Haase, Nietzsche hardly ever used the concept "Übermensch" in other texts than *Thus spoke Zarathustra*.<sup>4</sup> She therefore promoted the hypothesis that Nietzsche gave up on the concept soon after, or rather already within the book itself, which shifts from the teaching of the "Übermensch" to a focus on the doctrine of eternal return in the third part. While this schematic view is simplifying in that it reduces the text to philosophical teachings, it is true that the concept "Übermensch" (as well as the concept of eternal return) is closely linked to the character of Zarathustra and to his articulated perspective. It is promulgated in the "Prologue" as Zarathustra's main teaching: «Ich lehre euch den Übermenschen. Der Mensch ist Etwas, das überwunden werden soll. Was habt ihr gethan, ihn zu überwinden?»<sup>5</sup> («*I teach you the Superman. Man is something that is to be surpassed. What have you done to surpass man?*»)<sup>6</sup>. First of all, it should be noted that Zarathustra does not set out to define the term "Übermensch". He simply proposes the use of the term (he teaches the word "Übermensch") and I would argue that the content of his teaching is to be read *verbatim* – meaning that Zarathustra is going to show his disciples how the term "Übermensch" should be used verbally. Thereby, he shows how a certain linguistic operation (using the dynamic of the prefixes "über" and "unter") will lead to a philosophical critique of the concept of the "human".<sup>7</sup> Zarathustra reflects on this use of the term "teaching" at a later point in the text, in the chapter "Auf den glückseligen Inseln" ("In the happy isles"): «Einst sagte man Gott, wenn man auf ferne Meere blickte; nun aber lehrte ich euch sagen: Übermensch»<sup>8</sup> («Once did people say God, when they looked out upon distant seas; now, however, have I taught you to say, Superman»)<sup>9</sup>. The focus should be directed at the verb "to say" ("sagen"), because here it is made explicit that the term "Übermensch" has been introduced as a term with a certain function and thus replaces the notion "God" by claiming a finite and immanent mode of transcendence.

After promoting the use of the term "Übermensch" in his speech to the public in the "Vorrede" ("Prologue"), he goes on to define the term "Mensch" ("man" or "human"): "Man is something that is to be surpassed". However, instead of "surpassed" one should

<sup>4</sup> Cfr. Marie-Luise HAASE, *Der Übermensch in Also sprach Zarathustra und im Zarathustra-Nachlass 1882-1885*, "Nietzsche-Studien", 13, 1, 1984, pp. 228-244.

<sup>5</sup> Friedrich NIETZSCHE, *Also sprach Zarathustra*, in G. COLLI-M. MONTINARI (eds.), *Sämtliche Werke. Kritische Studienausgabe [KSA]*, vol. 4, de Gruyter, Berlin/New York 1980, p. 14.

<sup>6</sup> Friedrich NIETZSCHE, *Thus spoke Zarathustra*, tr. Thomas Common, The Modern Library Publishers, New York 1917, p. 27.

rather translate it to “overcome”, as Walter Kaufmann suggests, because the term “overcome” implies a dialectical<sup>10</sup> dynamic, which the mere comparative meaning of “surpassing” lacks.<sup>11</sup> The term “Mensch” is defined by an ethical proposition, which aims at the analysis of the original term. Again, the ethical advice consists in a mere linguistic operation: the term “Mensch” shall be reviewed in order to gain a new meaning of the term. Christoph König speaks of “Resemantisierung” (“resemantisation”) and argues that Nietzsche’s prose includes a philosophical thought, which lies in its linguistic expression, and thus appears as a mode of philological writing.<sup>12</sup> The rhetorical question that follows (“what have you done to overcome it?”), implies a potential sphere of action on the side of the listener to realize Zarathustra’s ethical and linguistic program.

The term “Übermensch” is thus closely linked to the term “Mensch” by a rhetorical parallelism without establishing the connection in definite terms. In fact, the term “Übermensch” is defined by the sentences which follow because the dynamic idea of “overcoming” or “surpassing” what is “human” is the definition of the term “Übermensch”. Zarathustra’s teaching thus is illuminated by an analytical reflection, which explains the term “overman” as “overcoming man”. What we find here is a linguistic or philological mode of arguing philosophically.

But how can Zarathustra’s provoking demand to leave humanity behind, or in a more radical expression to destroy it, be in accordance with a humanistic view? The answer is that Zarathustra’s project is a critical one and is situated within a tradition of moral critique with an intent of improving humanity (i.e. the French moralists, Voltaire, and others).<sup>13</sup> While his rhetoric is revolutionary and even aggressive at first

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<sup>7</sup> I am presenting a more detailed argumentation in Elisabeth FLUCHER, *Lehre als Textpraxis am Beispiel des Übermenschen*, in F. CHRISTEN, M.-G. DEHRMANN, C. KÖNIG (eds.), *Lektüren von Also sprach Zarathustra*, Schwabe, Basel (forthcoming).

<sup>8</sup> NIETZSCHE, *Also sprach Zarathustra*, p. 109.

<sup>9</sup> NIETZSCHE, *Thus spoke Zarathustra*, tr. Common, pp. 97-98.

<sup>10</sup> Dialectical though not in a Hegelian sense, implying some kind of “resolution” (“Aufhebung”). Nietzsche’s dialectics rather consists in a progression of thoughts, which works through antitheses. Thus, the negation becomes part of a constructive argument, without being replaced by a new term. I further discuss this dynamic in my dissertation *Formen der Sinnkonstruktion*.

<sup>11</sup> Walter KAUFMANN, *The portable Nietzsche. Selected and translated, with an introduction, preface, and notes*, Penguin Books, Harmondsworth 1959 (Reprint of the 1954 edition at The Viking Press, New York), p. 124.

<sup>12</sup> Christoph KÖNIG, *Zweite Autorschaft. Philologie, Poesie und Philosophie in Friedrich Nietzsches “Also sprach Zarathustra” und “Dionysos-Dithyramben”*, Wallstein, Göttingen 2021 (forthcoming).

<sup>13</sup> Cfr. Brendan DONNELLAN, *Nietzsche and the French moralists*, Bouvier, Bonn 1982; Guillaume METAYER, *Nietzsche et Voltaire. De la liberté de l’esprit et de la civilisation. Préface de Marc Fumaroli de l’Académie française*, Flammarion, Paris 2011.

sight, there is a poetic program at work which gives a moderate and liberal meaning to its provocative expression.<sup>14</sup> Zarathustra attacks the virtues of the “good and just”, or rather, those who call themselves the “good and just”, but his program of linguistic critique implies a possibility of rejuvenating and transforming those virtues, once they were understood to be worthy of critique.<sup>15</sup> First of all, the signifiers have to be corrected: «Hirten sage ich: aber sie nennen sich die Guten und Gerechten»<sup>16</sup> («Herdsman, I say, but they call themselves the good and just»)<sup>17</sup>. Nietzsche’s critical program consists of a thorough critique of words used to denote established values. By showing the linguistic process that underlies the construction of such values, the traditional values come into the scope of critique. As judgments are phrased in a certain language, they are themselves based on a creative process, which has to be analyzed. Zarathustra finds harsh words in his moral critique, but, as he defends his method, the destruction of old values is necessary to create new values. The provocative connotation of Nietzsche’s use of language lies in its aggressive rhetorical guise. In a dynamic radicalization Zarathustra turns his analytical critique against the “good and just” themselves. The critique is now uttered in an *ad personam* mode and is directed against the personification of conservative values: «Zerbrecht, zerbrecht mir die Guten und Gerechten! – Oh meine Brüder, verstandet ihr auch diess Wort?»<sup>18</sup> («Break up, break up, I pray you, the good and just! – O my brethren, have ye understood also this word?»)<sup>19</sup>. Zarathustra is aware of the possible misunderstanding that he risks with his phrase, but how should his words be understood?

