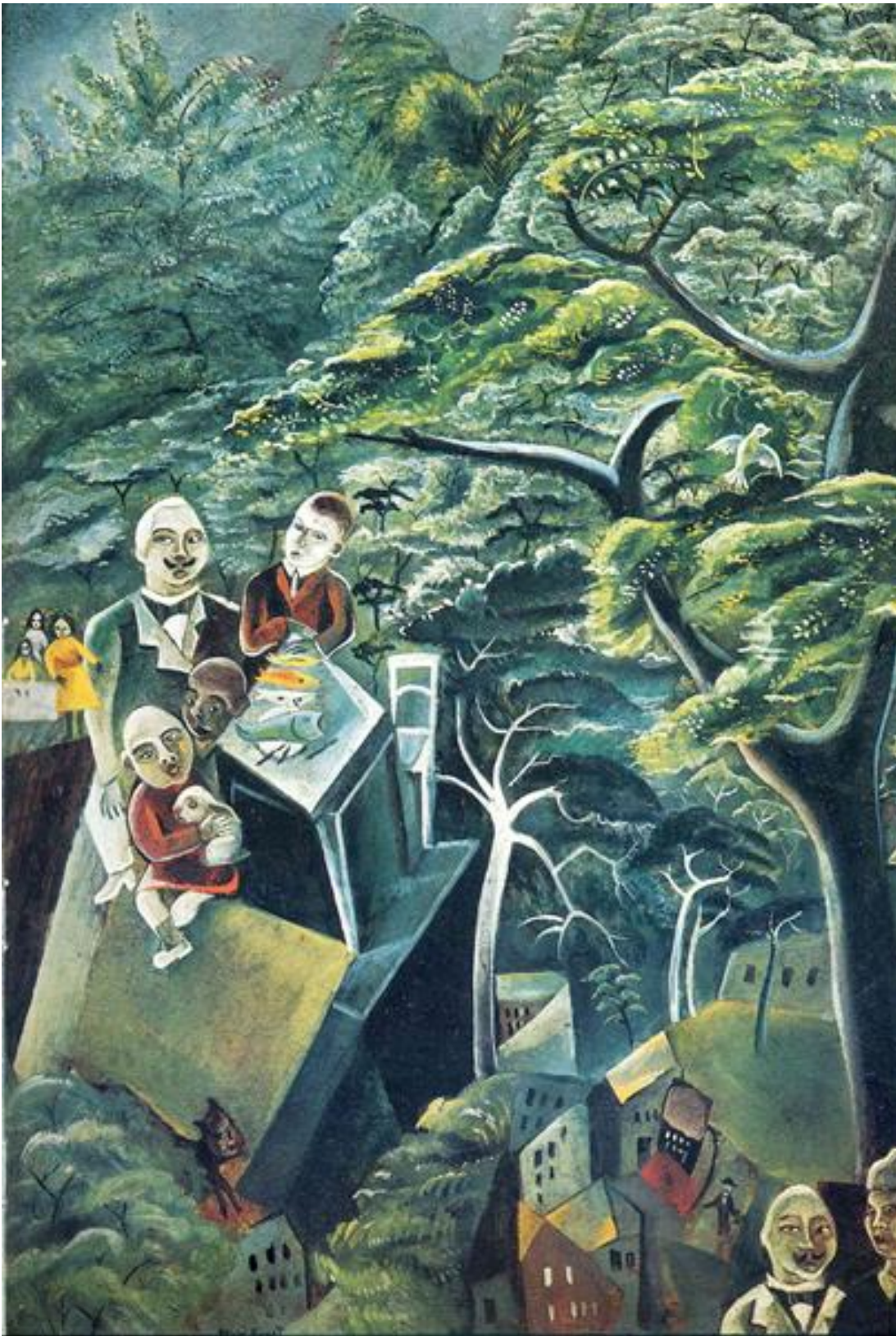


Posthumanism and Moral Myopia

by [Sean Haylock](#) (January 2019)



The Immortality, Max Ernst, 1913

The Already Fantastic Tomorrow

Futurism has come a long way. In the sixties it was all about moon bases and submarine cities and robot butlers. Today it's principally about achieving immortality by uploading your mind to a computer. Our utopianism has become less quaint and more metaphysically ambitious, less a magnification of parochial desires and anxieties and more a crypto-religious rubric of prophecies and promises against which to measure the merit of our projects. This is, anyway, how true believers in the posthuman future tend to apply their prognostications.

