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## **Book Review Symposium: Steve Fuller and Veronica Lipinska, The proactionary imperative: a foundation for transhumanism.**

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Steve Fuller and Veronika Lipinska *The proactionary imperative: A foundation for transhumanism*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014, £18.99 (ISBN: 978-1-137-43309-1), 153 pages.

Reviewed by Daniel Chernilo, Loughborough University

In terms of intellectual history, the end of World War II can be marked by the debate on humanism between Jean-Paul Sartre and Martin Heidegger. In *Existentialism is a Humanism*, Sartre offered a defence of traditional humanist *values* – freedom and autonomy for all – on the traditional grounds of *anthropocentrism* – ‘man’ is the measure of all things – and *constructivism* – the world we inhabit is of human making. In *Letter on Humanism*, Heidegger responded by making three fundamental counter-claims: through its egalitarianism and constructivism, humanism was itself to blame for the war and its atrocities, ‘man’ cannot be made a source of value so we ought to worship higher forms of ‘being’, and through their masterful command of language, a new elite of poets and thinkers were to restore human dignity by becoming self-appointed ‘shepherds of being’.

In this new book, Steve Fuller and Veronika Lipinska do not go back to this debate but to my mind appropriately recast it for the present. On the Sartre camp, transhumanists offer a proactionary principle as a radical form of anthropocentrism: humans are to be encouraged to play god by actively redrawing the boundaries of what is available for human intervention – not least, by redefining their relationship with human biology itself. On the Heidegger camp, we find both post-humanists that reject anthropocentrism as the most pernicious of modern illusions and precautionary positions that seek to establish limits to human intervention on the grounds that unknown risks are simply too high. As they wrote this book as a *manifesto for transhumanism*, Fuller and Lipinska would decidedly belong to the Sartre/transhumanist camp. That they take their task very seriously is to my mind a great merit of the book, so much so that, if we continue with the historical analogy, Sartre’s radically secular humanism is now represented by the authors’ own non-conformist Christianity (p. 7), whilst Heidegger’s conservative pantheism would now be represented by the various strands of the ‘progressive’ and ‘secular’ Left. This is unlikely to leave readers unruffled.

As is also the case with Fuller’s previous work, there are many strands to these arguments, which in the same page can move from twelfth-century theology to contemporary sociology, via a critique of Darwinism or various welfare policies. In this brief review, let me just raise two issues that I think deserve further discussion.

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1. Fuller and Lipinska are aware that their call for human self-enhancement ought to work both for individuals and collectively. In making this claim, they suggest that eugenics – understood as the late 19<sup>th</sup> century attempt to reunite biology and sociology within a single science – shall play a key role. Chapter 3 is wholly devoted to this question, not least as the authors painfully seek to disassociate eugenics from its embarrassing embracement by the Nazis (and, less famously, by other racist policy projects in Scandinavia). To my mind, they are right that this is not a question of *reductio ad Hitlerum*, but for a book that is written *as a manifesto* this connection between transhumanism and eugenics just doesn't help. They speak of counterfactual opportunities in the history of science – missed chances, for instance, in the

institutionalisation of sociology in the UK – (p. 71-80) and mount a decided criticism of Darwinism (p. 80-7). But neither argument seems persuasive enough for retaining eugenics and its unsavoury baggage. One may go further and say that eugenic's conception of human biology is dated – it clearly belongs to the 'pre-DNA' era – and its sociological contribution to welfare policies speaks of homogenous 'national populations' that no longer exist (to say nothing about the future of the welfare state itself).

2. As an attempt to redraw the boundaries between science and theology (p. 1), Fuller and Lipinska justify the human right to play god with our own humanity as way of fulfilling the religious command of making the most of what we are. Crucially for them, this concentrates on the enhancement of our mental capabilities to such an extent that it becomes conceivable 'to abandon altogether' the 'carbon substratum' on which human life has depended up to now (p. 134). More polemically, they intimate that an emerging *Techno sapiens* shall eventually see off *Homo sapiens* and at last be able to deliver on the ultimate promise of *Homo imago Dei*: eternal life itself. Some readers will find this possibility utopian, others dystopian and many may find it too speculative. But if in its limit case the proactionary case invites us to take leave of the constraints of human biology, doesn't this again undermine their claim on the need for a new eugenics? In fact, if leaving human *nature* behind is really the core of the authors' invitation to embrace a proactionary outlook, then they no longer side with Sartre's anthropocentrism and humanism and have instead embraced Heidegger's idealism in which human *animalitas* is rejected on behalf of some higher kind of *humanitas*.