The next paragraph in the chapter “Von alten und neuen Tafeln” (“Old and new tables”) indicates an atmosphere of fear and distress, a reaction only suitable for an aggressive tone: «Ihr flieht von mir? Ihr seid erschreckt? Ihr zittert vor diesem Worte?»<sup>20</sup> («Ye flee from me? Ye are frightened? Ye tremble at this word?»)<sup>21</sup>. The violence implied in Zarathustra’s words is related to the personification of “the good and just”. If they are to be destroyed, or “broken”, this means that the aggression is to

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<sup>14</sup> Such aesthetic readings of Nietzsche tend to be criticized by interpreters with a political focus as “naïve” or “innocent”, but such political (radical) readings presuppose themselves an ethical imperative in Nietzsche’s texts, which a scrutinized reading of the texts cannot justify.

<sup>15</sup> Thus, in the „Prologue“, chapter 3, the following concepts are being criticized and transformed: “Glück”, “Vernunft”, “Tugend”, “Gerechtigkeit”, “Mitleiden”, cfr. NIETZSCHE, *Also sprach Zarathustra*, pp. 15-16.

<sup>16</sup> NIETZSCHE, *Also sprach Zarathustra*, p. 26.

<sup>17</sup> NIETZSCHE, *Thus spoke Zarathustra*, tr. Common, p. 37.

<sup>18</sup> NIETZSCHE, *Also sprach Zarathustra*, p. 267.

<sup>19</sup> NIETZSCHE, *Thus spoke Zarathustra*, tr. Common, p. 219.

<sup>20</sup> NIETZSCHE, *Also sprach Zarathustra*, p. 267.

<sup>21</sup> NIETZSCHE, *Thus spoke Zarathustra*, tr. Common, p. 219.

be directed at them personally. But, if we take Zarathustra's teaching seriously, as evidenced from the first to the third part of the book in which he has built up a coherent method, then we are dealing here with words, and words only. What is to be destroyed then are not the persons who call themselves "the good and just", but rather the concept of "the good and just", which represents their ideal values. Furthermore, the verb "to break" implies the imagery of an object of veneration. Nietzsche's critique of idolatry is famous and may well be applied to the text at hand. What is to be destroyed then is the idol of "the good and just". While Zarathustra urges his disciples to create and establish new values, the process of actively creating values defers from simply and naively following the values that others have set.

The problematic nature of "the good and just" lies in the fact that they believe themselves to be good and just without any possibility of self-critique: «Denen, die sprechen und im Herzen fühlen: "wir wissen schon, was gut ist und Gerecht, wir haben es auch; wehe Denen, welche hier noch suchen!"»<sup>22</sup> («those you say and feel in their hearts: "We already know what is good and just, we possess it also; woe to those who still seek thereafter!"»)<sup>23</sup>. Their "stupidity" ("Dummheit") lies in their "good conscience"<sup>24</sup> ("gutes Gewissen"), in their inability to question themselves and to actively set their own values. The "good and just" are thus compared to the Pharisees of the New Testament, who are willing and ready to see Jesus crucified: «Das aber ist die Wahrheit: die Guten müssen Pharisäer sein, – sie haben keine Wahl!»<sup>25</sup> («It is the truth, however, that the good *must* be Pharisees – they have no choice!»)<sup>26</sup>. In Zarathustra's terms, they have no choice, precisely because they are not able to question their own values and are left without alternative. They are not creative but rather destructive, or, in Zarathustra's words, «they crucify the whole human future!»<sup>27</sup> («sie kreuzigen alle Menschen-Zukunft!»), because their relation to the setting of new values is obstructive. That they crucify the future of humanity, is an adaptation of the Gospel, which takes the verb "to crucify" metaphorically (or rather in a mixed metaphor – "Katachrese") and extends it to the "future" as its object. The point of the rhetorical use of language is to take the idea of a destructive relation to values to extremes. And as the medium of values is transformation, or permanent recreation, the

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<sup>22</sup> NIETZSCHE, *Also sprach Zarathustra*, p. 266.

<sup>23</sup> NIETZSCHE, *Thus spoke Zarathustra*, tr. Common, p. 218.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> NIETZSCHE, *Also sprach Zarathustra*, p. 266.

<sup>26</sup> NIETZSCHE, *Thus spoke Zarathustra*, tr. Common, p. 218.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

wish to stop and freeze this movement as the rather conservative-hearted “good and just” do, must in itself be hostile to the idea of values.

The “future” is in Zarathustra’s world closely linked to the term “Übermensch” because it represents the embodiment of a future goal to humanity. Nietzsche examines this metaphor in paragraph 8 of the chapter “Old and new tables”:

“Fundamentally standeth everything still” – that is an appropriate winter doctrine, good cheer for an unproductive period, a great comfort for winter-sleepers and fireside-loungers. / “Fundamentally standeth everything still” –: but *contrary* thereto, preacheth the thawing wind!<sup>28</sup>

Zarathustra himself does not promote the contrary doctrine: “All is in flux”,<sup>29</sup> but he demands the “illusion” of the values “good and evil” to be replaced by “knowledge” and thus promotes himself the classical values of the Enlightenment. This impetus is clearly expressed in the meaning that Zarathustra bestows on the word “Übermensch”, when it is said to replace the old idea of Gods: «“Todt sind alle Götter: nun wollen wir, dass der Übermensch lebe.” – diess sei einst am grossen Mittage unser letzter Wille!»<sup>30</sup> («“*Dead are all the Gods: now do we desire the Superman to live.*” – Let this be our final will at the great noon-tide!»).<sup>31</sup> The concept of the “Übermensch” thus serves as an instrument in the critique and destruction of idols as well as Gods. In any case, the term “Übermensch” is created in order to replace the talk about Gods and other concepts of the “hereafter”. On the contrary, Zarathustra’s poetics focusses on the “earthly existence” («I conjure you, my brethren, remain true to the earth, and believe not those who speak unto you of superearthly hopes!»).<sup>32</sup> But, how does the “Übermensch” replace the talk about Gods? Zarathustra gives an account of his answer in the chapter “In the happy isles” (“Auf den glückseligen Inseln”):

Gott ist eine Muthmaassung; aber ich will, dass euer Muthmaassen nicht weiter reiche, als euer schaffender Wille. / Könntet ihr einen Gott schaffen? – So schweigt mir doch von allen Göttern! Wohl aber könntet ihr den Übermenschen schaffen.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Cfr. NIETZSCHE, *Thus spoke Zarathustra*, tr. Common, p. 207.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> NIETZSCHE, *Also sprach Zarathustra*, p. 102.