They're also inclined to see the blooming of interest in posthumanism as cause for increased excitement. The growing prevalence of their ideas in popular culture is taken as another indication that we are edging closer to the electronic eschaton. But I think it's rather the pervasive feeling that we're living in dystopian times (which for many people the phrase "President Trump" will suffice to corroborate) that explains the recent surge in interest in posthumanism. It makes sense that posthumanism's utopian narrative should become pressingly relevant at this time, not because posthumanism offers an authentic vision of salvation but because it presents a particularly plump utopian zeppelin to puncture.

By posthumanism I mean specifically the belief that it would be beneficial, or even that it is morally necessary, to use technological means to render the human race obsolete, to

once-and-for-all transcend our biology and become thoroughly technological beings—what’s often called transhumanism. I’ll be using the two terms interchangeably throughout, and I favour “posthumanism” only because it’s the favoured term of my target.

What’s primarily objectionable about posthumanists is not (although it’s related to these things) that they have unrealistic expectations about what technological advances will make possible, or that, given their own understanding of the stakes, they may be expected to become unscrupulous and reckless and destructive in pursuit of their utopian fantasies. What’s most objectionable about posthumanists is their conviction that virtue is at best convenient and ultimately superfluous. They believe that being good is a problem you can get around if you’re intelligent enough, and that the problem of human existence (our finitude and vulnerability) is basically an engineering problem.

Another way of putting this is to say that the problem with posthumanism is that it’s idolatrous—it places at the apex of our concern something that doesn’t deserve to be placed there. It worships a false god, which is to say it sees the moral life as a means to an end, sees morality as purely therapeutic, as a form of technology (a way of exercising our power over nature). It embraces a counterfeit form of transcendence. One can tell that it’s counterfeit transcendence because it denies what every utopian fantasy denies, that we are, in Peter Augustine Lawler’s phrase, “stuck with virtue”: we cannot do other than live morally demanding lives, and we shouldn’t want to.

One of the more reputable spokesmen for the posthuman future

is the Oxford philosopher Nick Bostrom, [\[1\]](#) who has offered an “imaginary scenario” which he claims “perceive[s] the outlines of some of the nearer shores of posthumanity” [\[2\]](#):

Let us suppose that you were to develop into a being that has posthuman healthspan and posthuman cognitive and emotional capacities. At the early steps of this process, you enjoy your enhanced capacities . . . You are able to sprinkle your conversation with witty remarks and poignant anecdotes. Your friends remark how much more fun you are to be around. Your experiences seem more vivid . . . You begin to treasure almost every moment of life; you go about your business with zest; and you feel a deeper warmth and affection for those you love, but you can still be upset and even angry on occasions where upset or anger is truly justified and constructive . . . Instead of spending four hours each day watching television, you may now prefer to play the saxophone in a jazz band and to have fun working on your first novel. Instead of spending the weekends hanging out in the pub with your old buddies talking about football, you acquire new friends with whom you can discuss things that now seem to you to be of greater significance than sport. Together with some of these new friends, you set up a local chapter of an international non-profit to help draw attention to the plight of political prisoners . . . Consider now a more advanced stage in the transformation process . . . [ellipsis in original] You have just celebrated your 170th birthday and you feel stronger than ever. Each day is a joy. You have invented entirely new art forms, which exploit the new kinds of cognitive capacities and sensibilities you have developed. You still listen to music—music that is to Mozart what Mozart is to bad Muzak . . . You are always ready to feel with those who suffer misfortunes, and to work hard to help them get back on

their feet . . . Things are getting better, but already each day is fantastic.[\[3\]](#)

This is, extraordinarily, not a parody.

Imagine if everybody could compose music that put Mozart to shame! Imagine if witty quips and poignant anecdotes rolled off your tongue! Imagine if life was always getting better but was already fantastic! Some may say he's a dreamer, but he's not the only one.

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Bostrom assumes that to produce great art, to be witty or poignant, to improve your life and to live well, are all matters of enhanced agency, of greater freedom and more power. And he seems to think that it's enough, to lend him moral credibility, to simply avoid the Randian *reductio ad absurdum* of this view by including in his description of a good life an involvement with philanthropic concerns. (One of the unintentionally hilarious details I elided from his account was "You are also involved in a large voluntary organisation that works to reduce the suffering of animals in their natural environment in ways that permit ecologies to continue to function in traditional ways."). But an affirmation of altruism does not a mature moral philosophy make. Bostrom's moral philosophy is hopelessly naïve precisely because morality only enters the picture for him in the form of

altruism and its shadow, in the pursuit of wellbeing for oneself and the provision of wellbeing for others. His moral vision is fixated upon conduct and incapable of apprehending character. The agent he describes is so devoid of personality that it's impossible to imagine him or her actually living out a life. Bostrom has described *no one*, a person without family (note the telling omission of any mention of children), without nationality or sex or age or race, without any meaningful commitments whatsoever beyond those freely chosen for recreational and philanthropic purposes.

