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SHUSTERMAN AND THE PARADOXES OF SUPERHUMAN SELF-STYLING

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*One thing is needful. —To ‘give style’ to one’s character—a great and rare art!*  
Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*¹

Self-stylization is original, distinctive, and demanding precisely because we must cease to be our ordinary selves so as to become our higher selves.  
Richard Shusterman,  
“Genius and the Paradoxes of Self-Styling”²

1. Self-Styling and the Future

Richard Shusterman in “Genius and the Paradoxes of Self-Styling” develops a rich view of the philosophical promise and perils of self-styling. The central idea of self-styling is that while the individual is unconsciously shaped by contingent forces of evolution and culture, the individual becomes aware of that process with maturity, and, by taking an objective perspective on the self, one can shape one’s habits toward an ideal of one’s own. Each individual possesses a unique character (or genius) with specific gifts that arise from the dynamic interplay of evolution and cultural shaping. The ideal of self-styling is the realization of one’s particular genius through the perfection and enjoyment of one’s unique gifts in a completed character form. One perfects one’s genius by self-transformation and expresses that genius in given social forms like sport, art, science, and philosophy. Such a project as Shusterman’s differs from others that focus more on literary rather than somatic self-styling. For example, Richard Rorty and Alexander Nehamas also develop projects of self-styling, which are both influenced by Nietzsche; and Rorty, like Shusterman, is also a pragmatist.³ But Nehamas and Rorty focus more on developing one’s literary voice, whereas Shusterman develops a more embodied view of self-styling known as “somaesthetics,” which encompasses literary self-styling but focuses greater attention on the somatic form. Shusterman writes:
Somaesthetics can be provisionally defined, as the critical meliorative study of one’s experience and use of one’s body as a locus of sensory-aesthetic appreciation (aesthesis) and creative self-fashioning. It is therefore also devoted to the knowledge, discourses, and disciplines that structure such somatic care or can improve it.4

Because Shusterman’s project focuses on somatic self-styling, his view lends itself to analysis of how the body can be restyled in more radical form.

Over its long history, the project of self-transformation has been confined to shaping the individual within general biological species limits: for example, the body can be trained to run and swim only so fast. But within this century we are faced with a further possibility for self-styling: namely, genetic engineering and nanotechnology may begin to alter the very form of the individual and the species. With these technologies, self-styling may begin to take on its most radical form to date, and the potential for the forms of human genius, should such self-styling succeed, would be greatly enhanced. This new project of self-styling is known today by various names such as superhumanism, posthumanism, transhumanism, betterhumanism, ex-humanism, hyperhumanism, neohumanism, and Humanity Plus (or H+). We will use superhumanism, but, in general, all of these names refer to the same thing: they refer to a future state of humanity enhanced by genetic engineering and nanotechnology that transcends humanity’s relatively fixed natural limits on lifespan, planetary location, and cognition.

A common philosophical approach in this discussion conceives superhumanism as an extension of Nietzschean self-transformation, but ultimately resulting in a distorted form of humanity. For example, Francis Fukuyama and Leon Kass (who have both served on past President George W. Bush’s bioethics council) equate superhumanism with Nietzschean self-transformation and warn against future species distortion.5 Similarly, Jürgen Habermas in The Future of Human Nature refers to would-be superhuman beings as “self-styled Nietzscheans, indulging in fantasies,” and makes the same claim that superhumanism will distort humanity.6 The description of superhumanism as a form of self-styling is correct. But we should be careful about claims of any final picture of superhumanism. Kass and Fukuyama both argue that superhumanity will result in a future like the one Aldous Huxley depicts in Brave New World, a class-based society of engineered subhuman beings many of whom possess high levels of calculation, but no spirit or creativity, and no common human feeling. Against this view, superhuman beings will not have human lifespans or human limits on cognition like the individuals in the novel. It is tempting to think that we know for certain what superhumanity will be like or look like, perhaps particularly for those who wish to halt any experimentation on the human form. But no final picture of superhumanity can adequately be given because too much remains indeterminate with the transition beyond the biological human form. Yet despite our inability to formulate