<sup>31</sup> NIETZSCHE, *Thus spoke Zarathustra*, tr. Common, p. 92.

<sup>32</sup> *Ivi*, p. 28.

<sup>33</sup> NIETZSCHE, *Also sprach Zarathustra*, p. 109.

God is a conjecture: but I do not wish your conjecturing to reach beyond your creating will. / Could ye *create* a God? – Then, I pray you, be silent about all Gods! But ye could well create the Superman.<sup>34</sup>

The concept of the “Übermensch” is clearly opposed to the concept of God in that it can potentially be realized in this world. It is constructed in analogy to Kant’s concept of a regulative principle, which guides reason’s search for knowledge within the realm of possible experience, while the principle itself cannot be grasped or situated within that realm.<sup>35</sup> But contrary to Kant’s principle, Nietzsche’s “Übermensch” could be realized, or so he makes us believe: «Nicht ihr vielleicht selber, meine Brüder! Aber zu Vätern und Vorfahren könntet ihr euch umschaffen des Übermenschen: und Diss sei euer bestes Schaffen!»<sup>36</sup> («Not perhaps ye yourselves, my brethren! But into fathers and forefathers of the Superman could ye transform yourselves: and let that be your best creating!»).<sup>37</sup>

There are two possible ways to interpret this paragraph. The first would be to understand it literally, in the sense that it would be possible to create the “Übermensch” biologically within a few generations. This implies the concept of “breeding”,<sup>38</sup> one that is politically linked to the National Socialist ideology of eugenics.<sup>39</sup> This is the sense in

<sup>34</sup> NIETZSCHE, *Thus spoke Zarathustra*, tr. Common, p. 98.

<sup>35</sup> Cfr. Immanuel KANT, *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, Hartknoch, Riga 1781/1787, A 508-509, B 536-538.

<sup>36</sup> NIETZSCHE, *Also sprach Zarathustra*, p. 109.

<sup>37</sup> NIETZSCHE, *Thus spoke Zarathustra*, tr. Common, p. 98.

<sup>38</sup> This reading relies heavily on posthumous notes by Nietzsche, e.g. Friedrich NIETZSCHE, *Nachgelassene Fragmente. Herbst 1885 bis Anfang Januar 1889*, in COLLI-MONTINARI, *KSA*, vol. 12, p. 425: „Die zunehmende Verkleinerung des Menschen ist gerade die treibende Kraft, um an die Züchtung einer stärkeren Rasse zu denken,“ (Herbst 1887, 11[153]), but phrases like this can only be read in a biological sense, if taken out of context. In the context of the note, it becomes clear that the means of such a breeding are not actually biological, but they imply a spiritual and moral education, which consists in the habituation of certain thoughts and judgements, cfr. Thomas H. BROBJER, *Züchtung*, in H. OTTMANN (ed.), *Nietzsche Handbuch. Leben - Werk - Wirkung*, Stuttgart/Weimar 2011, pp. 360-361, who argues that the influence between physiological and psychological factors goes in both directions.

<sup>39</sup> Alfred Baeumler is most known for this thesis and he is one of the most important ideologists of National Socialism. Cfr. Alfred BAEUMLER, *Nietzsche. Der Philosoph und Politiker*, Reclam, Leipzig 1931. Heidegger, who himself has a complicated relation to National Socialism, criticizes Baeumler’s political reading in his lectures on Nietzsche, but defends Baeumler by arguing that he does not propose a psycho-biologism like Ludwig Klages, cfr. Martin HEIDEGGER, *Gesamtausgabe, II. Abteilung, Vorlesungen 1923-1976, Bd. 43, Der Wille zur Macht als Kunst*, Klostermann, Frankfurt am Main 1985, p. 26: «Diese Nietzscheauslegung ist umso merkwürdiger, als Baeumler sonst zu den ganz wenigen gehört, die gegen die psychologisch-biologistische Deutung Nietzsches durch Klages angehen». Cfr. Katharina GRÄTZ, *“Kämpfer gegen seine Zeit”: Alfred Baeumlers Nietzsche-Deutung und der Nationalsozialismus*, in S. KAUFMANN-A.U. SOMMER (eds.), *Nietzsche und die konservative Revolution*, de Gruyter, Berlin/Boston 2018, pp. 405-434; A. DENKER et al. (eds.), *Heidegger und Nietzsche*, Karl Alber, Freiburg/München 2005 (Heidegger-Jahrbuch 2).

which Sorgner would interpret the phrase as well: «The ultimate kind of overcoming can be seen in the overcoming of the human species, and whoever has been keen on permanently overcoming himself can regard himself as an ancestor of the overhuman». <sup>40</sup> Sorgner clearly reads the passage strictly in a biological, generational sense. <sup>41</sup>

The second possibility would be to read the passage metaphorically, which would, in a sense, be close to the Kantian idea of a regulative principle: <sup>42</sup> while the concept of the “Übermensch” could never be realized in fact, it would lead and guide our idea of education and refinement. Nietzsche often uses concrete examples to rhetorically make an argument for a more abstract matter. For example, in the chapter “On Poets” (“Von den Dichtern”), he uses the series “tomorrow”, “the day after” and “time to come” or “hereafter” in order to describe an increase from the nearest to furthest future. <sup>43</sup> Now, the same scheme of rhetoric argument seems to be at work in the quoted passage about the creation of the “Übermensch”. Zarathustra’s use of the verb “to create” (“schaffen”) and the play on words “to recreate” (“umschaffen”) should be noted. He does not simply say that his companions could “become” fathers of the “Übermensch”, but that they would have to “create” and “recreate” or “transform” themselves to fathers and ancestors. This implies another important step in the process: the bringing about of the “Übermensch” is not postponed to another generation but has to start in the transformation of the present. The point then is that the critical transformation is already demanded for the present moment – while it remains unclear how this transformation should be realized exactly –, the later development would follow from this transformation. But if it could be realized in the present moment, then why would the scope of a far future be necessary at all? This is the paradox of Zarathustra’s demand of a transformation of human nature: that, on the one hand, it could be simply reached by a transformation of the way we speak, think, and feel, but that, on the other hand, it still seems to be too far of a goal to reach. This kind of paradox, as I have

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<sup>40</sup> SORGNER, *Nietzsche, the Overhuman, and Transhumanism*, p. 25.

<sup>41</sup> Alberto Giacomelli summarizes the most important interpretations of Nietzsche’s “Übermensch” in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century and finds that most of them, including Heidegger, argue against a biologist reading, cfr. Alberto GIACOMELLI, *Dal culto alla cura. Il corpo in Nietzsche tra eugenetica ed etopoiesi*, “Orbis Idearum”, 6, 1, 2018, pp. 139-160, here pp. 154-155. Others, who argue biologically, also argue in favor of a “pure race” (e.g. Ernst Bertram), cfr. *ivi*, p. 155.