I imagine Bostrom complaining that he does point out that "our ability to imagine what posthuman life might be like is very limited" since "the essence of posthumanity is to be able to have thoughts and experiences that we cannot readily think or experience with our current capacities".[\[4\]](#) But still Bostrom hopes that his "thought experiment" will be "enough to give plausibility to the claim that becoming posthuman could be good for us."[\[5\]](#) But his details are arbitrary and sparse, and everything else in his scenario is platitudinous and clichéd. What is the point of asking whether a life in which each day is a joy might be good for us? How can any self-respecting philosopher call that a thought experiment?

Imagine someone who has very vivid experiences, goes about his business with zest, and has very deep warmth and affection for his loved ones. You will not imagine a real human being, just a bundle of superlatives. We would not believe this character if it appeared in a work of fiction and we should not believe it as it appears in Bostrom's philosophy. It betrays a writer lost in abstraction, oblivious to all the details that make up a life and therefore unqualified to pass judgement on what makes a life good or would make a life better. If someone asks you "Do you think it would be good to be fit and healthy all

the time, eat delicious food, have many delightful friends who you meet often, read lots of well-written books, have a rewarding career, and have a passion for devoting yourself to meaningful causes?" the correct answer is not "Yes", the correct answer is "That's a stupid question."

In addition to Bostrom's dismaying lack of imagination[6] when it comes to describing a life, he demonstrates what can only be called a morally obtuse understanding of death. Bostrom assumes that the only reason not to want to live beyond 100 years is the expectation of declining health. He regards the notion of an increased "healthspan" as rendering the notion of an increased lifespan unproblematic. He implies that death is only ever a good thing if it means freedom from suffering. If you can be freed from suffering in another way then death becomes entirely undesirable. Mortality, for Bostrom, is a feature of our faulty biology, a disease to be cured, and aging is its symptom. Imagine perpetual health! Imagine eternal youth! Imagine living forever!

The transhumanist's desire to conquer death might be thought comparable to the Christian's faith in the afterlife. But the comparison is specious. The important point for Christians is not that you don't die but that you are eternally responsible for yourself and that your life is ultimately a choice between estrangement from and communion with your Creator. The important point for transhumanists is precisely that you don't die, that you don't have to accommodate yourself to a capricious universe and that your power and your freedom have no necessary limit.

Acknowledging that all limitations are not going to be vaulted in a single leap, that even the superhumans will face certain

difficulties (until they overcome them, and face new ones, and so on *ad infinitum*) does not rescue a transhumanist from idolatry. The desire to grow ceaselessly and insatiably is the desire to be as much like a cancer as a person can be.[\[7\]](#)

Even many people sceptical of the claims of transhumanists fail to appreciate the nature of the error to the extent that they do not understand, do not *share*, Nassim Nicholas Taleb's "deep moral revulsion" at the technological quest to live forever.[\[8\]](#) A transhumanist is likely to see such revulsion as an expression of reactionary luddism, and to counter with the insistence that his position does not imply an exclusionary neophilia, a wholesale renunciation of the goods of the past. Along these lines, Bostrom says that "A fan of Cézanne may still enjoy watching a sunrise, and somebody who has learnt to appreciate Schoenberg may still delight in simple folk songs, even bird songs."[\[9\]](#) True enough. But Bostrom misses a crucial point. It's because we can enjoy a sunrise that we can enjoy Cézanne. It's because we can delight in bird songs and folk songs that we can appreciate Schoenberg. It's not because we can transcend our mortality that we can appreciate *King Lear*. If we think death can be cheated indefinitely, then we become incapable of appreciating *King Lear*. We could not understand why this aged man behaves as he does, and could not be moved by the play's devastating conclusion. Here, and in so many other areas of life, the richness of despair would be replaced by a cheap incredulity.