<sup>42</sup> For a Kantian reading of Nietzsche’s ethics cfr. Georg SIMMEL, *Schopenhauer und Nietzsche. Ein Vortragszyklus*, in M. BEHR, V. KRECH, G. SCHMIDT (eds.), *Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 10, Frankfurt am Main 1995, pp. 167-408, here pp. 388-389.

<sup>43</sup> Cfr. NIETZSCHE, *Also sprach Zarathustra*, p. 165: «Etwas ist in mir, das ist von Morgen und Übermorgen und Einstmals».

argued, is best expressed by Kant's idea of a regulative principle, because it sets a concrete goal, without taking the realization to be possible.

The point of the "Übermensch" then is not to denote a species different from the human species, which should be brought about in a process of generative selection and "breeding", as Sorgner's biologist reading has it, but rather the "Übermensch" is just another word for "human" in the ideal sense, which has to be brought about by self-critique and education just like the Enlightenment and its spokesperson Kant propose.

That Zarathustra's teaching of the "Übermensch" is actually and literally the teaching of a humanism, becomes apparent when his account of the "human" is considered more closely. Zarathustra avoids a definition of human nature in the same way that Nietzsche does, because the concept of the "human" for him is intrinsically under-determined. In chapter 62 of *Beyond Good and Evil* Nietzsche judges humans to be «the still undetermined animals»<sup>44</sup> («dass der Mensch das noch nicht festgestellte Thier ist»)<sup>45</sup>. His following critique of religion and morality consists in the assumption that Christianity and its ethical values reduce the potential of humanity to a limited scope: «in der Gesamt-Abrechnung gehören die bisherigen, nämlich souveränen Religionen zu den Hauptursachen, welche den Typus "Mensch" auf einer niedrigeren Stufe festhielten, – sie erhielten zu viel von dem, was zu Grunde gehn sollte»<sup>46</sup> («in the final analysis, the religions that have existed so far (which have all been sovereign) have played a principal role in keeping the type "man" on a lower level. They have preserved too much of what should be destroyed»)<sup>47</sup>. It is evident, that Nietzsche's claim about the human type is highly provocative, yet nevertheless it deserves a close reading. First of all, as a critique, it is directed against the Christian idea of humanity and its ethical value system. The claim Nietzsche makes is that a European Christian tradition of education and of the disciplining of affects has led to the diminishment of the idea of humanity, at least in Nietzsche's sense.

The objects of this political and economical disciplining human nature are not humans as persons, but the human as an abstract type – which means, that a certain habituation and discipline has led to a different idea of humanity. This is key to understanding the following sentence: it is not said that certain humans should perish, but rather that certain traits of the human type shouldn't be part of the idea of the

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<sup>44</sup> Friedrich NIETZSCHE, *Beyond Good and Evil. Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future*, ed. by R.-P. HORSTMANN and J. NORMAN, tr. J. Norman, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2002, p. 56.

<sup>45</sup> NIETZSCHE, *Jenseits von Gut und Böse. Vorspiel einer Philosophie der Zukunft*, in COLLI-MONTINARI (eds.), *KSA*, vol. 5, de Gruyter, Berlin/New York 1980, p. 81.

<sup>46</sup> *Ivi*, p. 82.

<sup>47</sup> NIETZSCHE, *Beyond Good and Evil*, p. 56.

human type. The translation, “should be destroyed”, further alienates the original sense, because there is no activity of destruction, but rather a process which does not need further assistance: “was zu Grunde gehen sollte” could be translated then as “what should perish” or literally “what should go to the ground”. Now, the term “zu Grunde gehen” along with “untergehen” (“to go down”) is of central importance in *Thus spoke Zarathustra* and requires attention. While “untergehen” is Zarathustra’s task in the book, “zu Grunde gehen” is rather the part of the listeners, if they want to follow Zarathustra. “Zu Grunde gehen” has the double sense of going down and of going to the ground of things. It could be translated as “taking something to an extreme and by doing so gaining knowledge”, thus it is closely related to “einer Sache auf den Grund gehen”, or “etwas gründlich analysieren” (“getting to the bottom of things”). It implies reaching a minimum of some kind; thus, it is closely related to the word “Abgrund”. It means going through self-destruction and getting through it in order to reach a transformed state. In this sense Zarathustra uses the term, when he says that “perishing” (“zu Grunde gehen”) would lead men to grasping the “Übermensch” as an ideal. In this sense, man would have to bring a “sacrifice”: «Ich liebe Die, welche nicht erst hinter den Sternen einen Grund suchen, unterzugehen und Opfer zu sein: sondern die sich der Erde opfern, dass die Erde einst des Übermenschen werde»<sup>48</sup> («I love those who do not first seek a reason beyond the stars for going down and being sacrifices, but sacrifice themselves to the earth, that the earth of the Superman may hereafter arrive»)<sup>49</sup> Zarathustra’s rhetoric of voluntary death and sacrifice is again ambiguous but has clearly a metaphorical sense. What needs to “perish”, are not individual human beings, but certain ideas, values and judgements. The aim of the critique is a way of speaking. Understood in this way, “perishing” isn’t identical to death, but to a transformation. That’s why the word “Untergang” is defined by the term “Übergang”: «was geliebt werden kann am Menschen, das ist, dass er ein Übergang und ein Untergang ist»<sup>50</sup> («what is lovable in man is that he is an over-going and a down-going»)<sup>51</sup> Kaufmann translates “overture”<sup>52</sup> for “Übergang” and thus captures the sense of a new beginning that is directed to the future. What is sacrificed then is a certain static notion of the “human”. Zarathustra’s concept is dynamic.<sup>53</sup> The opposite of Zarathustra’s idea of an “Übermensch” is thus the concept of a “last man”, who is characterized by his inability

<sup>48</sup> NIETZSCHE, *Also sprach Zarathustra*, p. 17.

<sup>49</sup> NIETZSCHE, *Thus spoke Zarathustra*, tr. Common, p. 30.

<sup>50</sup> NIETZSCHE, *Also sprach Zarathustra*, p. 17.

<sup>51</sup> NIETZSCHE, *Thus spoke Zarathustra*, tr. Common, p. 30.

<sup>52</sup> KAUFMANN, *The portable Nietzsche*, p. 127.

<sup>53</sup> Cfr. Anne-Marie PIEPER, „Ein Seil geknüpft zwischen Tier und Übermensch“. *Philosophische Erläuterungen zu Nietzsches ‚Also sprach Zarathustra‘ von 1883*, Klett-Cotta, Stuttgart 1990.

to transformation, change and striving: «Wehe! Es kommt die Zeit, wo der Mensch nicht mehr den Pfeil seiner Sehnsucht über den Menschen hinaus wirft, und die Sehne seines Bogens verlernt hat, zu schwirren!»<sup>54</sup> («Alas! There cometh the time when man will no longer launch the arrow of his longing beyond man – and the string of his bow will have unlearned to whizz!»).<sup>55</sup> “Mensch” and “Übermensch” are interrelated concepts, which refer to each other, while both stay oddly empty and under-determined if isolated from each other. While it is the quality of a “human” to strive to become “over-” or “superhuman”, the concept of “Übermensch” itself is nothing else but this ideal of humanity. Thus, the concept of “human” is of central concern to Nietzsche in his *Zarathustra*. It is part of his (proto-existentialist) definition of “human” that he/she decides for him/herself what he/she should become.

## 2. A question of translation and interpretation

Sorgner’s interpretation, which tries to establish a connection between Nietzsche’s philosophy and the ideas of post- and transhumanism, relies on the term “Übermensch” in Nietzsche’s *Zarathustra*. It is thus depending on translation. However, the meaning of the word cannot be isolated from the text, because it is interwoven with other words and other contexts, which altogether form a meaningful network: “human”, “last man”, “higher men”, “overcoming”, “perishing” / “going down”, “overture” / “over-going”, and others.<sup>56</sup> Understanding these concepts thus requires a thorough interpretation of *Thus spoke Zarathustra* in order to grasp the dynamic of the semantic revaluations at play in the text. These meanings are organized in a specific way and are not used randomly: the fact that their exact meaning is difficult to grasp does not mean that it can be interpreted in any possible way.<sup>57</sup> Sorgner tries to establish a translation of these concepts by comparing them to the theory of transhumanism. He defines the word “Übermensch” (which he translates as “overhuman”) by using the term “posthuman” and the words “higher men” (which he translates as “higher human”) by using the term “transhuman”, because he finds a significant similarity between the terms.<sup>58</sup> This fixation of meaning implies, first of all,

<sup>54</sup> NIETZSCHE, *Also sprach Zarathustra*, p. 19.

<sup>55</sup> NIETZSCHE, *Thus spoke Zarathustra*, tr. Common, p. 32.

<sup>56</sup> Cfr. Gregory WHITLOCK, *Translating Nietzsche’s Zarathustra into English*, “The New Centennial Review”, 16, 3, 2016, pp. 59-82; here p. 67.

<sup>57</sup> Cfr. Christoph KÖNIG, „Ich bin dein Labyrinth...“ *Zur poetischen Klugheit in Nietzsches ‚Dionysos-Dithyramben‘*, in C. BENNE-C. ZITTEL (eds.), *Nietzsche und die Lyrik. Ein Kompendium*, Metzler, Stuttgart 2017, pp. 331-349.

<sup>58</sup> SORGNER, *Nietzsche, the Overhuman, and Transhumanism*, p. 23.

that words from the text *Thus spoke Zarathustra* may be isolated as abstract concepts and explained in the context of a theory which is constructed (or reconstructed) with the intent of explaining the way in which these words are being used in the text.<sup>59</sup> He explains the term “Übermensch” biologically as a different species than “humans”: «The overhuman comes about via an evolutionary step, which originates from the group of higher humans».<sup>60</sup> But it is dubious whether the “Übermensch” in Zarathustra designates a different species from humans, one that Sorgner calls posthumans.<sup>61</sup> Everything comes down to the question of whether the “Übermensch” should be understood in terms of biological generation or not. As I argued in the first part of this paper, the biological connotations of Zarathustra’s use of words should be understood metaphorically. In the “Prologue”, the “Übermensch” describes the inherent quality of humans to strive beyond themselves. The word thus tries to capture the dynamic nature of what it means to be human. Sorgner further refers to the concept of “higher men”, which he interprets as “transhuman” in the sense that they have a higher potential than average men and women:

Higher humans still belong to the human species, but have some special capacities, which an overhuman could also have. However, higher humans cannot pass on their special capacities to their descendants by means of sexual reproduction.<sup>62</sup>

Sorgner’s biologism becomes clear, but he takes the term “higher humans” from a different context than the term “overhuman”. The term “higher men” appears only in part IV of *Thus spoke Zarathustra*, where they stand in no generational or biological relation to the “Übermensch”, but instead appear as a parody of that ideal,<sup>63</sup> and Sorgner has to take his definition by combining quotes from other works by Nietzsche. Sorgner refers to a passage from *Twilight of the Idols*, in which Nietzsche praises Goethe as an exceptional spirit, but he does not use the term “höherer Mensch”, which Sorgner

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<sup>59</sup> In my forthcoming dissertation (*Formen der Sinnkonstruktion in Nietzsches Also sprach Zarathustra*), I argue at more length why such an extraction of a philosophical theory is problematic. In general, the critique of philosophical interpretations of *Thus spoke Zarathustra* is not new within Nietzsche scholarship. Cfr. e.g. Bernd MAGNUS, Stanley STEWART, Jean-Pierre MILEUR, *Nietzsche’s case. Philosophy as/and literature*, Routledge, New York 1993, pp. 18-24.

<sup>60</sup> SORNGNER, *Nietzsche, the Overhuman, and Transhumanism*, p. 23.

<sup>61</sup> Babette Babich and Keith Ansell Pearson among others have challenged Sorgner’s interpretation, cfr. Babette BABICH, *Nietzsche’s Post-Human Imperative: On the “All-too-Human” Dream of Transhumanism*, in Y. TUNCEL (ed.), *Nietzsche and Transhumanism*, pp. 101-132; Keith A. PEARSON, *The Future is Superhuman: Nietzsche’s Gift*, in Y. TUNCEL (ed.), *Nietzsche and Transhumanism*, pp. 70-82.

<sup>62</sup> SORNGNER, *Nietzsche, the Overhuman, and Transhumanism*, p. 22.

<sup>63</sup> To the concept of parody in *Thus spoke Zarathustra* cfr. Claus ZITTEL, *Das ästhetische Kalkül von Friedrich Nietzsches “Also sprach Zarathustra”*, Königshausen & Neumann, Würzburg 2011, p. 126.

needs for his argument. The exact terminology is of importance here. First, Nietzsche does not talk about Goethe's person, but about his work. Only in his work lies the "grandeur" ("Grösse")<sup>64</sup> that Nietzsche estimates so highly – at least, he strongly identifies Goethe's life and his *œuvre*. Second, Nietzsche says here that Goethe conceived a certain type of human, not that he exemplified it: «Goethe concipierte einen starken, hochgebildeten, in allen Leiblichkeiten geschickten, sich selbst im Zaume habenden, vor sich selber ehrfürchtigen Menschen».<sup>65</sup> The verb "concipiren" ("to project" or "to conceive") designates a sketch, the glimpse of an idea of humanity, and is thus to be understood as a kind of "understanding" or "contemplating", not as bringing about a physical reality. However, Nietzsche underlines on many occasions how Goethe's "humanity" could be an example to be followed, where he is clearly interested in the *person* ("der Mensch") Goethe.<sup>66</sup> Nevertheless, it is not clear how the "higher men" in *Zarathustra* would be related to those ideal figures, whom Nietzsche praises in his other writings. It is also unclear, how Nietzsche's increased use of physiological metaphors<sup>67</sup> in his late writings (e.g. *Ecce Homo*) should be dealt with, as they are clearly closely related to cultural and intellectual issues.