Bostrom is blithely unconcerned about the possibility that it might be "impossible for posthuman beings to appreciate some simple things", as he puts it, because "they could compensate by creating new cultural riches." He thinks of "cultural riches" as indeterminate lumps deposited in the pan marked "good" on the scales of morality. And he thinks of art as

subject to progress in the same way that science is, thinks of artworks as lying along a continuum that ascends from mediocrity to excellence along a steady gradient (the posthuman future, remember, will be filled with better-than-Mozart music). If our stock of cultural riches is depleted, we can simply replenish it. This assumes that what makes cultural treasures is more freedom and more power, is the abolition of restraints. And it assumes that there is nothing about culture that depends intrinsically upon our being mortal.

Pace Bostrom, we value “cultural riches” because they shape our understanding of our humanity, because they help us understand what it is to be mortal, finite, vulnerable creatures, and to be in need of love. It’s not clear that a posthuman—an immortal, invulnerable being—would even be capable of appreciating any fictional representation of a human being in peril. An abstract understanding that the human with a knife pressed to her throat could easily be killed is not the same as an empathetic understanding of that fact. Failure to appreciate this type of situation excludes a *huge* amount of art from the realm of competent judgement.

Bostrom misunderstands the objection as an objection to losing degrees of experience. The real objection is an objection to losing certain *qualities* of experience. He describes the objection as “The accumulated cultural treasures of humanity might lose their appeal” to a posthuman. Lose their appeal is putting it much too lightly. It’s telling that Bostrom yokes this to “challenges that seemed interesting . . . might become trivial.” It’s not a fear of certain rewarding experiences dwindling into triviality that is at issue—it’s a fear of certain meaningful experiences *becoming unintelligible*. It’s a fear not of losing interest but of losing knowledge, a fear not of yielding to progress but of being conquered by

nescience, fear not of the indifference of posterity but of the horror of amnesia.

Existential Astigmatism

The idea of a catastrophic haemorrhage of moral knowledge has haunted moral philosophy at least since Alasdair MacIntyre's *After Virtue*.[\[10\]](#) The loss of a primary sense seems the most apt metaphor; to be robbed of moral sense in this way is akin to being blinded. But this manner of speaking presupposes the coherence of the notion of moral vision, the idea that where one's moral concepts are lost or distorted what is impaired is one's particular way of seeing things, one's perspective on the world of value.

What I have been charging Bostrom with (as a representative of posthumanism as a whole) is a form of distorted vision. But some perspective is in order. Bostrom is nothing like as morally blinkered as the worst transhumanist. I have in mind "bio-artist" and all-round pervert [Adam Zaretsky](#), a man who dreams of "[taking] a gene, say for pig noses, or ostrich anuses, or aardvark tongue, and [pasting] that into . . . a human zygote . . . It's literally gene collage . . . [I]f you're still into it, you go ahead and reproduce and you'll have children born with ostrich anuses and aardvark tongues and pig noses." A philosophy that is incapable of noticing any compelling reason why Zaretsky's ideas are a moral abomination is not a line of thought, it is a massive lacuna in thought.[\[11\]](#)

Again we are talking about moral vision, and here it is best,

if we want to lend the notion any detail, to appeal to that account of moral thought that was described with especial lucidity by Iris Murdoch a little over 60 years ago:

When we apprehend and assess other people we do not consider only their solutions to specifiable practical problems, we consider something more elusive which may be called their total vision of life, as shown in their mode of speech or silence, their choice of words, their assessments of others, their conception of their own lives, what they think attractive or praiseworthy, what they think funny: in short the configurations of their thought which show continually in their reactions and conversation. [\[12\]](#)

A Murdochian approach to moral philosophy will see moral thought as bound up in the apprehension and judgement of minute particularities. Morality, on this view, is holistic in a way that rationalist (meta)ethics completely fails to acknowledge. Moral rationality is not a discrete faculty that is momentarily engaged at points of decision. One's entire character, including one's dispositions towards any and all aspects of reality, and not merely one's actions and the articulated reasons for one's actions, are relevant to one's moral life. The point here is not just that private thoughts and dispositions impinge upon public attitudes and actions. It's that the range of things that can make a moral claim on us is not specifiable in advance of the living of a moral life (is never a settled matter), and thus that moral insight involves becoming newly acquainted with the contours of moral possibility (so moral education really is possible and necessary, but is also open-ended and protean). Moral truth is a feat of attention, is made available only by the bringing to bear of what Murdoch calls a "just and loving gaze" [\[13\]](#), which

isn't something that can be switched on and off.