While Sorgner acknowledges the fact that Nietzsche has mostly an intellectual education in mind when talking about a higher kind of humanity, the link to a biologist argument is nevertheless significant. How should the transition from a cultural project of educating and elevating humanity to a different biological species, the "posthuman" be explained if not by understanding also the first element in its biological sense? This link between cultural education and biological development is exactly what Sorgner states: «Higher humans wish to permanently overcome themselves, to become stronger in the various aspects, which can be developed in a human being, so that finally the overhuman can come into existence».<sup>68</sup> While Sorgner's interpretation that «so far no overhuman has existed»,<sup>69</sup> has a plausible relation to Nietzsche's text, his theory of a posthuman species based on the concept of the "overhuman" is based on a major

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<sup>64</sup> Cfr. NIETZSCHE, *Götzen-Dämmerung*, in COLLI-MONTINARI (eds.), *KSA*, vol. 6, p. 152.

<sup>65</sup> *Ivi*, p. 151.

<sup>66</sup> Cfr. Friedrich NIETZSCHE, *Schopenhauer als Erzieher*, in COLLI-MONTINARI (eds.), *KSA*, vol. 1, pp. 337-427, here pp. 369-371. For a lucid elaboration on Nietzsche's notion of exemplarity, cfr. James CONANT, *Perfektionismus und Perspektivismus*, Konstanz 2014.

<sup>67</sup> Nicholas Martin observes a focus on physiological aspects and health in Nietzsche's comments on Goethe, linking the "Übermensch" with Nietzsche's ideal picture of Goethe, cfr. Nicholas MARTIN, *Nietzsche's Goethe: In Sickness and in Health*, "Publications of the English Goethe Society", 77, 2, 2008, pp. 113-124, here p. 121.

<sup>68</sup> SORGNER, *Nietzsche, the Overhuman, and Transhumanism*, p. 20.

<sup>69</sup> *Ivi*, p. 23.

conjecture. It is moreover built on an intimate relation between *interpretation* and *translation*.

In the history of Nietzsche scholarship, advancements in interpretations have led to a critique of Nietzsche translations, and vice versa, as a more exact translation often leads to a better interpretation. While a translation by Alexander Tille from 1896 reads the “Übermensch” as “Beyond-Man”, the first English translation with a wider impact was that by Thomas Common from 1909, who translates “Übermensch” as “superman”. Hollingdale’s translation from 1961 and Wayne’s translation from 2003 confirm Common’s translation, while Walter Kaufmann’s translation from 1954 replaces Common’s “superman” by “overman”. Graham Parkes, who translated the work again in 2005, explains that «“Superman” conjures up unfortunate associations with musclebound blue-suited heroes and overemphasizes the “above” connotation of the “over” (über) at the expense of the “across”». <sup>70</sup> This comment gives an important dynamic when judging the translation of the word “Übermensch”, because it relies on an interpretation which is sensitive to the textual context. Parkes recognizes the meaning of “über” as transition which is exemplified in the word “Übergang”. The dynamic understanding of the prefix “über” also takes into account the relation to verbs like “überwinden”. As Parkes argues, the prefix “super” implies the static meaning of something which is locally “above”, while “over” in English can be used to express the movement of “overcoming”. <sup>71</sup> Parkes thus suggests the translation “Overhuman”, relying on Kaufmann’s translation but widening it to highlight the relation between the terms “human” and “overhuman”, which is also present in the German “Übermensch”. Sorgner then relies on Parkes’ translation of “Übermensch” as “Overhuman”, but Parkes’ translation implies also other interpretative claims. He reads the “Übermensch” as a concept that «emerges from our going beyond the human perspective and transcending the anthropocentric worldview» <sup>72</sup> and that puts nonhuman nature (mineral, animal, vegetal) into the center. This focus on nonhuman nature is taken further to a quasi-pantheist new religion: «There is a new kind of religion here – what has been aptly called Nietzsche’s “Dionysian pantheism”». <sup>73</sup> Both Sorgner and Parkes bring specific premises about the “transcending” of the human into their concepts of the “overhuman”, which block the meaning in Nietzsche’s text that marks the transcending dynamic as part of human nature.

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<sup>70</sup> Friedrich NIETZSCHE, *Thus spoke Zarathustra. A new translation by Graham Parkes*, Oxford University Press, Oxford/New York 2005, p. XVIII.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>73</sup> *Ivi*, p. XX.

A well-chosen translation alone does not fully capture all the implications of the original text, because the choice of words often relies on etymological and tonal similarities, whose ambiguity and resemblance cannot be reflected in the translation. The translation thus has to come with a commentary that refers to the ambiguities and inter-related words in the original text. Considering this situation, Walter Kaufmann has described the *Zarathustra* as coming «close to being untranslatable». <sup>74</sup> Kaufmann himself has proposed a lucid translation of *Thus spoke Zarathustra*, one that modernizes the text and does not imitate the archaic biblical tone like Common's translation does, however his translation doesn't follow the original partition into paragraphs, and he believes that the text could be concentrated on a much shorter length: «After all has been said, Zarathustra still cries out to be blue-penciled; and if it were more compact, it would be more lucid too». <sup>75</sup> Kaufmann tries to put the text into a more philosophical shape by canceling most of the line breaks, but in his translation he tries to stay close to the original meaning by giving mostly literal translations. So he replaces Common's "down-going" <sup>76</sup> by the word "going-under", <sup>77</sup> with the effect that his translation gives a hint of the relation between "going under" and "overman", but on the expense of an intuitive comprehensibility of the phrase: «I love him who lives to know, and who wants to know so that the overman may live some day. And thus he wants to go under». <sup>78</sup> By giving the raw literal sense and forgoing an over-hasty interpretation, the translation shows that an act of interpretation is indeed necessary and requested in order to grasp the meaning. Parkes' translation relies on Kaufmann's but tries to get even closer to the original by translating the word "Untergang" as a noun («And thus he wills his going-under») <sup>79</sup> instead of Kaufmann's verbal transfer. It is also significant, that Common puts "surpass" <sup>80</sup> for "überwinden", while Kaufmann and Parkes read "overcome", <sup>81</sup> as "surpassing" implies a quantitative exceeding, while "overcoming" allows the reflexive (and self-destructive) meaning of "overcoming oneself" and thus opens the possibility of a dialectical reading.

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<sup>74</sup> KAUFMANN, *The portable Nietzsche*, p. 108.

<sup>75</sup> *Ivi*, p. 106.

<sup>76</sup> NIETZSCHE, *Thus spoke Zarathustra*, tr. Common, p. 30.

<sup>77</sup> KAUFMANN, *The portable Nietzsche*, p. 127.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>79</sup> NIETZSCHE, *Thus spoke Zarathustra*, tr. Parkes, p. 14.

<sup>80</sup> NIETZSCHE, *Thus spoke Zarathustra*, tr. Common, p. 27.

<sup>81</sup> KAUFMANN, *The portable Nietzsche*, p. 124; NIETZSCHE, *Thus spoke Zarathustra*, tr. Parkes, p. 11.

### 3. Humanist and post-/trans-humanist perspectives on Nietzsche

Sorgner's reading of Nietzsche's *Zarathustra* is just one example of a provocative interpretation, which deduces political and ethical claims from the text. In order to situate his position more clearly within a tradition of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, I want to compare it to Peter Sloterdijk's essay *Regeln für den Menschenpark. Ein Antwortschreiben zu Heideggers Brief über den Humanismus*.<sup>82</sup> Sloterdijk relies heavily on Nietzsche's *Zarathustra* when arguing that Nietzsche paved the way for a critique of the concept of humanity by analyzing the disciplinary forces of secular virtue ethics. He uses the terms "Züchtung" ("breeding") and "Zähmung" ("taming"),<sup>83</sup> which claim a correlation between education and its biological effects. Sloterdijk does not mention Foucault, but the text calls his notion of "biopolitics" to mind. With this concept a style of government can be described, which actively designs the life of individuals or of a "social body".<sup>84</sup> This model explains how a totalitarian variant of government like National Socialism blends a racist ideology with their idea of a people defined biologically via a genetic model.<sup>85</sup> Sloterdijk is well aware of the political associations that he buys into with his provocative argument. Nietzsche's reception in National Socialist ideology is well known and Sloterdijk does little to refute these philologically false claims.<sup>86</sup> He rather enjoys the danger of the thought and likes to read Nietzsche as provocateur. What is Nietzsche's dangerous and provocative thought in Sloterdijk's eyes? It is the idea that concepts of humanity, morality and religion, or a process of civilization and culture could in the long run have an impact on humanity as biological genus and lead to a "selective breeding" ("Zuchtwahl"):

Die Menschen haben es – so scheint es ihm – mit Hilfe einer geschickten Verbindung von Ethik und Genetik fertiggebracht, sich selber kleinzuzüchten. Sie haben sich selbst der Domestikation unterworfen und eine Zuchtwahl in Richtung auf haustierliche Umgänglichkeit bei sich selbst auf den Weg gebracht.<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> Peter SLOTERDIJK, *Regeln für den Menschenpark. Ein Antwortschreiben zu Heideggers Brief über den Humanismus*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main 1999.

<sup>83</sup> *Ivi*, pp. 39-43.

<sup>84</sup> Cfr. Thomas LEMKE, *Eine Analytik der Biopolitik. Überlegungen zu Geschichte und Gegenwart eines umstrittenen Begriffs*, "Behemoth. A Journal on Civilisation", 1, 2008, pp. 72-89.

<sup>85</sup> *Ivi*, pp. 74-75.

<sup>86</sup> He does criticize the National Socialist interpretation as inadequate to Nietzsche's text, but, on a different level, he does not refute their biologist argument, cfr. SLOTERDIJK, *Regeln für den Menschenpark*, p. 40.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*

Sloterdijk takes the chapter “Von der verkleinernden Tugend” (“On virtue that makes small”) in *Thus spoke Zarathustra* as a starting-point to elaborate his thought. In this chapter, Zarathustra revisits the places of his teachings and evaluates if the people have adopted his teachings. By measuring them with his idea auf “grandeur”, he finds that they have become smaller: «Es ist Alles kleiner geworden!»<sup>88</sup> («Everything has become smaller!»).<sup>89</sup> It is obvious that Zarathustra uses the word “small” in a metaphorical sense and it is true that he blames morality for this development: «Ich gehe durch diess Volk und halte die Augen offen: sie sind kleiner geworden und immer kleiner: – das aber macht ihre Lehre von Glück und Tugend»<sup>90</sup> («I walk among this people and I keep my eyes open: they have become smaller, and they are becoming smaller and smaller; but this is due to their doctrine of happiness and virtue»)<sup>91</sup> The main disputed point when interpreting the text is if Nietzsche implies a relation between virtue and biological selection or breeding. Sloterdijk bases his argument on the following quote: «Tugend ist ihnen das, was bescheiden und zahm macht: damit machen sie den Wolf zum Hunde und den Menschen selber zu des Menschen bestem Hausthiere»<sup>92</sup> («Virtue to them is that which makes modest and tame: with that they have turned the wolf into a dog and man himself into man’s best domestic animal»)<sup>93</sup> Nietzsche uses the metaphor of taming and domestication to illustrate the behavioral changes that originate in a certain ethics. It is not clear, however, how those behavioral adjustments would lead to a biologically new genus. Sloterdijk merges a cultural critique of how cultural techniques (e.g. reading and literateness) change our idea of humanity with a clearly biological argument, that these cultural processes would have to lead to a change in our genetic imprint. The really provocative aspect of this thought lies in the imperative that once this relation is established analytically, how should it not be used practically? If it is culturally and technically possible to change humans biologically, and if we know the processes of how this has been done culturally over long periods of time – why shouldn’t we act accordingly?

Nietzsches Verdacht gegen alle humanistische Kultur dringt darauf, das Domestikationsgeheimnis der Menschheit zu lüften. Er will die bisherigen Inhaber der Züchtungsmonopole – die Priester und Lehrer, die sich als Menschenfreunde präsentieren – beim Namen und ihrer verschwiegenen Funktion nennen und einen

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<sup>88</sup> NIETZSCHE, *Also sprach Zarathustra*, p. 211.

<sup>89</sup> KAUFMANN, *The portable Nietzsche*, p. 279.

<sup>90</sup> NIETZSCHE, *Also sprach Zarathustra*, p. 213.

<sup>91</sup> KAUFMANN, *The portable Nietzsche*, p. 281.

<sup>92</sup> NIETZSCHE, *Also sprach Zarathustra*, p. 214.

<sup>93</sup> KAUFMANN, *The portable Nietzsche*, p. 282.

weltgeschichtlich neuartigen Streit zwischen verschiedenen Züchtern und verschiedenen Züchtungsprogrammen lancieren.<sup>94</sup>

The important implications made here are, first, that cultural and educational processes are acts of “breeding” and, second, once these mechanisms are understood, one should shape and influence them actively. Sloterdijk implies that the concept of the “Übermensch” might be read in this sense and that National Socialists wrongly identified themselves with this ideal, but he principally supports the link of biological and cultural argumentation.<sup>95</sup> Sorgner’s argument runs accordingly by defending the concept of eugenics in a liberal, individualist sense, but repelling the fascist idea of a “state regulated eugenics”.<sup>96</sup> But, his idea that individuals could improve their biological and genetic imprint and enhance their possibilities technically to their own best, is highly naïve if it doesn’t take into account the disciplining mechanisms of societies which Foucault described with the notions of governmentality, which allows to conceive the paradox of a kind of power which is “totalizing” and “individualizing” at the same time.<sup>97</sup> Thus, Foucault’s analysis of governmentality and biopolitics is much closer to Nietzsche’s analytical thinking by showing that secularization and individualization are still part of a governing power, which he describes in close affinity to a Nietzschean metaphor as “pastoral”.<sup>98</sup> While Nietzsche and Foucault analyze the dynamics of power, Sloterdijk and Sorgner deduce ethical imperatives from this analysis, which are politically highly provocative, but also naïve in their outlines.<sup>99</sup>

<sup>94</sup> SLOTERDIJK, *Regeln für den Menschenpark*, p. 40.