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On an interpersonal level, moral thought involves responding to this-person-and-not-another, responding to *this* or *that* person's suffering or joy or resignation or determination or ambivalence or enthusiasm or anxiety or charm, and to the grammar of their expression of it.^[14] (The notion that it is impossible to generalise about morality would be no more than a gross caricature of this view. The nouns I've just listed are all examples of valid moral generalisations, and I've made a host of others throughout this essay. It is not a matter of debunking the ordinary sense of moral language but of considering the places from which such language is spoken and the dynamic conditions of its intelligibility).

A literary example might help to clarify this last claim. Take the Box Hill episode in *Emma*, in which Jane Austen's eponymous heroine, by directing a witty retort at the tedious but good-natured old maid Miss Bates, provokes stern admonitions from her old friend and future husband Mr. Knightley. There is no reason to believe that a moral theory could tell you why Mr. Knightley is right to rebuke Emma for her humiliation of Miss Bates, or what the nature of Austen's achievement is in rendering this fictional circumstance. The theory would have to be able to provide the conceptual resources to explicate Knightley's speech to Emma and to see that he is not simply

urging Emma to observe *noblesse oblige*, to see that it would be unsatisfactory to reduce Emma's discourtesy to a violation of the etiquette of the class system, to understand how the real wit in Emma's remark to Miss Bates only compounds its callousness, to appreciate that the cruelty in Emma's remark comes from its presumptuousness about the level of self-consciousness of which Miss Bates can be expected to be capable (Emma expects Miss Bates won't get the joke) and its disregard for the high esteem in which Miss Bates holds Emma, to see how the terms in which Knightley rebukes Emma are measured to fit his intimate knowledge of her character and reflect his affection for her, and to sense the imaginative power and depth of sympathy that is required to construct a piece of literature that draws us into such a complicated web of judgements and precisely situates those judgements within a larger narrative. [\[15\]](#)

And to have the benefit of this reading you would have to at least implicitly recognise that no interpretive procedure, no systematic approach to literature, is going to allow these insights to come into focus. You have to be prepared to let the particularity of the novel take you by surprise, to respond to these particular characters in this particular situation.

There are moral data here that escape the apprehension of analytic reason. Call this the Box Hill Problem. Or better yet, don't, since the meliorist rubric of problem and solution is part of what this example works to discredit. Moral maturity can't be achieved without being capable of discerning the shallowness of Karl Popper's maxim "All life is problem solving." Bostrom then appears as a kind of Popperian infomercial host, inviting us to image a rolling solution to all of our problems, and hence a perfect life.

Stuart Hampshire once said “We all go lopsided to the grave.” The problem with posthumanism is not just that it denies the necessity of going to one’s grave, but (which might be worse) that it precludes any possibility of reconciling oneself with, let alone learning to love, one’s lopsidedness. Instead of any mature moral vision, of human life as, in the words of *The Book of Common Prayer*, “prevented and followed”, or of each of us as in some measure a fugitive from love (where love is, in Murdoch’s words, “the extremely difficult realization that something other than oneself is real”), all posthumanism seems capable of offering is a short-sighted moralism characterised by philistine snobbery (“you acquire new friends with whom you can discuss things that now seem to you to be of greater significance than sport”) and emotional positivism (“you can still be upset and even angry on occasions where upset or anger is truly justified and constructive”). It misses the irony of an encomium for the spirit of civilization that implicitly gainsays the greatest artworks civilization has produced, because it also denies outright the fact that, as Roger Scruton puts it, we are “not condemned to our mortality but consecrated to it.”

[\[1\]](#) Bostrom is the philosopher responsible for the theory, popularised by Elon Musk, that we are most likely, as a matter of arithmetical inference, living in a simulation. Bostrom is also the author of the book *Superintelligence*, which Kevin Kelly refers to in his critique of the eponymous concept (see my article “Whose Artifice? Which Intelligence?” at *Arc Digital*, or the longer version at *VoegelinView*).

[\[2\]](#) Bostrom, “Why I Want to be a Posthuman When I grow Up”,

The Transhumanist Reader, eds. Max More and Natasha Vita-More, p.32

[3] Bostrom, op. cit., pp.31-32

[4] Bostrom, op. cit., p.32

[5] ibid

[6] It's easy to imagine a more compelling description of the wonders of posthuman existence than that offered by Bostrom. Most of what he says isn't much more suggestive than "You live, like, the best life a human could live, but better." His method is piling on superlatives. Perhaps this indicates the unfortunate influence of the editor of *The Transhumanist Reader* (in which the article I've been quoting from appears), Max More, a man who changed his name from Max O'Connor "in order", so he himself claimed, "to remove the cultural links to Ireland (which connotes backwardness rather than future-orientation) and to reflect the extropian desire for MORE LIFE, MORE INTELLIGENCE, MORE FREEDOM." Extropianism is More's personal philosophy, named for the neologism (coined by More) "extropy" – which is the opposite of entropy. In a brilliant article on the cryonics movement ("Everybody Freeze!"), Corey Pein notes that "More's business partner, Tom W. Bell, also took a new, extropian name, signing himself T. O. Morrow." Pein's article is full of sordid details from More's past (e.g. arguing for the morality of consensual sex with children at age 18 in a libertarian magazine) and present (in his role as president of Alcor Life Extension Foundation, which Pein accurately describes as trading in "an expensive form of ritualistic corpse mutilation called cryonic preservation"). Pein gives an account of More's role in the effort to cut off and freeze the head of a deceased twenty-three-year-old cancer patient, which includes the following observation: "'Unfortunately,' the *Cryonics* report notes, 'there was some confusion and disagreement regarding the ideal temperature at which to perform surgery.' One might assume a forty-four-year-

old organization devoted to storing body parts on ice would have reached some working consensus on this question by now.” (*The Baffler*, No. 30, March 2016).

Of course, I don't mean to invalidate Bostrom's claims by highlighting his association with More. I've elsewhere cited Kevin Kelly favourably (see my “Whose Artifice? Which Intelligence?”), and Kelly has said good things about More (an early instance is noted by Pein), including providing a glowing endorsement on the back cover of *The Transhumanist Reader*.

[7] The problem, then, is that even Bostrom's modest posthumanism is a species of extropianism. It perceives all limits as limitations. The fact that Max More did not change his name to Max Infinite does not vitiate his error.

[8] Taleb, *Antifragile* (Random House, 2012), p.370.

[9] Bostrom, op. cit., p.47

[10] For an overview and illuminating discussion of this, see Cora Diamond's article “Losing Your Concepts” (*Ethics*, 98:2, January 1988).

[11] Allow yourself to think through the deduction from the size of ostrich eggs and Zaretsky's self-description as a queer pornographer to the reason he would find this particular anatomical feature desirable in a child and you will experience more horror than you ever could watching a David Cronenberg film.

[12] Murdoch, “Vision and Choice in Morality”, in *Existentialists and Mystics* (Chatto & Windus, 1997), p.80

[13] See her *The Sovereignty of Good* (Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1970).

[14] The theologian David Bentley Hart puts this point well when he says “Certain fundamental moral truths, for instance,

may *necessarily* remain unintelligible to someone incapable of appreciating Bach's fifth Unaccompanied Cello Suite." ("Nature Loves to Hide", *First Things*, May 2013). The point is not that appreciation of this particular piece of music could be a reliable test of moral discernment. The point is rather that that which can disclose the configurations of someone's moral perceptions can be (is usually) something as particular as this, and that a seemingly morally innocuous lack can speak a great deal about what kind of moral accommodations a person's mind might offer to the realities that rush to meet it.

[15] R.A.D. Grant, in an essay in the anthology *Conservative Thinkers* (ed. Roger Scruton), gives the following summary of the Box Hill episode:

Miss Bates is humble and unassuming; she is very good-hearted; and she is poor, with an aged dependent mother. Those three things alone – and her own small charities – give her a claim on the charity of others, which is constantly (though tactfully) forthcoming. Miss Bates is in phatic communion with the universe. Her incessant chatter is a delirious jumble of remembered kindnesses, solicitous inquiries, and bizarre trivialities, amounting, in fact, to the world seen under the aspect of overpowering gratitude, optimism, and benevolence. She is, says Mr Weston, 'a standing lesson of how to be happy'. Hers are the predicament, and the virtue, of ordinary commonplace humanity at its best. In her unlikely way, she is a specimen of the sacrosanct, the focus of pieties that reach into the very heart of the social order; one of the unideal meek who, just because they never will inherit the earth, deserve a little consideration. Unlike Miss Bates, Emma is 'handsome, clever, and rich', the natural gravitational centre of any social gathering. Flattered into greater than usual vanity, she makes, for the company's benefit, what is in effect, if not in intention, a rather hurtful, pointedly witty rejoinder to an

innocent, but irresistibly inviting, *niaiserie* of Miss Bates's. With great courage, for he secretly loves her, Mr Knightley takes her aside afterwards to remonstrate.

The fluency and deftness and sensitivity and insight displayed in Grant's description of the episode helps to make its moral weight felt. Witnessing another read discerningly and imaginatively is a moral education. For more on this, see my *Literature and Moral Sense* (forthcoming).

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