<sup>95</sup> Cfr. *ivi*, pp. 42-43: «Wahrscheinlich hatte Nietzsche den Bogen überspannt, als er die Suggestion verbreitete, daß die Verhaustierung des Menschen das vorbedachte Werk eines pastoralen Züchterverbandes gewesen sei, das heißt ein Projekt des klerikalen, des paulinischen Instinkts [...] Doch auch nach Abzug der überspannten und argwöhnisch-antiklerikalen Momente bleibt von Nietzsches Idee ein hinreichend harter Kern zurück, um ein späteres Nachdenken über die Humanität jenseits der humanistischen Harmlosigkeit zu provozieren. [...] Lektionen und Selektionen haben miteinander mehr zu tun als irgend ein Kulturhistoriker zu bedenken willens und fähig war».

<sup>96</sup> SORNGER, *Nietzsche, the Overhuman, and Transhumanism*, p. 20.

<sup>97</sup> Michel FOUCAULT, *The Subject and Power*, “Critical Inquiry”, 8, 4, 1982, pp. 777-795; here p. 782: «I’d like to underline the fact that the state’s power (and that’s one of the reasons for its strength) is both an individualizing and a totalizing form of power».

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*; cfr. Thomas LEMKE, *Gouvernementalität*, in M.S. KLEINER (ed.), *Michel Foucault. Eine Einführung in sein Denken*, Campus, Frankfurt am Main 2001, pp. 108-122; Nietzsche frequently uses the concepts of “pastor” and “herd” to describe modern governments, also in *Thus spoke Zarathustra*: cfr. NIETZSCHE, *Also sprach Zarathustra*, p. 25: «Nicht soll Zarathustra einer Heerde Hirt und Hund werden! / Viele wegzulocken von der Heerde – dazu kam ich».

<sup>99</sup> Markus Lipowicz defends Sorgner’s position arguing that the possibility of technical enhancement is well compatible with Nietzsche’s idea of increasing humanity’s potential, but his position is also

Sloterdijk stages his pamphlet as a reply to Heidegger's *Letter on Humanism*. In this text from 1947, Heidegger recalls a few thoughts from his *Sein und Zeit* and replies in a fictive dialogue to the question (the text is a reworking of a letter to Jean Beaufret) on why he doesn't outline an ethics supplementing his ontology. His reply is a denial to answer the question, by locating his own philosophy in a sphere beyond the distinction of ontology and ethics: «Die Antwort lautet: dieses Denken ist weder theoretisch noch praktisch. Es ereignet sich vor dieser Unterscheidung».<sup>100</sup> Heidegger's policy of concealing and not talking explicitly about National Socialism is undoubtedly questionable, but it is much smarter than Sloterdijk's provocation. Heidegger's letter ends in a staged modesty («Es ist an der Zeit, daß man sich dessen entwöhnt, die Philosophie zu überschätzen»),<sup>101</sup> but at least acknowledges the abyss, which the historical events and abhorrent cruelties of the Second World War have created. Nietzsche evokes the idea of an "abyss" that opens itself when questioning the term humanity, in a famous note from 1885 where he both criticizes the notions of "humanity" and "democracy":

Dies ist mein Mißtrauen, das immer wieder kommt, meine Sorge, die sich mir nie schlafen legt, meine Frage, welche Niemand hört oder hören mag, meine Sphinx, neben der nicht nur Ein Abgrund ist: — ich glaube, wir täuschen uns heute über die Dinge, welche wir Europäer am höchsten lieben, und ein grausamer (oder nicht einmal grausamer, nur gleichgültiger und kindsköpfiger) Kobold spielt mit unserem Herzen und seiner Begeisterung, wie er vielleicht mit Allem schon gespielt hat, was sonst lebte und liebte — : ich glaube, daß Alles, was wir in Europa heute als "Humanität", "Moralität", "Menschlichkeit", "Mitgefühl", "Gerechtigkeit" zu verehren gewohnt sind, zwar als Schwächung und Milderung gewisser gefährlicher und mächtiger Grundtriebe einen Vordergrunds-Werth haben mag, aber auf die Länge hin trotzdem nichts Anderes ist als die Verkleinerung des ganzen Typus "Mensch" — seine endgültige Vermittelmäßigung, wenn man mir in einer verzweifelten Angelegenheit ein verzweifeltes Wort nachsehen will.<sup>102</sup>

Interpretations of Nietzsche's posthumous notes are always risky, as we do not know how Nietzsche would have integrated them into a published text, how he would have

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naïve in its ignorance of power dynamics, which Nietzsche analyzes with his term "will to power" and with his analysis of how civilization produces and requires slavery. In short, Nietzsche and Foucault are aware of a danger connected with human life as a subject of politics while Sorgner is not.

<sup>100</sup> Martin HEIDEGGER, *Brief über den Humanismus*, in *Gesamtausgabe, I. Abteilung: Veröffentlichte Schriften 1914-1970, Bd. 9, Wegmarken*, Klostermann, Frankfurt am Main 1976, pp. 313-364, here p. 358.

<sup>101</sup> *Ivi*, p. 364.

<sup>102</sup> Friedrich NIETZSCHE, *Nachgelassene Fragmente. Herbst 1885 bis Anfang Januar 1889*, in COLLI-MONTINARI (eds.), *KSA*, vol. 12, 2[13], pp. 71-72.

transformed or if he would even have erased them.<sup>103</sup> Nietzsche overtly criticizes the term “humanity” and the European tradition of “morality” in the quoted note, but his critique focusses – in a philological maneuver – on wrong interpretations of the term “human”. Thus, his critique of moral interpretation is at the same time a defense of humanity.

#### 4. Conclusion

Taking Sorgner’s post-/transhumanist reading of Nietzsche as a starting point, I discussed a few relevant passages from *Thus spoke Zarathustra*, which analyze the relation between the notions “human” and “overhuman”. I argued that the concept of “Übermensch” is designed to describe the dynamic nature of “the human”, which according to Nietzsche’s *Zarathustra*, cannot be defined in an essentialist way. From a philological point of view, and a close reading of the text, I thus argued for a skeptical and non-essentialist humanism in *Thus spoke Zarathustra*. Sorgner’s main point is a combination of a cultural and a biological argument: he reads the metaphors of creation and fatherhood literally as a possibility to biologically bring about a new (post-)human species. The critical discussion of Sorgner’s arguments then led to a discussion of English translations of the term “Übermensch” and related terms in *Thus spoke Zarathustra*. In a few exemplary sketches, I highlighted the systematic hermeneutic premises of translations. Thus, I supported Kaufmann’s maxim of making decisions of translation as transparent as possible. Finally, I examined modern discussions of Nietzsche’s critique of the notion of “humanity”. While Sloterdijk’s provocative essay showed a similar line of argument to Sorgner’s reading, Heidegger wisely maintained his silence on the question of how to deal with the bankruptcy of humanism that humanity was faced with in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Both Sorgner and Sloterdijk argue in favor of an active design of the human species, a claim which does not only have a heavy historic burden; compared to Foucault’s analysis of power the biologist reading and its provocative ethical imperative it is also naïve.

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<sup>103</sup> Cfr. Wolfram GRODDECK, ‘Vorstufe’ und ‘Fragment’. *Zur Problematik einer traditionellen textkritischen Unterscheidung in der Nietzsche-Philologie*, in Martin STERN (ed.), *Textkonstitution bei mündlicher und schriftlicher Überlieferung* (Beihefte zu Editio; 1), 1991, pp. 165-175.

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